Ouranos

By Philip Rainford

The planet Uranus is the seventh from the sun and first of the outer ring of planets. It is 3,000 million kilometres from Earth and named after the Greek god Ouranos, the sky deity. It was the first planet to be named after a Greek god instead of a Roman one. Its 27 moons are named after magical spirits in the English Literature of Shakespeare and Pope. The planet has a diameter of 51,118 km being four times that of Earth. There are 13 rings and was the first planet to demonstrate Saturn was not unique to have rings.

It is a blue-green planet with a core of iron and magnesium sulphate, about the size of Earth. Its mantel consists of a sea of water, ammonia and methane gases floating on a base of liquid diamonds. The extreme pressure of the atmosphere breaks up methane molecules and condenses the carbon into diamond crystals that rain down upon the water ammonia ocean floor forming a diamond silt and creating solid diamond 'icebergs'. The atmosphere is 82.5% hydrogen, 15.2% helium and 2.3% methane and ammonia.

A year is 84 earth years; its axis is tilted at 97.77 degrees, meaning it slides around the sun on its side - with its poles pointing to the sun. Each season is 21 years long. A day on Uranus is 17 hours and 14 minutes, gravity is 0.9 of earth and surface temperature is -224 degrees Celsius making it the coldest planet in the solar system.

It was not the picture I was expecting when I awoke. My ears were ringing, and everything sounded muffled. My eyes revealed I was in a room with equipment panels that were on fire. The subsequent smoke was beginning to sting my eyes as I groped around. Red emergency lighting was providing some light, but I had no idea where I was. A moment of additional thinking made me realise I didn't know who I was, and I had no memories of my life before that moment. It was as if I'd just been born. I slowly got to my unsteady feet, staggered over to the fire extinguisher, and put out the fire.

On checking the equipment, I realised I could read and understood how they worked. Despite the damage, I was still getting readings and managed to switch the power back on. It was then I looked out the window. I seemed to be in a lookout tower overlooking a domed city

erected on a floating platform. That platform was floating in a blue green sea illuminated by massive lights like those on football stadiums mounted around the platform.

What horrified me the most was not being unable to identify where I was, but rather, the massive hole in the dome; whether we floated in liquid or gas the dome was exposed and I doubted whatever it was, was breathable. A quick analysis confirmed we were floating calmly on a water-ammonia ocean in an atmosphere nearly completely consisting of hydrogen and helium. They had to be dead. Did that mean I was alone? But where? My guess would be some planet that was not Earth. And why couldn't I remember?

I looked at myself in a mirror, the face was unfamiliar. It was also covered in blood from a head wound that I didn't feel until I saw the blood. My ears still rang, and my hearing was muffled. My vision was blurred as if the room was filled of smoke. I cut the alarms and all went eerily silent. I decided I needed to explore my place of captivity, tend to my head, and try to establish some sense of what happened here.

"Computer! Damage Report!"

"Main dome compromised. Life support and power in observation tower undamaged. Base operating normally except for life support in main dome."

"Life signs?"

"One life sign in observation tower."

I was alone, floating on the surface of an unidentified planet."What happened here?" I asked.

"Unknown."

Unknown - How could the computer not know? I decided to explore my prison, a place starting to appear like my tomb. I went to the lift and found there was a floor below. I went there and found living quarters and a kitchen. It was not a home, more like an overnight duty room. I found a First Aid kit and bandaged my head wound. On the wall I found a map of the base. If the equipment was working maybe I could find the medical centre and check myself out.

On further investigation I found this section had its own air lock and a space suit. I donned the outfit and stepped outside into the compromised base. The suit insulated me from outside noises. My ears still rang and I was gaining a headache, but the only sound was my heavy breathing as I walked down the deserted corridors. The atmosphere looked normal but all instruments told me I would not only freeze to death but would be asphyxiated within seconds.

I found the medical centre and checked everything was operational before stepping into the examination tube, a glass tube backed by scanning equipment capable of analysing my

whole body for abnormalities. A screen nearby lit up and my body was displayed in sections as it was examined minutely. After a few minutes the computer reported. “Head injury, severe concussion. Recommend minimal activity and avoid sleep for six hours, medication being dispensed to assist healing. Take one every two hours.” I stepped from the tube and found the medicine bottle on the dispensing tray next to the tube.

I looked around having taken little notice as I walked in. There was nothing here but the machine. Just a desk, presumedly for the doctor, if we had one? A sign indicated “Isolation Ward” in the next room. I stepped inside and found a series of glassed-in rooms with air locks to ensure patients with contagious diseases did not come in contact with the outside base. Inside one of them was a woman. She was laying on the bed, presumedly dead, a yellow haired blonde with long hair down to her shoulders, dressed only in her underwear. She appeared to be in her late twenties, good figure, attractive in every way. Just my luck, Robinson Crusoe, finds the perfect woman – but she’s dead.

Then to my surprise, she moved. Sensing my presence, she sat up and saw me watching her. Her surprise and alarm turned to relief when she saw me. “You’re alive!” she cried from inside. I wasn’t sure whether it was my hearing or the case she was in caused the muffled distant voice that I heard. I looked around helplessly unsure what to do to help her then realised I’d need to find another space suit.

“I’ll find another suit!” I replied and walked away. She watched me leave, her eyes filled with fear of being abandoned. I wasn’t even sure that she’d heard me; maybe she thought I was just going to leave her. Having left the medical centre, I returned to the main corridor. Where would I find a space suit? Think? I needed to find an air lock. Further down the corridor I found a copy of the base map, found the closest airlock, and soon returned with a second suit.

She was very relieved to see me return. I examined the air lock and discovered it wasn’t exactly an air lock. It was airtight but designed to operate in normal atmosphere. If I opened the inner door I’d release the poisonous atmosphere into the room. She looked at me unsure why I was hesitating. I began putting my thoughts together. Like a submarine, space craft of any kind had compartments that could be sealed off in case of emergency then pumps that could remove the water or the poisonous atmosphere. I checked around. My assumption was correct. I wondered if my voice contact with the computer extended to the rest of the base.

“Computer! Can you seal off the Medical section of the base and re-establish life support?”

“Yes. Section 344 in not compromised and can be sealed.”

“Do it!”

Immediately I heard door closing nearby. I could not see them but the hissing sound that followed indicated the area was going to vacuum as the poisonous gas was removed. I was unexpectantly distracted by the woman pounding on the glass and holding her throat. I realised immediately what was happening. “Computer, maintain life support in the Infectious Ward!”

“This is not possible; they are on the same system.”

I had no choice; I had to hope that sufficient poisonous gas had gone for me to be able to get to her. I opened the outer door, climbed in quickly closed it and then opened the inner door. She was gasping for air as I approached with an oxygen tank and urged her to get into the suit. She took a few breaths to revive herself and then climbed into the suit. By the time she had finished the atmosphere exchange was complete and she was not required to put her helmet on. I removed my helmet to introduce myself.

“I hope you’re not infectious,” I said stupidly.

She smiled at my awkwardness. “No, I’m the doctor. I managed to get in here before the breach reached me. How bad is it?”

“Bad. As far as I can tell we are the only survivors.” I saw her face collapse in horror at the thought. “Can you tell me what happened?”

She stared at me. “Don’t you know?”

I shook my head. “I don’t even know who I am or where we are. What is this place?”

For the first time she noticed my bandaged head. I pointed to the medical chart. She exited the isolation cubicle and went to the machine. “What can you remember?”

“Nothing. I know how the equipment works but nothing else.” She sat me down at the desk and examined my injury, peered into my eyes, and confirmed the machine’s diagnosis. “Can you tell me what this place is?”

“It’s a mining base on Uranus. We mine the gases and the liquid diamonds below the surface. Regular transport visits to collect our produce but I have no idea when the next one is due. I think our first priority to check for other survivors.”

“Agreed then we need to convey to someone what has happened here,” I replied. She had no problem with that, so we split up and searched the base exited the air lock that sealed off Section 344. After an hour we met back at the Medical Centre, we had found no one. I had been experiencing what she called floaties in my eye, being brown ghostly like clouds that crossed my vision. We decided to head back to the Observation Tower after collecting food from the canteen. We did find that some had been contaminated, frozen solid in an atmosphere of ammonia and methane.

“You haven’t told me your name,” I asked as we returned with a trolley of food.

"Rachael Burke. I'd ask yours but…" We both smiled as we reached the air lock and entered my home away from home. "My God!" Rachael was looking out across the destroyed dome. "What could cause that?"

"Don't know, an asteroid perhaps?"

"I'm no physicist but I would have expected an asteroid to destroy the entire base. Anything smaller should have been deflected by our shields. They protect us from atmospheric pressures."

"Maybe the shield collapsed." I turned to the computer. "Is that possible computer?"

"Negative. If that had occurred, the base would be crushed. Analysis indicates the dome shattered due to unknown stresses."

"What kind of stresses?' I asked stupidly.

The computer incapable of sarcasm simply replied. "Unknown."

"So what do we do now?" asked Rachel.

"We wait, as this base is on the dark side of the planet, we can't send any distress call. We are still seven hours away before sunrise. Until then I suggest we relax and have something to eat."

A short time later, we were relaxing in the common area, eating, drinking and talking. "So why so far out? I would have thought Jupiter and Saturn more economic places to mine for Helium 3."

"With the new fast travel drives it was easier to mine here, distance was no longer an issue. Gravity is 0.9 of Earth, so healthier for the crew. It's a shallow atmosphere with far less radiation and gravitational obstacles."

"Helium 3, one of the most plentiful gases in the universe, yet one of the rarest on Earth." I remarked as I noticed something different. Something had changed, but what?

Rachel noticed I was distracted. "It's gone very quiet."

"That's it! The scrubbers have stopped!"

"That doesn't sound good."

"It isn't. Without them our air supply will fail, the atmosphere will become contaminated with carbon dioxide at toxic levels." I jumped to my feet and rushed out. "I need your help!"

Within minutes we were back in our suits making our way to the life support equipment through the rich hydrogen helium and methane atmosphere. On entering the generating room I saw the problem instantly. "They're trying to scrub the planets atmosphere which has no oxygen and they're breaking down." I raced over to the controls and checked the readings.

"Can you do anything?"

I shook my head. “This is an old system it runs the whole base as if it were one unit instead of breaking it down into compartments. I can’t isolate the Tower from the rest and this thing is going to overload. We have to get out of here – NOW!”

I grabbed Rachel and we ran back through the complex as the equipment went into overload. The explosion knocked us off our feet as a sheet of fire flashed over our heads. It was quickly extinguished with no oxygen to keep it alive, but the base rocked like a buoy floating in rough sees. If the base had not already been breached, that would have done it.

As we got to our feet, we saw debris lying all around us. “I gather you can’t fix this?” asked Rachel and we both started laughing as he headed back to the Tower.

“Life support report!” I requested on getting back.

The computer was quick with a reply. “Life support will fail in five hours, forty-two minutes.”

“That’s about two hours short and makes no allowance for the time for a signal to be received and rescue sent. We have to leave. Is there any way off this base?”

“There is a shuttle that runs from this base to the one on the other side of the planet. We could go there.”

I saw no other option. “I’ll prepare a recorded message which the computer can send as soon as we have direct contact, just in case we don’t make it.” Rachel agreed so I turned to record the message. As I did those floaties began to return, brown smudges like bad scratches on a pair of glasses obscuring my vision and concentrated on the window looking down at the crushed dome. Rachel saw I was looking out the window.

“You looking at those brown flakes?” she asked.

I turned. “You see them too?” She nodded. So they weren’t in my eye, they were outside. When I turned to look at the room, they were gone, so we both looked more closely. What we saw were like flat jelly fish, flat and thin like a sheet of paper but oval in shape, clear to the point of nearly being invisible with brown blobs in the centre of their bodies. I watched closer as the window view became blurred, and then I realised what was happening. “They are adhering themselves to the window, layer over layer.” I saw the unspoken question in Rachel ‘s face. “Why?” I asked the computer to analyse the stresses on the window.

“A biological one celled organicism is attaching itself to the window and exerting increasing stress upon the window. It will fail in fifty-nine minutes.”

“Could these creatures have destroyed the dome?” I asked.

“Quite possible.” Neither of us liked the reply.

“So we are killed by the failure of the glass or from failure of life support. Guess we have no other choice but to get out of here,” suggested Rachel.

I agreed and began preparing our distress call. “This is Uranus Base. Mayday! Mayday! We are under attack. Base destroyed, two survivors. Abandoning night side base for sunny side base before life support fails. Request assistance!”

A short time later we had loaded up a trolley of food to take with us, put on our suits and headed out the airlock for the last time as we set off for the landing pad; a little shelf on the far side of the Dome big enough for a small ship to land.

As we made our way, we started to see the floaties all around us, small numbers to begin with but they started to attach themselves to our suit. Each one hit with a force that knocked us forward and each one latched on and tightened like a vice. More and more attached themselves and we found it was becoming hard to breathe as the pressure exerted by these organisms was restricting our breathing, even through our suits.

Becoming alarmed we abandoned our food trolley and ran as fast as we could to the shuttle as breathing got more difficult. Struggling for breath we stumbled the last few feet to the airlock and slammed shut the door. As the airlock filled with oxygen, the pressure eased and the creatures fell dead to the floor. We stood there catching our breath our suits lying at our feet covered in an unmoving gelatinous mass. “I guess we’ve found one weakness,” remarked Rachel.

I nodded. “Leave this all here; don’t want to contaminate the ship.” Rachel agreed and we entered the shuttle. It was not a big ship, big enough to carry six passengers with a below deck cargo bay. The décor was grey metal, poor lighting, and instrumentation. I took the pilot’s seat while Rachel just starred out into the atmospheric clouds outside as I started up the engines. The ship lifted off the platform and dove into the thin atmosphere burrowing a tunnel at high altitude to the opposite side of the planet. It wasn’t long before we realised we had a problem.

“Hull pressure rising to critical,” reported the onboard computer.

Rachel was surprised. “How can that be? We’re at high altitude, there should be very little hull pressure?” she remarked as she turned to look out the shuttle windscreen. It was covered in brown floaties and clear membranes. “What can we do?”

“Let’s see how they react to the vacuum of space,” I suggested as I regained the pilots chair and took the ship up into low orbit just above the atmosphere. The computer reported no increase in hull pressure but also no decrease. “Seems that cold and vacuum doesn’t upset them.”

“That makes sense, single cell bacteria have been known to survive for thousands of years in cold extremes and they don’t breathe. This is also a very cold world anyway.”

"Then let's see how they like heat?" I suggested as I drove the ship into a sharp controlled re-entry. We felt the heat inside as we watched the nose of the ship go red with heat. We had no re-entry heat shield as the shuttle was not designed for this type of manoeuvre but I had to push the ship to its limits to burn off these things from the hull.

"We're burning up! You need to pull up!" screamed Rachel, the heat starting to turn internal controls too hot to handle.

"Not yet, just a little bit further!" I replied noticing the floaties beginning to peel off the front windscreen. "Just a little bit longer," I repeated watching.

"Hull pressure decreasing. Hull temperature exceeding safety limits, hull failure in two minutes," warned the computer in a voice that reflected no alarm. Rachel shot me a fearful glance, her stomach no doubt in knots of fear like my own.

I took the ship up, back into low orbit around the planet. It wasn't until we were back on course in space that we relaxed. "That was close."

I nodded. "But we found another weakness, heat."

Five hours later, after failing to raise anyone at the other base, we found ourselves hovering above the base. "They've been here as well." Rachel's observation understated what we saw. The dome had been destroyed as per our base. There were no survivors and no emergency signal had been sent. We were alone and our nearest contact was millions of miles away on a Saturn moon.

"What do we do now?" asked Rachel desperately hoping I had a solution.

I took stock of our situation. "The signal from our base won't come over the horizon for nearly three hours. We have less than two hours air in the shuttle. That doesn't allow for the time necessary for a rescue mission to reach us. We have to go down and get some oxygen to survive."

"You mean face those things again? They nearly crushed us last time."

"This time we have a weapon. We use the portable oxygen tanks from the suits to spray them, clearing a path. We also need to send a distress signal from here."

Rachel wasn't so sure but said nothing, having no better ideas and knowing we were doomed if we stayed here. So I landed the shuttle, we put on fresh suits, entered the air lock and watched the 'dead' membranes as we exchanged atmospheres. "They're not reacting," observed Rachel when the membranes remained inert.

"Kick them outside just in case," I instructed as I headed for the large oxygen cylinders that stood nearby to restock the shuttle. These were big seven-foot-high cylinders with

diameters of two foot. They were on trolleys for ease of movement. As I wheeled three into the airlock, Rachel stood armed with a small portable cylinder fitted with a spray and waited.

"So far so good! They haven't noticed we're here," I picked up my portable cylinder. "Let's go forth and get that signal out there," I suggested moving forward.

As we passed the scrubbers and air recycling unit, I decided to switch it off before it exploded and restock our portable oxygen cylinder supply as this was where they were refilled. Rachel loaded a trolley with a dozen cylinders as I pulled the lever that shut the power to the system. It slowly ground to a halt and an eerie silence descended over the area. "Time to go," I suggested after we'd both paused to take in the silence.

Our momentary reprieve was short lived as we turned to face a wall of membranes approaching at rapid speed. "Time to test our theory!" I shouted as we sprayed the membranes with Oxygen. It was obvious they didn't like it, the wall backed off as we approached but I couldn't see we were doing any damage. I'd hoped for acid burns, shrivelling membranes but it was more like they were retreating from a bad smell. Who cared as long as we got through? The creatures retreated as we marched on towards the Tower, leaving our trolley behind and armed with two cylinders each. Both our stomachs were churning with fear, waiting for our tactic to fail and they'd crush us, but it didn't happen.

On reaching the Tower we found the airlock still intact; we entered and found air inside but it was tainted. "Never mind, we need to send that signal. Get us some new cylinders!" I ordered as I went to the communications unit. This place was identical to my Tower so I had no trouble getting our signal together. Then I noticed the membranes gathering on the window. I thought for a moment and rigged up an electrical charge into the window heating it. I watched as the membranes backed off. "What are you doing?"

"Buying us some time. That will give us time to get our breath and have a bite to eat before fighting our way back to the shuttle." Rachel glanced at the hot window, impressed and for the first time in several hours, smiled.

The signal was on its way; we were fed and rested; now all we had to do was escape the base. The air in our suit was running out and we needed the spare cylinders as weapons. The final incentive to leave was a power cut off. Everything suddenly went dark. "What caused that?"

Grabbing a torch off the wall, left there for exactly this reason, I headed for the door. "Not sure but it means the charge keeping the membranes from breaking through the window is off."

"What about the distress signal?"

"It's on a different system so it continues even if all power is shut down. We need to move!" I said as I replaced my helmet, having removed it to eat. Although the air was contaminated it was not unbreathable for short periods. When we returned to the airlock, we found we had a welcoming committee.

It was a long hard fight back to our trolley of cylinders. Standing back-to-back and retreating, we kept the membranes at bay then reloaded with fresh cylinders. Given the intensity of the attack we were unable to take any more than two cylinders each and had to leave the trolley of precious oxygen as we retreated back into the ship. As we approached the ship I noticed it was coated in a thick layer of membranes. Dumping our suits in the airlock, I raced to the controls and lifted off, immediately diving into the atmosphere to create a re-entry burn off of the membranes. The computer warned me the hull was already compromised from our previous journey down this path, but we had no choice.

The ship plummeted deeper into the atmosphere, the heat inside becoming unbearable. I reversed direction as the atmospheric pressure was getting too great and headed for space at a speed greater than required to reach escape velocity but also fast enough to maintain the heat on the hull. Our risk here was to hurl ourselves out into space. This was not an aircraft that could manoeuvre and land wherever it wanted. It was a low orbit space craft with no navigational instruments for space flight. Once out of orbit, all sense of direction would be lost. This was made worse when we did break orbit, the engines overheated, and we had no thrust. We were a projectile headed into space out of control.

Three days later, our shuttle was breached by a rescue crew. Both Rachel and I had passed out from lack of oxygen but the scrubber I'd rigged up had kept us alive. I was hardly aware of the rescue; I vaguely remember a face asking me my name. I can't remember if I answered as the next image I had was being in a sick bay under observation.

"I see you are awake," came a voice from my left. I turned to see a nurse sitting there watching my vitals being displayed on a portable electronic PADD. "Are you up to answering a few questions?" I nodded still feeling woozy. "Can you tell us your name?"

"No, I lost my memory in the attack. I must have been an engineer in the control tower because that's where I woke up."

"I'll get the Commander; he wants to know more about this attack before he moves in. I'm Doctor Mears, Angela to my patients." I nodded that I understood and gave a weak smile, still feeling a little out of it. I hoped I'd not suffered brain damage.

She returned with a stocky man in military uniform, a full grey beard but jet-black hair, round faced and big grin on his face. “I believe you two have been through a lot. When we heard of the attack we sent out three ships fully armed and ready for a fight but your log, very extensive I might say. You tell us they are giant microbes?”

“We had nothing else to do but to log in detail our observations, in case we didn’t make it,” I replied weakly to his booming voice. I would have imagined he could have been an opera singer with his ability to project his voice.

“Giant microbes?” he questioned.

I heard the scepticism in his voice. “Giant bacteria to be precise, in massive numbers, they crushed the dome and killed everyone. I only escaped because I was in the tower.”

“And the doctor?”

“She placed herself in an isolation room. How is she?”

“Still unconscious but she should be okay in time. You rest, our scientists are going through your data but I think we’re safe from an invasion.”

“Maybe off-planet but I think you might find you’ve got a fight on your hands from the locals if you plan to return.”

The Commander smiled. “I think we can handle a few microbes, I wouldn’t worry,” he replied and departed. I wasn’t as confident.

Commander Radcliff was a seasoned officer, but his experience was limited to international incidents in space. Patrolling and enforcing illegal territorial disputes. The world had gone to space as one but soon split into corporate and national interests as the opportunities presented themselves. Attacks were usually small incidents where one ship had fired warning shots across the bow of another. This was something different.

He entered the laboratory, a fully digitalised state of the art place. No test tubes, microscopes or other appliances, just one analytical computer and a human interpreter of the data. Radcliff approached Doctor Samantha Willcott. She was young, early thirties with a serious unsmiling face that could have been attractive if she knew how to activate any expression.

“What have you found?”

“Pretty much confirmed the findings of the surviving crew. A biological single cell organism about one foot in diameter. They appear to hunt in packs and act like ants, prepared to sacrifice themselves by the thousands to advance the goals of the collective.”

“How so?” asked Radcliff.

“Ants, in order to cross a water obstacle, allow hundreds of ants to drown creating a bridge of their bodies for the colony to cross over. These things have a strong grip when they latch on to anything. Three could crush a man’s chest. Thousands could bring down a domed colony given time.”

“So how do we stop them?”

“Heat and oxygen have proved to be their weakness but the most effective solution would be an anti-bacteria that infects the population and wipes then out.”

“Can you develop such a solution?”

“Give me a few days,” she replied.

Rachel came rushing into my sick bay room with a horrified look on her face. I was glad to see she had recovered and I was feeling a lot better after a good nights sleep. “Do you know what they are planning?” I shook my head reeling from her aggressive entrance.

“Genocide! They’re going to wipe out the entire native population of Uranus to ensure our mining operations aren’t disrupted again!”

“That was to be expected. We kill insects by the thousands to protect crops and microbes by the trillion to maintain health. I don’t see the problem.”

She stared at me, her mouth open. “We don’t wipe out the entire species to do that and this isn’t our planet. We are destroying an entire life form. We are invading a planet and destroying all life. Is this the precedent we’re going to set for exploring the universe? Exterminate anything that inconveniently gets in our way?”

“I guess I see your point,” I agreed as I considered her argument. It reminded me of old Sci-Fi movies where the aliens tried to wipe us out. It then struck me I couldn’t remember my past, but I could remember old movies.

“We can’t let them do this?”

“What do you propose?”

“We need to get an injunction against them under the United Earth Native Extinction Act. It only applies to life on Earth, but it was drawn up before life was found in other parts of the solar system. That life has not proved an obstacle to human advancement.”

Not one to argue I agreed to assist, and we got hold of legal support from the Saturn System Legal Office who promptly told us it could take several weeks to be processed. Given the planned infection was due within days, we had to put a rush on the process. However, the Commander under pressure from his superiors, who were in turn under pressure from the

corporate owners of the Uranus mining rights pushed for the contamination to precede post haste.

The missiles were launched, designed like depth charges to release their cargo at a certain depth into the atmosphere. The winds would then spread the anti-bacteria and destroy the indigenous life. They didn't anticipate the creatures would fight back.

"Sir! The missiles are exploding prematurely," reported a flight controller on the ship's bridge. Rachel and I were present along with several others including Sam Willcott.

"They are not supposed to explode! That will destroy the anti-bacteria," she exclaimed. "They are supposed to exhaust their fuel and release the bacteria!"

"What is causing the premature explosions?" demanded the Commander, his voice booming across the Bridge.

"Atmospheric pressure is crushing them causing combustion."

Rachel smiled at me. "Those clever creatures are defending themselves by latching on to the missiles and crushing them before they can do harm."

The Commander glared at us for being so joyous at their failure but there was more to come. Our ship had remained a million miles away from the planet allowing the two warships to go in a fire their missiles from a low orbital position. As we watched, an electrical build up in the atmosphere lurched out towards the ships. This bolt shorted out all instrumentation, fried anyone touching a conductive surface and sent the ships hurtling into the atmosphere. One hit the ruins of the mining station, exploding on impact and destroying the buoyancy system that kept the base suspended in the atmosphere. The ship and structure went hurtling through the atmosphere, disappearing to crash, unseen, on the Earth sized rock interior of Uranus.

"I'd say Round Two to the bacteria!" commented Rachel, a big grin on her face.

No one else shared her thoughts, except maybe me. Though I did have a thought for the lives lost on the two warships that had gone down so spectacularly. "So what now Commander?" I asked but only received an angry snarl in return.

Our next move was to return to our nearest base, one of the moons of Saturn, which was the local authority for this region. Rachel was quick to send a message to Earth requesting a hearing under the Earth Global Act to protect endangered species on Earth. Her message sent before an embargo on the situation could be established spurred activists into action creating an outcry. "Was this going to be the way we treated alien life forms? Had we learnt nothing from the invasions of the Americas, Africa and Australia and the destruction of the native people and their cultures? The fight gained weight except in the courts who declared

the Acts only referred to terrestrial life and ruled in favour of the mining conglomerates. Fortunately, the outcry from the people was so strong that politicians were forced to respond and introduced the Alien Life Act which gave equal rights to intelligent life as humans and non-intelligent as that of terrestrial animals. The Uranians were safe, the planet was declared off limits except for communication and research purposes. Humans had at last had contact with alien life and set up rules for dealing with them.

We had been invaders with no regard for the right to life and co-existence with ourselves. A policy that was to prove beneficial in centuries to come when contact could have led to interplanetary war instead of a peaceful accord. Both Rachel and I felt honoured to have been a part of this development before we resumed our dull lives working on the gas giants with our former enemies the conglomerates.

THE END