

CHAPTER ONE

Beta 4297

Gareth climbed out of the freezer. He knocked a few small pieces of ice from his clothes, and stood up. He shook his head. A freezer technician was standing next to him. She was wearing a silver metal suit.

'Name?'

'Gareth ... Gareth Palmer.'

'Number?'

'Beta 4297.'

'Job?'

'Garden Technician, Class Four.'

'What are six threes?'

'Eighteen.'

'And nine fours?'

'Nine fours are thirty-six.'

'Where are you?'

'On the *New Adventurer*.'

'Where are we going?'

'To the star Orelia. Planet Five.'

The freezer technician put down her pen. She turned to the doctor. 'He's all right. No problems.'

She turned back to Gareth. 'You're OK, Beta 4297. You can go to your room. Dinner will be in forty minutes. Report for work at 18.00 hours.'

Gareth walked out of the Freezer Room. He was always a little nervous. It didn't happen very often, but every two or three months, someone didn't wake up, or they did wake up but they couldn't remember who they were or what they were doing. He thought about Philip. Philip was a garden technician, too. When he woke up last year he was like a baby. He couldn't speak or feed himself. They put him in the hospital for tests, but there was nothing they could do. They had to kill him. There was no room on a starship for passengers.

Gareth hurried to his room. He wanted a shower. That was always the first thing you wanted after two weeks in the freezer. He found his room, stopped and looked at the sign on the door.

ROOM 543

ALPHA 3461

BETA 4297

He opened the door and went in. The room, as usual, was empty. He took his key from his pocket and opened his cupboard. He took out a work suit and laid it on the bed, and then he took off the metal freezer suit, and put it in the cupboard. He got in the shower, and turned on the hot water. He felt better immediately. He stood in the shower for two minutes, then the shower turned itself off. Two minutes was the longest time you could have in the shower. Then he saw something in the bottom of the shower tray. A little piece of gold metal.

He picked it up. It was an earring. A small gold earring. 'Alpha 3461,' he said to himself. 'So, Alpha 3461 is a woman.' He smiled. He had never met Alpha 3461, of course. She was in the freezer now. She was going to be there for two weeks, then Gareth had to go to the freezer, and Alpha 3461 could come back to the room for her two weeks. Alpha and Beta workers never met. There were a lot of rules. You couldn't leave anything in the room. Everything had to go in your cupboard. Nobody ever asked about the other workers. It was easier.

Gareth put on his work suit. He put the earring on the table. He looked at it for a minute. He knew nothing about Alpha 3461. They had used the same room for three years now, and they were going to use it for seven or eight years more. He didn't know what she looked like, how old she was or what she did.

CHAPTER TWO

The New Adventurer

The *New Adventurer* was a Type 7D starship. All Type 7 starships worked on a two-shift system. There were two shifts of workers, and each shift spent two weeks in the freezer, then two weeks at work. During the time in the freezer you didn't get older, so that after a ten-year journey through space, you were only five years older.

The journey to Orelia Five took ten years each way. Most of the people on the starship would stay on Orelia Five, but you could return to Earth if you wanted to. Without the freezers, people would be more than twenty years older when they got back. The freezers cut this time in half. Scientists on Earth were working on faster starships, and they were working on better freezers, too. Two weeks was the longest safe time in the Type 7 freezer. In the ten-year journey to Orelia Five, about one per cent of the starship's crew would die in the freezers. When the scientists tried four weeks, more than thirty per cent died. At six weeks it was one hundred per cent. So they used two shifts. Alpha workers were awake for weeks 1 and 2, Beta workers were awake for weeks 3 and 4. A few of the crew, the two captains, the most important officers, and the freezer technicians worked a different shift. They were awake either for weeks 2 and 3, or for weeks 1 and 4.

The biggest problem was the time in space. Everyone knew about the first Type 1 starship. It left the Earth in 2235 on a 75-year journey to the Centauri star system. But when it arrived in 2310, it found thousands of Earth people were already there.

The first starship that arrived on Centauri was a Type 4 which left Earth in 2281, and arrived on Centauri in 2289. Between 2235 and 2281 scientists discovered the Hyper-Drive engine, which was much faster than the old Type 1 and Type 2 starships. The second ship to arrive on Centauri was a Type 3 which left Earth in 2275, then a Type 2 which left in 2250. Last of all was the Type 1 from 2235. You didn't know what was going to happen because it was impossible for Hyper-Drive starships to communicate with the Earth. Perhaps when Gareth's Type 7 starship arrived on Orelia Five they would find that a Type 8 or 9 was already there.

CHAPTER THREE

Who is ALPHA 3461?

Gareth reported for work in the gardens at 18.00 hours. The gardens were one of the most important parts of the starship. They had plants from Earth for the new colonies on Orelia Five, and they also produced food for the starship. The plants cleaned the air on the spaceship, and produced oxygen.

Gareth walked over to his control desk. Gareth controlled the oranges and lemons. He looked at the computer terminal. Everything was all right. Alpha 6558 had done a good job during his two weeks.

He thought about Alpha 3461. He didn't know what her job was. He pushed some buttons on the computer. A list of garden technicians appeared. He read it quickly. So she wasn't a garden technician then. He couldn't get information about any other jobs.

He walked over to the orange-farming area. The trees were very small, less than two metres high, but each tree had more than a hundred oranges on it. Gardening and farming were two of the most important sciences. There were millions of people in the star colonies, and food had to be produced very quickly in small areas.

Gareth looked at the water pipes. They were all right. He was still thinking about Alpha 3461. He wanted to know more about her.

Gareth finished work at 04.00 hours. On Earth, 04.00 was night time. In space it wasn't important. He went back to his room and changed his clothes. It was time for a meal. Restaurant Area Number Three was nearly full when Gareth arrived. He took a tray and went to sit at a table with some friends, Mohamed and Hiroshi. They were Starship Hyper-Drive technicians.

'Hi,' he said. 'I'm happy to see you're both awake again.'

'It was a good day,' said Hiroshi. 'Everybody woke up.'

'How do you know?' asked Gareth. When there was an accident in the Freezer Room, it was usually a secret.

'I've got a girlfriend in the Freezer Room,' said Hiroshi. 'She told me.'

They finished their meal, and went to the Sports Area. There was a football match at 06.00 between Area 3 and Area 9. They all wanted to watch it. They sat down next to a tall woman. They didn't know her, but she was wearing a freezer technician's uniform. Area 3 won the match easily, 12-1.

'That's the best score I've ever seen,' said Mohamed.

The tall woman smiled. 'You weren't here last week,' she said. 'The Alpha team from Area 4 scored fifteen.'

Gareth thought for a moment. Of course! The officers and freezer technicians worked different shifts from everyone else. So they met people from the Alpha shift and the Beta shift! He turned to the woman.

'Er ... you don't know Alpha 3461, do you?' he said.

She laughed. 'There are 9,000 people on each shift!' she said. 'Anyway, I can never remember numbers. What's his name?'

'Er... Alpha 3461 is a woman,' he said.

'OK, what's her name?' said the woman.

'I don't know,' said Gareth. He felt stupid.

"What does she look like?"

'I don't know,' said Gareth again. 'I don't know anything about her.'

The woman looked at Gareth. 'Then why are you asking about her? You shouldn't ask about people on the Alpha shift, you know.'

Mohamed got up. 'Come on, Gareth . . . let's go and have a coffee,' he said.

They sat down in one of the coffee rooms near the Sports Area. Mohamed looked at Gareth for a moment.

'Who's the mystery woman?' he said.

'Oh, she's the one that has the same room as me,' said Gareth.

'How do you know that she's a woman?' said Mohamed.

Gareth told him about the earring. Mohamed looked worried.

'Gareth, you know you shouldn't ask questions about her. If that freezer technician reports your conversation, you'll be in trouble.'

'Why?' said Gareth.

'Oh, come on, Gareth! You know the rules as well as I do!' said Mohamed.

'Yes, I know the rules,' said Gareth. 'I know them, but I don't understand them. Why shouldn't I ask about her?'

Hiroshi moved forward. 'I don't really understand, either,' he said, 'but they always keep the two shifts apart on starships. I think it's because there are 9,000 of us on each shift, and we're locked up together for ten years. When we arrive on Orelia Five, there'll be 9,000 new faces - 9,000 faces that we

aren't bored with.'

'Yes,' said Mohamed, 'it may not be very important, but it's like all the rules on a starship. You have to obey all the rules one hundred per cent. If we question the rules, it will be impossible to go on.'

'So we must obey with no questions at all,' said Gareth.

'You know that, Gareth,' said Hiroshi. We all knew that before we left Earth.'

'Forget about this Alpha woman,' said Mohamed. 'Really, it's the best thing to do. '

CHAPTER FOUR

Problems in the Freezer Room

It was the last day of the Beta shift. Gareth was in his room. In half an hour it was going to be time to go to the Freezer Room. Gareth got into the shower. Very carefully he put the earring on the shower tray where he had found it. Then he took a small white flower and put it down next to the earring. He hoped the cleaners would be too lazy to check the shower. They hadn't checked it last month. The small flower was from a lemon tree. If the cleaners found it, there would be trouble. It was forbidden to pick flowers from the garden area. Nobody had seen Gareth when he picked it earlier in the day.

When Gareth got to the Freezer Room the door was closed. A starship policeman was standing outside.

'You'll have to wait for a few minutes,' said the policeman. 'We're having a small problem.'

Gareth could hear screams from inside the room.

'What's wrong?' he said.

'I shouldn't tell you,' said the policeman, 'but it's one of the cooks. He doesn't want to go in the freezer. He's frightened. He says he wants to stay awake until we get to Orelia Five.'

'What's happening?' said Gareth.

'What do you think?' said the policeman. 'We're putting him in the freezer. If he's still making trouble when he wakes up in two weeks, we'll have to ... well, you know what we'll have to do.'

Gareth knew. Five minutes later the door opened. Gareth went in and walked towards the freezers. He climbed into one. Before he started to fall asleep he thought about Alpha 3461. 'I wonder if she uses the same freezer, too?'

Two weeks later, as soon as Gareth left the Freezer Room, he hurried to his room. He closed the door and walked round the room. It looked empty, as usual. He looked in the shower. No earring, nothing. He had his shower. He felt sad. What had he been hoping to find? He didn't really know. He got out of the shower and went over to the sink. He wanted a drink of water. He turned on the tap. Nothing happened for a second, then the water came out suddenly. A piece of paper came out with the water! He picked it up. It was wet. He sat on the bed and looked at it.

Dear Beta 4297,

Thank you for finding my earring. And thank you for the flower. You mustn't do anything like that again. It's dangerous for you! I've often wondered about you. I don't

know anything about you. I know you are a man. You didn't clean the sink very well, after you shaved, and the cleaners are not very careful in this area of the ship. Well, we'll meet on Orelia Five. Until then, good luck!

Best wishes,

Alpha 3461

Gareth read the note several times. It was dangerous for her, too. He should throw the note away, but he couldn't. Now he really wanted to know about Alpha 3461.

He went for dinner. As he walked into the Restaurant Area, he saw the policeman again.

'Hello,' he said. 'What happened to the cook?'

The policeman looked round quickly. 'Be quiet,' he said. 'I'll be in trouble. It's forbidden for me to talk about it. Let's just say - there was a problem with his freezer. He didn't wake up.'

'You mean ... they killed him,' said Gareth.

'I didn't say that. There was a problem with his freezer. And you should forget this conversation. I'm going to forget it.'

Gareth thought for a long time about the note. On the last day of his shift he sat in his cabin, and wrote to Alpha 3461.

Dear Alpha 3461,

Can I call you 61? Or can I call you by your real name? I'm Gareth Palmer, and I'm a garden technician. I'm 26, and I come from London in the United European District on Earth. This is my first space trip, and I'm going to stay on Orelia Five, so it's probably my last space trip, too. I don't know why I want to know about you, but I do. But I don't want you to do anything dangerous. You know what happens to people who break the rules. Be careful!

Very best wishes,

Gareth

Gareth put the note carefully into the tap. He was smiling as he went to the Freezer Room. He wanted the next two weeks to pass quickly.

CHAPTER FIVE

An Educational Program

Gareth nearly got into trouble when he got out of I the freezer two weeks later. As usual, the freezer technician asked him questions. When she said, 'Name?' he said, 'Gareth Palmer.' But when she said, 'Number?' he replied 'Alpha 3461,' because that was what he had been thinking about. He quickly said, 'No, sorry, I mean Beta 4297,' but he had to have half an hour of tests. He hated the tests. They didn't hurt, but he wanted to hurry to his room as quickly as he could. At last the doctor said that he was all right, and he could go.

He went to the sink at once. It was there! He read it immediately.

Dear Gareth,

This is stupid and wrong. But I want to know about you, too. I had to write this note. My name's Sara Lopez, and I was born on Centauri Three. I'm 23 and I'm an educational technician. I work on the self-study computer programs and my special area is the history of space exploration. I wrote the new program on the history of the Centauri colonies. It's in the library now. I finished it this week. You should look at

it, especially the piece on the first colony in 2298. Write again.

Best wishes,

Sara

Gareth smiled. As soon as he finished dinner he hurried to the self-study library. He walked along the row of people in the library until he found a computer terminal that no one was using. He put his things on the chair and went over to the library technician.

'Hello,' he said. 'I'm interested in the history of the Centauri colony. Have you got anything?'

'Let me see,' she said. 'I think there's a new educational program.'

She gave him a small green disk. He walked back to his terminal. Hiroshi was standing there.

'Hi, Gareth,' he said. 'What are you doing with a green disk? Green disks are history, aren't they? I didn't know you were interested in history.'

'Er ... yes, I am,' said Gareth. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm looking at a program about Japan. My great-great-

grandfather was Japanese. He was the first one in our family that went into space, you know.'

Hiroshi went to a computer terminal on the other side of the room. Gareth sat down, put on the headphones and put the disk into the computer. The program was very exciting. Gareth watched the hologram pictures of the first starship landing. He asked the computer to move to 2298. He saw a hologram of the main city on Centauri, and listened to the computer voice. Suddenly he sat up! The computer voice was saying:

'And now, entertainment. The first Centauri television station opened in January 2298.'

The first programmes were old videos from Earth. In May they showed the first programme that was made on Centauri. It was a comedy, and it was called Gareth, I think I love you. The Centauri television station made many TV programmes after that, and they were popular everywhere.'

Sara! She wrote the computer program! Gareth went over to the desk and got some more programs, *Television in the 23rd Century*, *A Short History of Centauri*, *Television on Centauri*, and some others. There was nothing on any of them about *Gareth, I think I love you*. It was a secret message to him! Gareth spent hours on Sara's program during that shift. There were no other messages, but while he was watching the program, he thought about Sara all the time. He could meet

her in seven or eight years, but how could he meet her before then?

The next day he returned to the self-study library. He asked the library technician about programs on Centauri. She didn't seem very interested.

'But I've got a lot of questions about it. I want to speak to the education technician that wrote the program. Is she ... or he ... an Alpha or a Beta?'

'I've got no idea.'

'But you must have some information. There's only one self-study library.'

The library technician pushed a few buttons on her terminal.

The person that wrote the program was a ... Sara Lopez. We only have the name. But I've never met her, so I'm sure she's an Alpha. Of course, you can't speak to her.'

'No, of course not. Could I leave a message?'

'Well, that's forbidden.'

'It's a question about the program.' That's all right.' Gareth left a message.

Dear Programmer,

I am interested in the history of television on Centauri. Your program talks about television in 2298. I saw a programme from Centauri once. It was a very old one. I saw it on an old video. It was called 'I love you too'. When was that programme made? Please reply.

Yours,

Garden technician,

Beta 4297

A year went by. Gareth put notes in the tap every two weeks. When he got back from the Freezer Room there was always a note waiting for him. He spent hours in the self-study library. Sara usually put little messages into her computer programs. He wanted to meet her, but it was impossible.

CHAPTER SIX

An Accident In The Garden

One day he woke up in the freezer. His eyes opened. Two freezer technicians were standing over him. One of them spoke. 'Beta 4297 is awake, Doctor.'

The doctor hurried over. 'Are you OK? You know who you are, don't you?'

'Yes,' said Gareth.

'We haven't got time for tests,' said the doctor. 'We've had to wake you up early. You've only been in the freezer for three days.'

'Why?' said Gareth.

There's been an accident in the garden. There was an explosion in the pipes to the orange trees. They need your help. Go there now. Don't change your clothes, you haven't got a room. It's the Alpha shift.'

Gareth hurried up to the garden area. All the garden technicians were working in the orange area. He didn't know any of them. The Chief Garden Technician came over. Gareth knew him, because he worked weeks 1 and 4, like all the

officers.

'Gareth, we need your help. The orange trees were in the explosion. We have to save them.'

'Right,' said Gareth. 'Where's Alpha 6558?' Alpha 6558 was the garden technician who worked on the orange and lemon trees on the Alpha shift.

'Carl - that's his name - was hurt in the explosion. He broke his leg. He'll be OK, he's in the hospital now. That's why we had to wake you up.'

Gareth worked for nearly twenty hours on the orange trees. There wouldn't be any oranges for a few months, but he was able to save the trees. The Chief Garden Technician was waiting for him.

'You'll have to use Carl's room,' he said. 'I've had your things moved there.'

'Right,' said Gareth.

'And we'll have to change you to the Alpha shift. I'm sorry, all your friends are on the Beta shift.'

Gareth didn't say anything.

'You'll have to stay on the Alpha shift for three or four months. There's no one else that knows about oranges and

lemons on this shut. The Beta shift will be all right. Jose can do your job there.'

'I can change to the Alpha shift for the rest of the journey, if you like,' said Gareth.

'You don't mind?' said the Chief Garden Technician.

'No, not at all,' said Gareth. He was wondering when Sara finished work.

'All right. I'll show you where Carl's room is,' said the Chief Garden Technician.

Gareth felt very happy.

The Chief Garden Technician looked at him for a moment.

'Stop smiling, Gareth. I know why you want to work on the Alpha shift.'

Gareth felt cold suddenly.

'Yes, when they moved your things to Carl's room, they found these.' He showed Gareth some pieces of paper. They were Sara's notes. He hadn't wanted to throw them away.

'I told the policeman who found them that you were . . . that you were writing a romantic book. I also told him that you were the only person that knew enough about the trees.

He agreed to forget about it.'

The Chief Garden Technician showed him Carl's room on the plan of the starship.

'Now, you go and get some sleep, you need it,' he said.

'Yes. Thank you,' said Gareth.

He walked slowly out of the garden area. Carl's room was downstairs, and to the left. His old room was to the right.

Gareth smiled again. He turned right, and began to walk more quickly.