



The Arbitrator

MAX NOWAZ

THE ARBITRATOR

SECOND EDITION

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CONTENTS

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE](#)

CHAPTER ONE

The prisoner lay in his cell dreaming of good times. He had been rotting there for a long time, and the good times came when he was like this, drugged and semi-conscious.

Somebody kicked him, he thought, but it didn't hurt too much.

"Get up you lazy bastard. The governor wants a word with you," said a guard.

He opened his eyes and smiled. There was another guard standing near the cell door in anticipation of any trouble. The prisoner smiled at him, too.

Now what can the governor want from me? He wondered. His dishevelled form seemed incapable of coherent thought. "It's nice of him to remember me," he said aloud, trying to concentrate.

"Surprising he's got any time for a worthless shit like you," said the first guard.

"I once used to be a very important person," the prisoner said feebly.

"I still am," the guard laughed. "Now get, up you fucking junkie, unless you want a real good kicking."

"Thanks for your pity," said the prisoner. He hauled himself up with effort and set off between them, the drugged smile still on his face.

* * *

The Arbitrator lay on 'the bubble', as the contraption was fondly called, floating on a cushion of air. He needed to relax; he was tired from the exertions of the last few days, what with the rebellion and capturing the leaders. Normally he would have been in peak condition, but he had been ravaged by years of abuse. His once handsome face, which had always looked young for his age, was now haggard, and his usually well-built body was now badly out of condition.

The Arbitrator, despite his fatigue, was in an imperious mood. Things had gone very smoothly and he had everything under control, which was surprising given how much could have gone wrong. It had been quite difficult when he had first arrived; the planet had been in turmoil with a rebellion in

full swing. The natives, it seemed, did not much care for the autocratic form of government run by the interplanetary arm of the EPA, the Earth Policy Administration.

His mission had been to deal with the uprising in Pirrus, a sparsely populated planet in a system a good many light years from Earth. It was a backward planet in his estimation, but nevertheless it was now his, to do with as he wished, as long as he delivered. He was there to fix things as Earth wanted them.

Now 'Arbitrator' was a strange title; maybe 'Overlord' or even 'Governor' would have been more apt. The term Arbitrator implied that he would arbitrate between Earth and the natives, but in reality he was there to follow an agenda dictated by the EPA and there was not much sense of justice in it at all. However, the Earth government liked the title: it was considered respectable.

When the planet was first pacified it had taken only three hours, which was about right. This time it had taken him three weeks and he was slightly peeved about it. After all, was he not one of the most capable administrators the EPA ever had? Brown, his real name, had been in the colonisation business for some time. In his 153 years of life he had seen quite a lot, but perhaps he was losing his touch after his long stretch in the wilderness.

He lay back, disappointed. His quarters were not lavish and almost spartan, although it was highly functional, with the latest developments in technology, matching the vast complex that was the EPA headquarters in Pirrus.

"Bring me a soft drink!" Brown shouted. "Damn these drugs, they're killing me. I need to get back to Earth and get off them," he muttered to himself.

He had been trying to give up his long-standing drug addiction for a while, but it had not worked out. The solution to his addiction lay on Earth and he needed desperately to finish the job and return there as soon as possible. Time was running out for him. He had been due for his second life renewal when he turned 150, but lacked the funds for the procedure. He was broke after having blown all his money on a get mega rich quick scheme on another planet.

A mandroid brought his soft drink, made from some local fruit. He preferred natural food to artificially prepared ones. The taste of the fruit reminded him of mangoes. This was the fruit that was toxic to Earth humans.

The juice had to be carefully prepared before it could be drunk. The locals, naturally, were immune to it.

“Any journalists bothering us about the executions tomorrow?” Brown asked the mandroid.

“No, sir,” it said.

“Good.” He hated journalists, even if there were only a few here.

In fact, there were hardly any humans from Earth here. Most of them were EPA employees who worked for him. Besides them, the only others were on the planet on business. As yet, the vast number of settlers expected had not materialised.

He lay back and sipped some of the juice. It felt good, the remnants of the fruit’s toxins gave him a mild buzz, but it didn’t assuage the gnawing hole inside.

He reached for a prepared hypo and injected himself with the drug. The concoction included a parasite that attached itself to both the nervous system and brain. He had picked up the habit during the last ten years and had tried to shake it for every one of them. But it could only be cured by a full renewal. Time was of the essence: his next renewal was already three years overdue. Who knew how long he could last without it?

There was to be an execution the next day. Perhaps with that out of the way he could depart for Earth? He was still just within the limit, even if he was cutting it a bit fine. His thought process was interrupted by a mandroid.

“One of the native girls wants to see you,” it said. “Shall we allow her in? She is at the reception.” Its voice sounded human and if one was not aware, it was difficult to tell otherwise.

“Who is she?” He was disinterested. The drug was beginning to take effect.

“Claims to be the daughter of one of the men you’re going to execute tomorrow. I think the one called Zalamus, sir.”

Now that was mildly interesting. The mandroid had said ‘*I think*’. They were getting too damned like humans. “Why does she want to see me?”

“She wants a pardon for her father. She thinks you might grant it if she can speak with you.”

“Quite possibly,” he said sarcastically. “But I am not interested, so tell her to go.”

The mandroid went away.

Brown sank into a sweet reverie as the parasite took hold of his nervous

system.

Was it a few minutes later? It was too damned soon, anyway, when the mandroid returned.

“Sir, she says she insists on seeing you and will not leave.”

“She does, does she?” he laughed. He was getting higher.

“Okay, bring her in.” He felt like having some amusement. “Screen her first.”

It was unnecessary for him to ask the mandroid to do so, as it was going to be done anyway. They always sent the natives through a scanner to check for concealed weapons.

The girl entered. She was tall and slim, and her pale blue skin glistened in the artificial light. Red hair flowed over her shoulders. Even through his high he could see she was beautiful. The girl was dressed in traditional native attire, but of very high -quality material. It hugged the contours of her body perfectly, obviously an item that was only meant to fit her and which projected her beauty even further.

She came up to him and stood silently.

“You want to see me?” he asked, his face moist with sweat, the drug rampaging through his mind.

“Yes, Your Excellency,” she said in Earth Speak 1, the compulsory language the natives were taught. “I want to plead for my father’s life and that of the other people. Please let them go.”

“And the reason I should do it?” he laughed, trying to hide his symptoms.

“Because it does not serve any purpose. They’re not the leaders. You know they are powerless to act against you if you let them go.”

“Is that true?” Brown was a bit surprised, but didn’t want to show it. “So who are the ones I should execute?”

“They have disappeared, I give you my word,” she said. “You only have the front men.”

“Sorry,” he said. He was indeed sorry. It seemed the revolution wasn’t quite as over as he had assumed earlier. “The execution will go ahead to send a message to others not to follow them. These are the small details one must attend to when suppressing rebellion.”

Brown was disappointed. The real leaders of the rebellion were still unaccounted for then. There was also the question of the suspected foreign powers that were backing them. That would explain the continued reports of

landings of unidentified spacecraft.

“Just small details to you!” she said. “You’re talking about the lives of several people who are not even the actual leaders of the rebellion.”

“They shouldn’t have tried it,” he smiled. “It was doomed to failure.”

“How can you be so callous? You know you do not have to kill them,” she cried. “Did you never have rebellion in the history of Earth?”

“Yes,” he said. “And they were always put down ruthlessly.” He had been going to add, “Unless they succeeded,” but even in his altered state realised that would make him look vulnerable. “Would your father have spared me if he had won?” he said instead.

“You would have survived, yes. They would let you negotiate terms of surrender. They are just people, and we are fighting for a just cause.”

“And we’re fighting for our standard of living.” It wasn’t completely true, he was fighting for his own standard of living.

“You represent criminals who have taken away everything, including our way of life.”

“You ought to be more careful,” he said. He raised himself on his cushion of air, but slowly so that his head didn’t float off over the room. “You could be arrested for incitement. As it is, most of you natives are doing very well,” he smiled. “We have really let you get on with your lifestyle while improving it, since we took over a hundred and fifty years ago.”

“I don’t care.” She started crying. How he hated it when they did that. “Please save my father and my fiancé,” she pleaded. “They are not the leaders of the rebellion.”

“Fiancé as well?” he eyed her. “Who is it?”

“Zedan.”

“Zedan? Ah yes. He and your father, they’re close to the leadership.” He tapped the side of his nose and pointed at her.

“They are just ordinary men,” she pleaded. “Caught up in the situation, please let them go, I beg you.”

For a moment her pleading eyes nearly softened him, but only for a moment. She excited him. Something about her fire and vulnerability cut through the drug and reminded him how lonely he was. He had already wondered whether it was really necessary to have them killed, but he had dismissed it. He was killing them to teach others a lesson and keep them under control. It was an EPA protocol to make it expensive for any local

population to kill any Earth human. Natives had to pay for it with lives. The official face of the EPA, however, was humanitarian. The killings took place discreetly, unless there had been a direct open challenge as in this case.

These were just a few worthless lives, paying the price of an unsuccessful revolution. He disliked unsuccessful people, though there was already another plan forming in his mind.

“I beg you,” she pleaded again.

“What’s your name?”

“My...?” She looked bewildered. “Gina.”

“Well Gina, if I let them go, what do I get out of it?” he asked suddenly, almost regretting it for a moment.

“I don’t know what I could do for you.”

“I’ll make a bargain with you.” He wanted her now, but he was still playing with her.

“What sort of a bargain?” she asked cautiously.

“One life for you,” he said. “You have to choose. Your father, or your fiancé.”

“Oh God,” she was disgusted. “You cannot really be serious.”

“Just as I thought,” he smiled. “Self-interest only, you’re not really interested in saving them.”

Gina stood silent, her eyes blazed with hatred and she turned to go. He laughed, which made her turn towards him again.

“How can I trust you?” she asked.

“You will just have to take the chance, I’m afraid.”

“Alright I agree,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows. This was getting interesting. “You haven’t made your choice, you know,” he taunted. “Your father, or your future husband?”

Her head was bent for a moment. “My father,” she said slowly.

She stood there in front of him and he looked her over from top to bottom of her exquisite form.

“How old are you, Gina?” he asked.

“Twenty-six,” she said. Just over twenty-eight in Earth years.

“Do you know how old I am? A hundred and forty of your years, but biologically I’m almost as young as you are. Once we also had short lives, but that was a long time ago.” In fact his calculation was not quite correct, but she got the message.

“Haven’t you got a wife back home?” she was desperate.

“No. Not anymore.” He laughed. Brown had been a bachelor for the last twenty-five years. After his third wife he had got a bit fed up with married life.

She did not say anything, but she stood there. He eyed her again.

“That’s the bargain,” he said. “Go and get decontaminated.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. This was the final insult.

“It won’t take a moment, the mandroid will take you. You’ll just be cleaned up. One of these precautions I have to take.”

* * *

When she returned, she was naked and her blue skin blushed to a light yellow with shame. He was waiting for her on the bubble.

“Don’t you have any privacy?” she asked. “All these people are watching us.”

“They are all machines,” he said. “They don’t feel this sort of emotion. Come here.”

She obeyed without any resistance. “Make sure you keep your promise.”

“Don’t worry,” he said and pulled her down under him. He could feel her whole body cringe in the anticipation of things to come and felt guilty again for a moment, but the urge was overwhelming.

He needed a break from the tension of the last few days and though he was violating his own long-held beliefs, there was nobody there to judge him. He was also under the full influence of the drug now and it had indeed been a very long time.

Afterwards she said nothing. She looked away, yellow in shame, disgusted with herself. After a few minutes the colour darkened through a rather fetching green, to a fine blue.

“I want you to come back again,” he said.

“No,” she sat up. “That was not part of the bargain. I will never let you touch me again. I will kill myself before that.”

“Calm down,” he said. “I will release your fiancé if you do.”

“My fiancé? I can never go back to him now,” she was almost crying.

“Don’t be silly,” he said. “Just because you’ve been with me? Anyway, you will be saving his life, if you do come back to me. Don’t you want to do

that?”

Bright yellow patches appeared on her face. “I haven’t *been* with you.”

“I will let all of them go,” he said. “If you come back just a few more times, think of the service you will be doing your people.” The other plan had formed in his mind already.

She did not say anything. She seemed on the verge of crying out against him, but controlled herself with difficulty.

“I suppose your silence means you agree?”

“You know I can’t refuse your proposal. But the shame I feel.”

“Why?” he said “Am I not good?” In his chemical haze he imagined that his pride was genuinely hurt.

“Tell me one thing,” she said. “Are all the Earth people as ruthless as you are?”

“Only the few in power,” he said. “The others don’t get much of a chance. Perhaps I’m being too honest?” Had he said that out loud? He tried to focus, but the parasite was loosening his tongue as much as his mind.

“How do you manage to keep control?” she asked.

“We have all the advantages over people who are not ruthless,” he smiled. “Anyway it is an unfortunate choice of words. We have merely done away with the restricting inhibition of moral justice. Once we believed in gods and other such superstition, and derived our power from them. But we became wiser and realised that it was access to power itself that decided who had a right to justice and who had not. So we learned to deal with each other more equitably. But you are in an inferior position. The law is different for you.”

“So we are justified in our struggle against you,” she said angrily. “You hold power away from us deliberately.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But you don’t have a chance in a billion of succeeding. Why do you think I am letting these people go? Because they can do nothing, I can have them back whenever I feel like it.”

“You are a monster.” She could have killed him then.

“Careful,” Brown could see the hatred in her eyes. He admired her guts. “You are supposed to address me as ‘Your Excellency’. I am really trying in my own way to tell you the truth, and that is why you think I am such a bad man. This will be our little secret.”

* * *

After she had gone, he called a mandroid and ordered the release of the prisoners. The mandroid was a bit perplexed at this decision, but did as it was ordered.

They're getting too damned human, he thought again.

He ordered the security system to delete any record of the girl's visit, which relaxed him. He couldn't stop thinking about the girl, her values and those of the people of Pirrus. How different they were, yet it was the similarities that struck him the most.

They had strong customs, barbarous in Earth terms, of course. Although now they were stamped with a certain Earthiness: the mark of the civilised. Some brilliant administrator had even divided the year up to resemble the Earth months, only they had weeks containing eight days. Such problems were easily overcome, after all one could not resort to the calendar followed by these people. The eighth day was called Sunday Plus One, which perhaps didn't mark out the brilliance of the previous administrator at all. At least the weekend had been extended by another day. Brown felt slightly amused by it all, which could only be down to the drug.

The mandroid would be returning later to inject him with a second drug to calm him down and to kill the parasites, otherwise the effect of the first drug would be quite overwhelming. He was perspiring profusely and his heart rate was manic. Unfortunately the second drug wasn't wholly effective. While it would calm his heart and bring him down, some parasites would survive and send out their defence pheromones looking for other parasites to help defend them. That's what caused the habit. They were eating him slowly, but he didn't care. For now he just wanted to submerge himself under their influence.

Brown realised he could not afford to be soft. There was too much pressure on him to earn the money needed for his renewal. That is why he had accepted a commission to this godforsaken backwater of a planet in the first place, not that he had much choice in the matter. With his past record they had head-hunted him and this was his last chance of survival: he had to be brutal. He needed to sort matters out quickly, collect his very large bonus and be back on Earth for his second renewal. It was touch and go whether he would make it in time, so he did not have the luxury of feeling guilty.

That was really why he had released the prisoners. He needed a peace deal quickly and showing mercy was probably the best way. But he also had an

ulterior motive for releasing the prisoners. He wanted them to lead him to the real perpetrators of the rebellion. He lay back on the bubble, overwhelmed by the drug's rage.

Being magnanimous in victory usually worked, but to keep abreast of the situation he had to pump the girl for all she knew. Was there a pang of remorse for his actions in his mind? Possibly, but what choice did he have? If he wanted to survive, he had no room for weakness.

CHAPTER TWO

Brown slept well after his encounter with the girl, and awoke the next morning when his mandroid injected him with the second drug. The doctor at the base who supplied it had warned that it was effective, but only up to a point.

The Arbitrator was supposed to give a press interview in two hours' time about the situation in Pirrus. There would be a few journalists present from Earth and various colonies, settlements and other independent planets.

He had a light radiation shower. Though it was ten times as effective as washing with soap and water, Brown actually preferred a water shower. But in his parasitic hangover, he felt too lazy to attempt it. After the shower he entered the silent sonic vibrator to have his body massaged and to relax and tone his muscles and burn off excess fat. He left after a minute or so, feeling really relaxed.

He began to dress himself for his meeting with the press, choosing a light weight suit with matching pair of boots. The miniature gun in the hidden holster on his forearm was a nice finishing touch, he thought, and though everybody in the press conference would be screened and there would be security standing by, one could never tell. People had got through the screening before. These were troubled times.

* * *

He arrived early and took a moment to survey the room from a secret viewpoint. It was unnatural that there should be a gathering of such a number of journalists here in this small colony after the uprising. Amongst them, he noted with interest, a Mr Kirkan from the nearby Berkai Empire. They were a strange, warm-blooded reptilian species that could tolerate much higher temperatures than humans.

* * *

The Berkai Empire did not challenge Earth openly for Pirrus. Earth was a

stronger power. Similarly Earth did not provoke Berkai because its forces were spread thinly over a very large territory.

The Berkai Empire was spread across two planets: their original home planet in the same solar system as Pirrus, and another in the next nearest solar system. It was a wonder the Empire had never colonised Pirrus. While there was no open hostility between Earth and the Berkai Empire, they were not really on friendly terms either. There was some trading between the two empires, but not a very cordial relationship.

Of course there had been rumours that these people were behind the arms supplies for the recent uprising, though this had not been proved. As it turned out the arms captured from the rebels had originated on a planet which was on more friendly terms with Earth.

Was this all connected with the unidentified ships landing on Pirrus? Undoubtedly, in his mind. There was a clever game being played.

Just after Earth had colonised Pirrus, the Berkai Empire had also expanded itself, into the next solar system, from Baccra, their home planet. Their designs on Pirrus itself had been foiled by Earth.

The balance of power was changing. The Berkai Empire had recently been expanding its forces. Did it still have designs on Pirrus? All Brown knew was that Pirrus remained strong because of a breakthrough by Earth in producing a new type of mandroid soldier. Their superiority and rapid deployment helped keep the Berkai Empire in check.

The process of making mandroids was top secret and it was only possible to manufacture them on Earth itself. These machines were always under the total control of Earth and were not even available to its closest allies. They were programmed to self-destruct if tampered with or if they fell into the hands of an enemy, not unlike the suicide bombers of old. This was one of the aces held by Earth along with superior ships, though for how long one could not tell. True, everybody had service robots. But the bio-engineered androids were a cut above any competition, and hugely compensated for manpower disadvantages. Some said that they were a throwback to the old AIs of the past, which had been banned some centuries ago, but Brown of course knew that they were still around. Mainly the AIs had been very large super intelligent machines, but there were smaller mobile versions of them and Brown had indeed come across one in his past. The mandroids were of more limited intelligence, programmed to follow orders, but they were also

self-repairing androids with synthetic biomass armoured bodies.

Brown left the area and entered the canteen for a quick snack before meeting the reporters. At one time he had been a confident man who handled himself well in press conferences. This was one of the main reasons for making it up the promotion ladder so quickly in the past, but now he was rusty and unsure of himself.

When he entered the press room they were waiting for him in there already with their barrage of questions. Brown walked in calmly and sat down in the swivel chair and looked around with a half amused expression on his face. His mind was at that moment working furiously, noting and forming first impressions of all the reporters.

Altogether there were two women and several men who in turn introduced themselves to him and the planet they came from. One woman was an officious-looking reporter from Earth he recognised. The other was a striking woman from Levita, a planet in a nearby system. What was her name? That was it: Miss Lanzy. He would have to acquaint himself later on. He had a lot of difficulty in taking his eyes off her shiny semi-transparent dress, which seemed very provocative for such an occasion.

While he was still absorbed in the beautiful green eyes of Miss Lanzy, he was interrupted by his introduction to Mr Kirkan. He tried to size up the lizard-man. He was a big good-looking creature with jet black hair and light brown complexion. There was a scar running down his right cheek, which gave him a distinguished air. If he hadn't been a lizard, he could have passed for a Chinese Earthman.

He seemed very athletically built and was dressed in a loose garment made of silk-type material. He reminded Brown of a coiled serpent and Brown wondered about the scar: was there a tradition of duelling in the Berkai Empire? Somehow the man did not fit the role of a reporter. Though descended from lizards they were humanoid in appearance, except for a forked tongue and sharper teeth. Though it was rumoured that the species still sported a short tail, Brown knew that they had in fact lost it, like humans had done in their own past.

“Pleased to meet you all,” he said presently. “I hope you are enjoying your stay on Pirrus.”

Mrs Davis, the reporter from Earth, spoke first.

“Things seem to have quietened down over here. However, accommodation

seems to be rather scarce. I wonder if something can be done about that, Arbitrator.” There was no hint of protocol in how she addressed Brown, she was sure of her own status.

“We shall take that matter up as soon as the conference is over,” Brown said, smiling. He knew very well some sort of favour would be needed to get a good report. The journalists expected their perks.

“When is the date of the execution of the captured leaders?” asked Kirkan. His voice hissed slightly, but he had good control of Earthspeak 1, a combination of old English, Spanish and Indian. There was also Earthspeak 2 and 3; Brown was fluent in all three. “I suppose that is the logical follow-through after the savage manner in which the revolution has been stamped out.”

“I see you don’t need a universal speakeasy,” said Brown. “We’re not as militaristic in tradition as the government of Berkai. I have no doubt you would have dealt with them very severely. However, the government of Earth is more forgiving. The prisoners will be allowed to go free.”

“Surely you don’t mean that,” Mrs Davis exclaimed. “After killing humans they should be severely punished. I think death sentences should be very appropriate.”

“Now, now, Mrs Davis,” Brown kept on smiling, he was going to enjoy this. “No charges have been proved against these people personally killing any Earth citizens. No doubt they were close to the leaders, but that is a political offence. By executing them, we would only make them martyrs. Somebody else would only take their place.”

“You have not hesitated in executing people for similar offences before,” another reporter spoke up. He was a smallish man who had a habit of twitching every few minutes.

“Well times change,” said Brown. The journalists were taking notes furiously, except for Kirkan and Miss Lanzy who were watching him intently.

“We want to show everybody that Earth is not beyond forgiving and forgetting. This is a season of good will here and we want to act in accordance with that spirit. I am sure Mrs Davis would agree with me.”

Mrs Davis was the only person in the room who was of any importance to him and his career. It did not matter a hoot what the others wrote about him, he could not give a damn. Her influence through Earth-based media was

more useful than the rest of them put together.

“What is the future policy on this planet going to be?” Miss Lanzy spoke up. She was using a speakeasy device.

“Much the same as before. We carry on a peaceful co-existence,” Brown said in Levitan, catching her off-guard. “Of course, we must take more care that this is not interrupted by outside influence. I am sure you are aware that a lot of the arms captured originated from your planet, Miss Lanzy.”

“You speak Levitan,” she seemed surprised, but Brown was somehow sure she knew. She quickly recovered her journalistic pose. “It’s true. We do sell arms to other planets. Are you suggesting, Arbitrator, that my government was involved?” She did not obviously care much for observing interplanetary etiquette.

“I am suggesting no such thing.” Was he suggesting it? He left it for them to interpret his tone. “I’m just stating a fact about something we’re looking into. We are much surer of some of other governments’ interest in this matter. We have reports of unidentified ships landing away from official spaceports.” Brown looked directly at Kirkan and smiled. Kirkan met his gaze with a steely, unwavering stare.

I will have to watch him, thought Brown.

“We are having a banquet to observe the Festival of Durkali as we do every year,” he said aloud. “I will ask my staff to allocate you quarters in the banqueting house. This will solve any accommodation problems. Please, enjoy the experience. Thank you for your time, ladies and gentlemen. Let us have some refreshments.”

Brown moved away, keeping his eyes on Kirkan’s until the last minute. The lizard-man’s stare remained cold and fixed on his.

* * *

The Festival of Durkali dated back many hundreds of years into antiquity.

Durkali was the incarnation of God in Pirrusian human form. Its image was based on a king who had united the planet’s two main races: the shorter and darker south western race, and the taller and lighter-blue north eastern race. However, they had broken the treaty after his death and gone back to their old rivalries. When Earth had colonised the planet, the first settlers had reinstated the feast as a means of bringing peace and order.

The festivities were going to take place in a few days' time. The banquet after the Festival of Durkali served two purposes. First it helped the Earth Policy Administration to further their interest in Pirrus as all local notables were invited. Secondly, it helped the authorities to keep their eye on the local political hobnobs and pick up information about any trouble fomenting politically. This had not, however, stopped the last rebellion from taking place.

It was truly a banquet of immense proportions. The whole banqueting block of EPA was taken over for three days while a thousand live-in guests feasted non-stop.

It was a busy time for the administrative section, because just the arrangement of the feast called for immense organisation. This, however, was made simpler by bringing into service the humanoids who took over the actual labour side of things. Since Earth had taken control of the planet, the size of the feast had been increased. The number of guests had doubled, trebled and was now ten times the original event. But the real purpose of the banquet was much more complex and took up even more time. Every scrap of conversation and information about the guests was secretly recorded and fed into the surveillance computers to be processed and analysed and cross referenced. The number of secrets that had been picked up in those moments of drunken frenzy was totally countless. Earth Policy Administration on every colonised planet was well known for its banquets. The Feast of Durkali was a convenient cover for the tactic. And yet, despite the amount of intelligence it produced, it had not stopped the recent rebellion.

Most people came to the banquets because they wanted to have a good time. Those with something to hide also came because they did not want the EPA to suspect that they had something to hide by refusing to come.

A lot of the guests had now taken up residence in the banqueting block and the info system was in full swing. There were people arriving all the time.

Earth still followed the old policy of divide and rule and the two ethnic Pirussian sub-groups were set against each other as much as possible, without being obvious. On the surface it even seemed that the EPA was making a great effort to heal the breach and bring two races together.

The policy of EPA was to foster local religious beliefs and use it to their own advantage. If the religious leaders of the world supported their regime, it made their jobs so much easier. They would have liked nothing better to

stamp a religion of their own on the planet, but unfortunately since hardly any people from Earth believed in religion any more, it was not an easy task. Most of the churches, mosques and temples on Earth had become museums or had been turned into bingo halls. There had been, at one stage, contingency plans to introduce a ready-made religion in all the colonised worlds, but this had been dropped in favour of the local religion. Instead bingo had been introduced, along with golf courses. It seemed no matter where humanity went, the natives liked gambling and ball games.

As Brown moved towards the refreshments being brought in he was immediately set upon by Kirkan.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Mr Kirkan?”

“I have already seen the Feast of Durkali,” said Kirkan. “And I have no wish to impose on you.”

“Of course, Mr Kirkan. I should have known that,” Brown agreed. “But the leaders of the last revolution will be attending and I’m sure you would like to see them. I take it you know them well?”

There was a hidden threat in Brown’s voice, which Kirkan could not ignore. He looked at Brown, smoothing the jacket of his light blue suit and still smiling.

“If you wish so,” said Kirkan finally. “I am only acquainted with the leaders though.”

“Good,” said Brown. “I’ll ask my people to relocate your quarters closer to the banqueting centre. Now if we have no more questions, let us have a drink to the new things to come. Please join me for some refreshments.”

The party moved on to a lounge where mandroids served drinks. The Earth journalist Mrs Davis spotted Brown, and homed in.

“That was a brilliant move,” she said, “to pardon the leaders. I was sure you were going to execute them. You know I have followed your career right from the beginning.”

“Thank you, Mrs Davis, I am really flattered. You know I am a great admirer of yours and follow your articles very closely.”

Brown noticed she enjoyed drinking quite heavily. She could obviously hold her liquor well. Though she looked slightly worn, all the same she had a very good figure and not at all that bad a countenance. She was obviously older than himself and had been around a bit. He wondered whether he should make a proper job of it and seduce her. He would have to keep that in

mind.

“I hope you will give me the pleasure of showing you around later,” he said aloud. He turned as Miss Lanzy joined them. “And you too, Miss Lanzy. As I was saying to Mrs Davis, I hope I will have the pleasure of showing you ladies around.”

“I am quite looking forward to it,” Mrs Davis said.

“And me,” echoed Miss Lanzy. “This banquet is quite new to me.”

Brown looked around the room. Kirkan was talking to another reporter in the corner of the room. Some other reporters were heading Brown’s way. He prepared himself for the barrage of questions.

“It seems you have a very nice set up, Arbitrator.”

“We try.”

“It must be costly.”

“But necessary,” he said. “We save by reducing personnel costs.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed,” one reporter said. “These mandroids do a good job.”

Kirkan looked up at the word ‘mandroids’, but did not say anything.

“Can you tell me a bit more about the unidentified landings?” Miss Lanzy interrupted.

“Well, I am sure you know some governments have always contested Earth’s rights to be here. It could be any of them. We are looking into it. However, when I see you again, I will be able to give you more info regarding the matter.”

“You promise?” she said, brushing against his arm. Brown couldn’t but help noticing her very erect nipples.

“I promise,” he said, controlling the tingling sensation in his loins.

“The Berkai Empire has always been interested in this planet,” Mrs Davis put in.

“Yes,” the other journalist supported her.

“Maybe we should ask Mr Kirkan about that,” Brown said mischievously.

At the mention of his name Kirkan finally headed towards them. The other journalist followed; he was a large fat man of reddish complexion and looked as graceful next to Kirkan as a farm donkey next to a racing thoroughbred.

Kirkan had an easy athletic gait, which made Brown a bit envious, for he used to consider himself extremely athletic in his younger days. He was slightly taller than Kirkan and made a note of that mentally. But physically it would be very difficult for Brown to match Kirkan’s strength. The lizards

were a very strong species.

“You wanted to ask me something, Arbitrator?” The lizard-man locked eyes with him again.

“Well, the ladies were asking me about the interest of the Berkai Empire in this planet.” He sipped his favourite fruit juice.

“We make no secret of it,” replied Kirkan. “We think rightfully it should belong to the Berkai Empire.”

“Do you now?” Mrs. Davis said. “I think we got here first.”

“We were in this solar system long before you came,” he said.

“Well, we are here now,” said Brown. “And here we are going to stay.” He wanted to provoke Kirkan into making a statement to the contrary, but nothing was forthcoming. The man handled himself calmly.

“Was it your ships that landed here?” a small male reporter interjected.

“I have no knowledge of any ships landing here other than officially,” Kirkan smiled. “I am sure his Excellency will be able to tell you more about this matter.”

“He is a most fantastic, looking man and he does handle himself well,” Mrs Davis whispered to Brown.

“I think they breed them like racehorses on their planet,” said Brown viciously. “You see they don’t have any humanoids.”

“Are you jealous, Arbitrator?” Mrs Davis smiled.

“Of course I am,” he smiled.

“You don’t do badly yourself,” she said. “You were saying you were going to take me around one evening.”

“Well, the banquet does not begin for a while, but I am free, so it will be a pleasure. Shall we say tomorrow?” He would definitely have to seduce her, he thought, but he put it down to his career. After all, there was nothing like good references. But that evening he was looking forward to seeing the Pirussian beauty again for the second time.

CHAPTER THREE

Before he could go back to his quarters, Brown received a secret, encrypted message. There was a small chip planted next to Brown's right ear, so when he read the message out aloud, he would hear the real message subliminally. It was a card from his last wife and Brown did not yet know what it contained.

"Who is the card from?" asked Benson, his security chief. His slightly balding corpulent figure seemed to quiver with anticipation of the answer. He was intrigued at Brown receiving a card all of a sudden.

"From my ex-wife," said Brown.

"That's funny, I thought you separated many years ago."

"You know the flames of passion are never extinguished," smiled Brown.

"So it seems. What does it say?" asked Benson. He didn't grasp the humour in Brown's words.

"Well..." Brown trailed off. Benson was being a bit over inquisitive, he thought.

"Sorry," Benson apologised. "If it's too personal."

"Not at all," said Brown. "Here you read it."

Brown passed over the piece of sensitive plastic-like material on which the message had materialised, after being received by his communication officer.

"So glad to hear you're doing something you like again. I wish I could come there to help you with your problems," read Benson.

"That's nice of her," said Brown, who could not make out anything else yet. "Probably short of money." Brown was taking liberties as in truth his ex-wife was extremely rich.

"How did she know where you were?" Benson sounded suspicious. "I didn't authorise any contact."

"She must still have contacts within the EPA headquarters."

"Good thing she doesn't know what you're getting up to here."

"What do you mean?" asked Brown.

"Well you and the native girl and then you letting all the natives go," smiled Benson.

“You disagree with my decision?” Brown was confrontational.

“Not really, though the smart thing would have been to execute them, to stop any further trouble.”

“I disagree,” said Brown. “The smart thing is to get them on our side. Don’t you agree?”

“I see your point. I suppose the girl persuaded you.”

“Not at all. I’m interested in her for other reasons.”

“I can see that,” laughed Benson. “Especially when you’re high on drugs.”

“Well... sometimes your mind is much more lucid, when you’re high. You should give it a try.”

“You’re not going to catch me taking the stuff you take,” said Benson.

Brown knew he was well aware how destructive the drug was. He had good days and bad days, but knew it was killing him slowly. In fact, his doctor had told him that it was some sort of a miracle that he was still alive.

However, he didn’t always feel bad, he attributed it to having good and bad days.

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” smiled Brown. “Can I have the card back, I want to keep it for sentimental value.”

Benson handed Brown the piece of plastic. Brown pocketed it and made his way back to his quarters.

* * *

Brown read the card aloud to himself back in his quarters. Something flashed in his mind. There was a man arriving that day on a commercial flight from a nearby solar system. He had highly secret information for Brown’s eyes only. It was so highly sensitive that they didn’t want even Benson to know about it.

Brown looked for the arrival times on his wrist communicator and it flashed up a display in front of him with the arrival time of flights. The man was already here and Brown was running late for the rendezvous. Brown quickly changed into some casual clothes and ordered a mandroid to follow him to a secret exit from his quarters.

Brown was in disguise with a hairpiece that covered his head with blonde hair. The mandroid was dressed as a Pirussian and acted as his driver. They headed for the hotel where the rendezvous had been set up. It was too dangerous to meet at the spaceport as the man’s cover would be blown if

somebody was keeping tabs on him.

Brown knew that though the man had followed a very circuitous route from Levita to get there, he was carrying some very sensitive information and was more than likely under the watchful eye of Levitan counter intelligence, if they had any suspicions of the fact.

Lately there had been a big increase in the traffic from Levita and Baccra and apparently several delegations had arrived to do business deals. The sudden increase in interest in the planet seemed to have coincided with the revolution and showed no signs of diminishing.

Pirrus which was a largely waterlogged world, contained only one large landmass, surrounded by oceans of various depths. There was also another very large landmass visible from space just under water, but was slowly rising out of it because of volcanic activity. Maybe at some point in time it would form another continent above water.

Pirrus City was the only large city on the continent and was quite well populated. The land around it was mainly covered in trees and savannah, but also contained some spectacular mountain ranges. Most of the area outside the city was very sparsely populated.

They arrived at the Hotel Star Crest, which was one of a very few big international hotels in Pirrus City.

The mandroid took up position in the lobby of the hotel. As pre-arranged, Brown made his way to the bar and ordered a non-alcoholic mango juice substitute so he could keep a clear head.

“What sort of a drink is that?” asked a man sitting not far away. He was dressed in smart business clothes and surprisingly spoke in Levitan.

“It’s a local fruit juice with the poison taken out, though it’s not poisonous to the natives,” Brown replied in Levitan, which he was of course fluent in. The man must surely have a universal speakeasy on him for translation purposes, thought Brown, but he wasn’t using it. Maybe he was checking Brown out, if he could converse in Levitan, which seemed odd.

“Ah! You speak Levitan,” the man smiled. “But you’re not from Levita I think.” Like most Levitians he was a good-looking man, if perhaps a bit effete for Brown’s tastes.

“No, I lived there for a while.”

“Did you enjoy your stay?”

“Up to a point. The Levitan women are very beautiful.”

“Yes, of course. So are the men in Levita,” the man smiled. “We used to have a cleansing programme to ensure a healthy population.”

“You mean a culling policy, where you killed all the weakest members of the population.”

“It ensured a healthy population. We have, of course, stopped it now. Tell me do you prefer women,” he cocked his head, “or men?”

“I’m not that way inclined,” smiled Brown. He did not like the way the conversation was turning out. The man was playing with him. He clearly wanted something. Why not get to the point?

“Pity,” said the man.

“Are you here on business or pleasure?”

“Business only, it seems. Pharmaceuticals. Though I hear the Pirussian women are unbelievable.” He laughed.

The man must be a bi-sexual, thought Brown. He was certainly playing with him.

“You need a licence to start a business here.”

“We want to open up a bio-tech production facility. One wonders how to encourage the EPA to grant a licence.”

“I know something of the process. Maybe I can help.”

“Here’s my card,” said the man, passing Brown a piece of card. “Maybe we can meet in private.”

“Of course,” said Brown. He was worried, things were turning out to be very different from what he had envisaged. Was the card the message, or the conversation? Was this even his man?

“It was good to talk business. Please,” he tapped the card Brown held, “do use the card if you want to help further with licences.”

“Sorry I haven’t got a card on me,” said Brown.

The man left. Brown continued sipping his drink. Something was troubling him. For a start he wasn’t expecting a Levitian. Also why had he insisted in speaking to him in Levitan? He decided he would go to the restroom and look at the card to see if there was a message on it and to think about the situation.

As he was going into the men’s room a large man was coming out who bumped into him.

“Watch where you’re going,” the man grunted.

Brown ignored him and apologised. It wouldn’t do to draw attention. He was running enough risk being outside without security. The Arbitrator’s face

was well known, even if he had disguised himself with a wig and different clothes.

Once inside the cubicle, Brown pulled the card out and rubbed it on his jacket for a few seconds. After another five seconds some writing appeared on the card.

“They’re watching. I’m in room 121. Levita plans to invade. Come as soon as possible.”

Brown made his way to room 121. He gave instructions on his com to the mandroid to meet him outside the room. He had rearranged his disguise so that his face was covered by a fringe, and his clothes so that he appeared smaller. He wanted to slip through the hotel lobby as anonymously as possible.

But something was troubling him. If he was being watched, why give over the card so openly? They would certainly know which room the man was in. If Brown headed straight for the room, would he be running into a trap of some sort?

But Brown didn’t get a chance to finish his thoughts. As he stepped out of the elevator, he saw the other man who had bumped into him outside the toilet was coming towards him. The man brushed past him and Brown caught his eye just for a moment.

Was there something in the man’s eyes? A hint of contempt, perhaps? The man seemed to be sneering at him. Something didn’t feel right about this whole thing. His highly developed sense of intuition was kicking in as he carried on towards the room and he made a snap decision. Brown dropped his gun from its hiding place on his forearm, into the palm of his hand. It was still concealed, but close enough to fire within a second. He turned and crouched down on one knee.

“You there, stop where you are,” he called to the man.

The man quickened his pace.

“Hey, I’m talking to you,” said Brown.

Brown was waiting for the mandroid to appear any moment, so they could tackle the man together, but there was a sudden blur of action. The man turned faster than Brown expected. There was a gun in his hand.

Brown fired simultaneously as the man and dropped to the ground. His shot went wide and burned the corridor wall. He used to be a good shot once, but was a little rusty at present.

Plasma from the man's gun seared through the air, sizzling the outer layers of Brown's wig. The smell of burned hair filled his nostrils.

Brown fired again, and easily hit his target this time, especially as he was holding the gun in both hands in a shooting position.

The man crumpled and fell with a scream, clutching his chest. His gun fell to the floor with a clutter.

Brown's senses were on fire.

A creaking noise behind made Brown roll over, gun already aimed at the sound. He had time to see a gun come out, and fired at the next thing that followed it. A man slid to the floor, with a sigh, without having the time to discharge the weapon.

Brown got up and scuttled towards the door, trigger finger ready. The man – it was the one from the bar was still holding his gun but was dead. So it had been an ambush after all. Brown kicked the gun away and cautiously looked through the open door into the room, but he could see nobody else. His mandroid arrived in the elevator, and at a word brought the first man and his weapon into the room, then the second man.

After a quick search, Brown found a rectangular tablet of metal and plastic in the top pocket of the first man. It was presumably the highly encrypted plans of the invasion. But the problem with it was that there was a fused hole right through the middle of it where he had shot the man. Even if he was able to break the encryption, he was highly unlikely to make it work, and get his hands on the plans.

“Sir,” said the mandroid. “You may want to come into the bathroom.”

There was a third man there. He had been tortured, and was barely conscious.

“Are you the man I was supposed to meet?” asked Brown.

“There's a mole... in your... base,” the man said.

“Where's the encryption code?” Brown shook him, but there was no reply. The man had died.

“Search the room, see if you can find anything,” Brown ordered the mandroid, but Brown knew it was going to be a fruitless endeavour.

They left the room soon, leaving a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the door and made their way to the car. They saw the room service robot come around the corner as they were getting into the elevator.

Brown was none the wiser about the invasion plans. All he had was a burnt

out encrypted message tablet with him. Maybe something could be done with it, but he doubted it very much.

Brown hurried back to the base for his meeting with the Pirussian girl. He was still very much looking forward to it, buoyed up and elated by the success of the physical action. But he was also thinking of the last thing the dying man had told him.

If someone in his office had turned traitor, then the whole of the planet would be in danger. He had to find out who it was, before Levita invaded. And especially, most importantly, before Brown could buy his way back to Earth for his rejuvenation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brown had already decided to stay off the drug before meeting the girl. He wanted to engage with her, to find out more about her. Brown was intrigued by her from the moment he had met her even though he had not realised it at the time. He was eager to see her again.

He wondered what approach he might take with her. Though he had allowed her fiancé, her father, and other leaders of the revolution to go, he knew that the rebellion was not over. In light of the developments earlier in the hotel, he was now more than convinced there was something else brewing. He had to uncover the mole in his own base, but how? Should he talk to Benson, his security chief and intelligence officer? Could Brown trust him?

His last conversation with Benson, just before he had gone to meet the agent in the Star Crest hotel, seemed to take on a new meaning.

“In fact, in my opinion, you can even take a holiday and go back to Earth if you want to,” Benson had suggested.

“I’m not so sure,” Brown told him. “We haven’t got to the bottom of things here yet. There are a lot of foreign powers interested in the place lately.”

“Why do you think that?” Benson asked. “Nothing has been uncovered by our intelligence.”

“Well take the presence of those two reporters from Berkai and Levita, for a start. When I was in Levita ten years ago, they had just acquired hyper space travel from another race. They were barely out of their own system and now they’re following a very aggressive policy of acquiring territory and building a very large space fleet.”

“But that doesn’t mean anything,” said Benson.

“Then tell me why have they suddenly showed up here? This is a backwater planet of no interest to anybody.”

“They’re just reporters.”

“What about that Levitan arms cache we intercepted?”

But Benson had shrugged and they had left the subject. They had enough work to do with the upcoming festival, to worry further on that score. Brown

decided not to confide in Benson. He wondered if Benson had any knowledge of, or would find out what had taken place in the Hotel Star Crest.

However, Brown was determined to find out if the girl knew that something was about to happen. He decided he would take a friendlier approach to see if he could break her down, maybe a bit of a carrot and stick approach and see what he could glean. At any event it would be an interesting exercise. The intercom buzzed and he was informed that she had arrived.

“Send her in,” said Brown.

A few minutes later Gina entered, her demeanour did not give much away. She looked much the same, but Brown could sense that underneath the façade there was a sort of steely determination to get through the ordeal without getting too affected by it.

“Hello,” said Brown. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No need,” she said. “Let’s just get it over with. Shall I go and get decontaminated.”

“Not necessary,” said Brown.

“Not worried about catching some alien germs anymore?” There was a sarcastic look in her eyes, or was it one of defiance.

“Not at all, you’re perfectly fine from last time,” Brown retorted.

Gina started taking her clothes off, Brown felt a heightened sense of excitement begin to come over him, but he wanted to talk.

“Just a moment, I would like to talk to you first.”

“What about?”

“About the revolution.”

“What about the revolution? It is over.”

“I’m not so sure, I think something is still going on. What do you know about it?”

“I think, we’re back to being under Earth’s boot.”

“It’s not so bad, we’ve improved things around here,” said Brown.

“But you control our lives.”

“Tell me about your role in the revolution. What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything much. My father and Zedan were involved in a superficial capacity as figureheads, but they don’t tell me much.”

She was obviously lying, but he wanted to lull her into a sense of security so she would give more away. He acted as if he believed everything she said. It was not so much what she said but what she didn’t say that were the clues

Brown wanted to tap into, but she seemed cagey despite his pretence.

“When did you last see Zedan?”

“I haven’t seen him recently, maybe he’s found out that I’ve been coming here,” she said. It was a blatant lie but Brown accepted it.

“When are you going to see him again?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I won’t see him again, especially if he finds out.”

“I find that hard to believe. After all he is your fiancé.”

“Was...” she trailed off. “We’ve broken off.”

“That was quick. What happened?”

“You happened. I broke it off. I don’t want to tell him about you, but I don’t want to deceive him either.”

“So what did you tell him?”

“I blamed it on the circumstances. After all, the revolution has put a lot of strain on us. I said we needed a break, he didn’t argue”

“Very clever, but you could be just lying to me.” Brown grabbed her and looked closely into her eyes.

Gina stared back at him defiantly. “Shall we get on with things?” she asked.

Brown sensed she wanted to divert the subject. “You seem eager to get on, maybe you’re starting to like it, eh?”

“You men are all the same. At least you’re not drunk like last time.”

“Well let’s start then.” He started taking her clothes off. She didn’t resist. Brown was relieved that she didn’t realise that he was high on drugs the last time.

When he was inside her, Brown said something that caught her by surprise. It was just a hunch, but was worth a shot.

“I think Zedan hasn’t got any time for you, because he’s too busy plotting the next stage of the revolution with Kirkan.”

“Who is Kirkan?” She didn’t meet his eyes.

“You know perfectly well who he is,” Brown stuck the knife in. “The Baccran lizard-man, masquerading as a journalist.”

“I don’t know anything about him.” Brown did not say anything more, but carried on. About twenty minutes later she suddenly let out an involuntary groan.

“Can we please stop this?” she cried.

But Brown didn’t stop, he just carried on. She tried to control herself as

best as she could but in the end an uncontrolled quiver of her body gave her away. She looked disgusted with herself.

Brown grinned. *All those years of practice haven't gone completely to waste*, he thought. For how else should he interpret her behaviour?

When he had finished he said, "You should tell Zedan not to waste his time. We will crush any Baccran invasion and him with it."

"He will ask me how I know about all this," she said.

She had a point.

"So you do know something about it?" he said.

"I didn't say that. Listen you said you would let me go. Can you please do so after today? I don't want to come back here anymore, people will start getting suspicious."

It's not people she is worried about thought Brown. She was worried about her own emotions getting the better of her.

"I'll think about it, but I did say a few more times if I remember correctly," said Brown.

"The revolution is over. Please let me go. You've got what you wanted."

He suddenly felt he wanted to accede to her request, but had he got all the information he wanted? Either the girl was outside the inner circle of the rebellion, or she was a good liar. Either way she seemed ignorant of any useful intelligence.

After deciding that the former was the case, he resolved not to see her again. He was going soft in his old age. The sooner he had the regeneration, the better he would be able to pursue things with a greater vigour.

"I will find out what's going on," said Brown. "Meanwhile we have to keep an eye on things. This is where you can help."

"Help?"

"I'd like you to report to me regularly. Just information, that's all. And this other stuff ends."

"You mean spy on my own people? I'm sorry, I can't do that even if you hurt me."

"If I can prevent another revolution, I can prevent a lot of suffering. Then no one gets hurt."

"So you just want to subjugate us again," she laughed derisively.

"I can recommend that Earth gives you more autonomy, but I doubt they will listen."

“You seem fairly honest in admitting these things,” she sounded surprised.

“When you’ve lived as long as I have, I find it always makes things easier if you explain things as honestly as possible.”

“Are you really as old as you say?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Brown.

“You don’t look it.”

“We have a process by which we can regain our youth, but it doesn’t work on aliens.”

“You mean you won’t let us use it.”

“I didn’t say that, but I don’t know if it will work on you.”

“It’s said our ancestors came here on a ship about a thousand years ago, maybe even from Earth. Perhaps it will work.”

Brown was surprised. “If that can be proven, you can get special status.”

“Unfortunately all records were lost when we crash landed, or so we are told by the priests,” said Gina.

“Well you need proof so Earth will take you seriously,” said Brown.

“You have methods of analysing genetic coding, don’t you?”

“Sorry, strictly against Earth regulations; it is prohibited to compare the DNA of aliens with Earth type. It has led to all sorts of problems and counter claims in the past. You first need to come up with some proof, before we can do any testing.”

“That’s very convenient,” there was an edge to her voice, like crack in a dam.

“Perhaps I’ll do something. Meanwhile you should think about my proposal,” said Brown. “It’s for the good of your people.”

“I’ll do that, but I don’t want to come back here again.”

“We’ll see,” said Brown.

Gina left without another word.

Brown sensed or at least thought he sensed – and after all weren’t they the same thing in the final analysis – a softening of the girl’s attitude towards him. Had the Pirrusians come from another planet? Even from Earth? He did not have the time to delve into it further and tried to dismiss the thoughts.

It was population pressure in the early twenty-second century, when all those colony ships had set off from Earth’s moon to settle planets. Hyperspace drive had not yet been discovered and still needed people who were prepared to travel for scores of years, at sub-light speed to reach their

destination. Whole generations would have lived and died before they did so.

Once the war came, many of the records of these were lost and then forgotten. After the war there was so much destruction and so many people died no further such journeys were undertaken until late in the twenty-fourth century, when hyper-drive was invented. Since then some of the settlements had been rediscovered. Some colonies were already extinct because of local adversity, but others were thriving.

There had been no records of a ship leaving for Pirrus and by the time it was discovered, the EPA. had already decreed that no further colonies would be recognised unless they could prove beyond doubt that they were of Earth origin.

CHAPTER FIVE

Brown decided he could not stay off the drug any longer, as he injected himself. The events in the previous hours had taken its toll on him mentally and he needed a break from his problems, even though it would ultimately be worse for him.

He drifted off like colonists before hyper-drive was invented, full of dread and excitement, and both hoping that the destination would come and that the journey would never end in case the destination was worse than what had been left behind.

He was back in Levita, not in the city he had made his home after his last retirement, just over ten years ago. This time he was being hunted, running for his life, through a dense forest.

“He’s over there,” somebody shouted. His voice woke Brown with a jolt. Sweat ran down his face.

Why was he dreaming about Levita? Because of the reporter, Miss Lanzy. Memories were flooding back of Levita, further boosted by his encounter with the men in the hotel.

He reached for a drink, gulped down some water and drifted.

Soon he was back in Levita again. Not a dream this time, but a waking memory; an experience he had lived through and which played itself out in a hazy, strangely real way. Like a dream, he couldn’t escape it. Once the memory started to replay it seemed bound to continue until its end. He let it play out. Perhaps it was trying to tell him something.

* * *

It was just over ten years ago.

He had met this absolute peach of a woman called Narissa a year or so after his arrival. Levitian women were all extremely beautiful and in fact the men were too. It was the result of culling all babies who were not perfect. All deformed, mentally challenged and even ugly ones had been systematically terminated for a century or so. It was similar to what had been done on Earth in the early twentieth century in Scandinavia. Like eugenics, which had made

the Scandinavians beautiful, the cull had made the Levitians beautiful, but on a much bigger scale.

The Levitian women loved Brown, as far as he could tell. He thought he was bordering on ugly by Levitian standards. He was a novelty, he decided, and that suited Brown right down to his little toe nails and he took full advantage of it.

Because of the money he had squirreled away illegally, unknown to the EPA, it was not possible for him to stay on Earth too long, as he would be found out soon as he tapped into those funds.

He looked around for a place to settle, where his money would go further and it took him a few years to make up his mind. Finally he settled on Levita. Things were relaxed here, and he was quite a rich man in Levita even without his illegal funds and he looked forward to his long retirement after his renewal. He had no intention of going back to work on Earth to start from scratch after his legal funds ran out.

He had got rich and he wanted to live his life out in style, without going back to work again. There were only a handful of people who lived on towards three hundred years. Most did not complete more than two or three renewals, as it was prohibitively expensive and often boredom got the better of them.

“Have you met my father’s friend?” Narissa asked Brown over dinner one day.

“Who’s he?”

“His name is Ito. He’s in mining. Diamonds, I think, I’m not sure. In the interior somewhere,” said Narissa.

A few days later Brown was invited to a party at Narissa’s father’s house for his birthday. The party was lavish, and Brown discovered that he was seen as a well-respected businessman.

The party was at his large mansion, which was in a prime spot in the town. The house was decked out in a very opulent style. There was an eclectic mix of old and new furnishings which blended in perfectly, obviously designed by some famous interior designer at a huge expense. There was a marquee in the garden with a full contingent of caterers. People were milling everywhere.

“I had no idea you were so well-heeled,” Brown said to Narissa.

“We do alright. Of course, you haven’t been here before, have you?”

She was fully aware that Brown hadn’t been there before as they had only

met a few months earlier. He had met her at another party, at one of his new friend's places. People generally had been quite welcoming towards him. It surprised him that people looked at him with such awe but guessed that it was because he had already been through renewal once and looked so young despite his great age.

"You look so young, even though you're many years older than me," Narissa's father quipped when they were introduced. Could Brown could detect a note of jealousy in his voice? The man looked about sixty year of age. He was well-built and good-looking, about similar in height to Brown with slightly greying hair. He was dressed immaculately in a Levitian-style evening suit.

"A regeneration process maintains our body longer than a natural lifespan."

"Ah yes. Earth is very secretive about this process. It's not available to natives of other planets," remarked Narissa's father.

"We tried but it didn't work. Something specific to our DNA apparently."

Now Brown was not sure if this was the truth or not but this was the official line that he himself had been fed. It was no surprise that the process was a closely guarded secret as it offered Earth a tremendous advantage over other species.

"So you have become living gods. You might as well live forever," Narissa's father protested. "You should try harder to make the technology available to everybody."

"Actually most people don't regenerate more than twice, and there are a lot of prohibitions. People are compulsorily retired after every fifty-five years of service, starting initially at the age of seventy-five and they cannot work for at least ten years after each retirement."

"Why such restrictions?"

"To ensure people don't accumulate too much wealth or too much power as a result of longevity: to safeguard society. Plus some other barriers."

The scheme fitted in quite well since there were a lot of places to go and see, in fact a lot of different worlds to visit. This also ensured most of the wealth accumulated by people in their years of work was depleted by the time they returned to work again, especially after paying for regeneration. But Brown had other plans, he wanted renewal, for which he would have to go back to Earth, as this was the only place renewal was available and strictly to Earth citizens only, but he wasn't going to stay there.

“What are the barriers?” asked Narissa.

“Mainly costs. The process is hideously expensive and it’s government policy to strip you of as much wealth as possible, each time you go for regeneration.”

“But that seems very unfair,” said Narissa’s father.

Brown had been compulsorily retired at the age of seventy-five like everybody else. After a compulsory ten-year retirement, he was again retired fifty-five years later at the age of one hundred and forty. After spending the next two years of his retirement on Earth, he had spent the next year off Earth as life held far less restrictions on one of the new planets. He still had seven years of compulsory retirement to go through before renewal and a new career.

“I’m sorry. Maybe one day soon it will be available,” offered Brown. “But in any case you have a naturally longer life-span than us.”

“But it does give Earth an unfair advantage. Look at all the knowledge and skills a person can acquire, if they live longer, maybe abilities too.”

“I haven’t got any special abilities,” lied Brown. In fact, he was well trained in several fields, including unarmed combat. He also knew that some second or third-time regenerated people had developed some psychic and cognitive abilities. Brown had met such a person earlier back on Earth.

He himself had developed a heightened sense of intuition from years of dealing with people. It had saved his life on more than one occasion.

“When are you going for your next renewal?” asked Narissa.

“In six or seven years’ time, if I don’t run out of money first.”

“But you have enough,” smiled Narissa.

“Enough for one more time and then live out my days happily in style.”

“On Levita?” she asked, looking hopeful.

“Where else?” said Brown and he meant it. He was in love.

Though he had just enough legal funds to go through the process, he wanted to live a life of luxury. Most of Brown’s money was very well hidden. He had accumulated it during his long career, from doing little favours to people, who had then been very grateful. He needed an opportunity to invest his money so the proceeds would become legitimate. Meanwhile he was going to enjoy himself until such an opening arose.

The plan was a good one, but all good plans have flaws: flaws that are abundantly clear to all but those who devise the plan. When you’re that close

to the immediacy of things, it is often difficult to visualize the bigger picture.

Brown had settled in well on Levita, in Central City, one of its major cities. He was fairly discreet with his wealth and the source of it, but he did not want to live the life of a recluse. So he bought himself a posh apartment in the centre of the most fashionable district in the city and people soon started taking notice of him.

Almost a year had gone by, and he was a man of leisure, after all he had retired. He was serving out his forced retirement period of ten years. He lived above his means, though this was not immediately apparent to any authorities, as officially his expenditure including his apartment, was within the parameters of a person of his previous rank.

Brown, however, gave off an air of a man with limitless sources of wealth to those immediately around him. He was having a ball, and overspending like there was no tomorrow. Socialites and other local people were taking notice. "You seem to be a man of certain means," said Narissa's father. "Opportunities often arise for people like us. But please, enjoy the party. We can talk later." The man raised his glass. "By the way, call me Demba," he said. "I'll leave you two lovebirds alone for now."

Just as Brown had planned. Act rich, get lucky. Demba seemed to be accepting his relationship with Narissa. And his plan to whitewash his illegal funds had started well. How could it not? He had planned it, after all.

* * *

Brown was about to declare his love to Narissa when a man standing nearby spoke to him.

"Pardon me, I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with Demba. How would you like to increase your money tenfold?"

"This is Ito," said Narissa, before Brown could answer. "Remember I mentioned him?"

Ito was a thick-set brute of a man with close cropped blond hair. He was much taller than Brown and his eyes, though perfectly spaced, gave the impression of being too close together.

"I don't want to be greedy," said Brown. "What's your proposal?"

"Narissa's probably mentioned something to you already."

"A diamond mine or something?"

“That’s correct,” the man said. “She can bring you to meet me and her father another time when it’s more convenient. I’ll leave you for now.” The man shook Brown’s hand and departed.

* * *

The party went on till late. Brown had trouble forgetting Ito’s penetrating eyes. There was something about them that troubled him, but he decided he needed to get into the party mood and relax. Brown stayed on at the house as a guest that night. The sex was wild that evening. Narissa’s room was kitted out with a water bed and full ceiling mirrors, which seem to make the pleasure more intense. In all his hundred and forty-three years, Brown had not experienced anything like it. What a shame their species were too different to produce babies, he thought.

Brown was in love, probably for the first time in his life. After the party he just couldn’t wait to see her again, but she was busy with things and so he waited and waited. Days passed by and it drove him crazy. He could not believe that after the night they had spent in her father’s house, she could stay away from him for so long.

However, she turned up at last, after making him wait what seemed like an eternity to him. She made her excuses and they had another fantastic night. She was absolutely exhilarating and made his whole body tingle with excitement. Brown was unable to think straight anymore. She suggested they go and meet Ito and her father the next day.

To spend the next lifetime with her was not enough, Brown was up for anything. He didn’t care about the closeness of Ito’s eyes or his original suspicions about the whole set up or whether Narissa was manipulating him. Nothing mattered anymore except her, he just wanted her, whatever the cost.

* * *

The meeting was quite low key. It was at Ito’s offices which were very plush.

“Here’s a sample of what we’ve found,” said Demba. “Uncut here, cut and polished here.”

“And why not approach a corporate partner?” Brown examined a diamond against the light.

“You’re right. We need money to develop it. “But we would have to part

with a majority of the shares.”

“And you’d rather make more money?”

“And keep control, too. Investors would of course get a very good return on their investment. We estimate a ten-fold profit.”

“We could live so well,” chirped Narissa.

“You could live like a king,” chimed Demba.

“We could all go on a holiday to Earth for your renewal,” said Narissa.

Now there was an idea, thought Brown who did not really relish the thought of Ito coming on holiday with him to Earth for his renewal, but his head was spinning. Renewal on Earth and Narissa in tow was something else.

“It’s the opportunity of a lifetime,” said Ito finally, who had been keeping very quiet up to this point.

“Indeed. How much will it cost?” asked Brown

“About twenty million Interplanetary Credits,” said Demba. “A modest investment for a man of your means.”

“Indeed,” said Brown again. That was all the money he had, which started to strike him as strange, when his thoughts were interrupted.

“We’ll arrange a visit to the mine,” said Ito. “Show you the place itself.”

“Indeed,” said Brown. Or had he said that? The strange waking memory he had fallen into started to become repetitive. Reality started to flow back in.

Diamonds, thought Brown. *All those diamonds in that mine.*

CHAPTER SIX

Brown spent most of the next afternoon in the data room. His waking dream remained vivid, but he had no time to dwell on it.

Brown relaxed in an easy chair and watched the screens. There were almost thirty of them, showing scenes at random from different rooms, including some special rooms, which were being monitored continuously on dedicated screens. The whole project was a closely guarded secret, which had been set up by Brown for the festival. The monitoring had never been as intensive as this before.

There were three people working in the data room, and six mandroids doing all the essential work of collating and cataloguing the information.

The monitoring of the reporters hadn't picked up anything, but then he had not expected anything so soon. It was enough that Kirkan was under observation. He didn't trust the lizard-man.

Kirkan seemed to be sleeping in his room. The other two reporters were busy writing reports. Mrs Davis was not on the continuous monitor as she had security clearance from Earth.

Brown was watching the woman Lanzy changing to take a shower, when Benson came up behind him.

"A real goddess that one," he smirked. "I wouldn't mind giving her back a scrub at any time."

"You've got more important work to do than that," Brown replied.

"Stop pulling rank on me, Arbitrator. I can see you have your own eyes on her."

Benson was a good man, who had worked with Brown in the years before his last retirement. He was younger than Brown by almost ninety years.

"It's part of my duty to keep an eye on her," said Benson.

"You will be welcome to her after I've finished with her," Brown said. "That's seniority, I'm afraid. You'll be alright in another fifty years' time."

"That's great, isn't it? Meanwhile I'll just watch you have all the fun."

Brown ignored the comment. "Have you got the reports I've asked you to compile for this lot?"

“Everyone except Mrs Davis. We need a special request from you for that purpose. They won’t supply anything otherwise, because of her security clearance.” Brown authorised the request and then sat studying the other reports. He glanced through the reports of two male reporters other than Kirkan. There was nothing very interesting, which was as he expected.

“What are the correlations between Lanzy and Kirkan?” he asked Benson.

“They’ve never met before it seems. What’s more interesting is that he has met Mrs Davis a few times.”

“That’s funny,” remarked Brown. “It looked to me like Kirkan and Lanzy did know each other. Maybe they’re just vague acquaintances and are not well known to each other.”

“That could be,” said Benson. “By the way, there’s a report that came in from the local police. It seems three men were killed yesterday in the Hotel Star Crest. One of them seems to have been tortured. They were all off-worlders.”

“Keep me informed of anything unusual in the reports,” said Brown, as if it meant nothing to him. “Also watch all the people Kirkan meets. Keep a close eye on him. I’ll see you at the training session.”

Most of the staff had a work-out every day and often did some unarmed combat training. Benson was a keen participator in this, and despite his security prowess, always seemed to lose to Brown. Brown enjoyed the sparring and the knowledge that, despite being ninety years older than Benson, he clearly still had some upper edge.

* * *

Brown left the room with the reports of Lanzy and Kirkan under his arm.

He went back to his quarters to study the reports, but couldn’t seem to settle in his seat or focus on one report for very long. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something worried him gravely.

His thoughts dwelt on the Pirrusian girl for some reason. It must have been a great sacrifice for her, he thought. No doubt sooner or later her fiancé would find out and that would be the end of that relationship. He realised he was anticipating another visit, even though he had earlier resolved not to see her again.

He wandered back to the reports in front of him. He was digressing badly.

Mrs Lanzy, he read. Thirty plus years old. There was the date and place where she was born. He flicked through the pages that dealt with her schooling and previous jobs. She had been a reporter for the last ten years. There was a lot of progress in the last five years to end up doing interplanetary reporting. Maybe she didn't mind using her charms when necessary, to get what she wanted. She had already won two awards: Best Newcomer and Best Reporter in Central City on Levita. She didn't want for talent.

He could not find anything incriminating in that report. She seemed to be a straightforward careerist as far as he could see. He would have to get her alone sometime.

He picked up Kirkan's report and skipped through it. The man had not graduated from a military academy, even though his race were militaristic in tradition. That didn't explain his scar on the cheek. Kirkan had been in government service for some years before becoming a journalist. The report was straightforward and factual, with nothing else in it. No gossip, no bad marks or comments, no hints or suggestions. Miss Lanzy had her awards: she had stood out from the pack. Kirkan had followed a normal and unremarkable career path. That in itself suggested something else was going on.

There was something about Kirkan that gnawed at the back of Brown's mind. He would just have to wait and watch him. He had time; the rebellion was firmly under control and he couldn't see how it would start up again.

The face on his watch beeped and Benson's face appeared on it.

"Ready for the work-out?" he asked.

Brown left, his brain niggling, his sparring muscles ready for their inevitable victory.

* * *

That evening Brown made his way through the corridors of the banqueting hall to see Mrs Davis.

Everything was running according to plan. The guests were settling in well and the monitoring was progressing full strength.

He knocked on Mrs Davis' door and waited. The banqueting quarters were built in the style of an old Mexican hacienda except with several floors. Each suite opened into one side of the corridor while the other side looked into an

open courtyard, with some out-buildings. The quarters for the Earth Policy Administrators were on the left, easily distinguishable by the semi-transparent blue plastic dome on the top of the very high building. This served as a communication tower in part and several other things besides, including a solarium, which was Brown's favourite habitat.

He stared across the corridor into the flat semi-arid savannah, which was quite dry. It didn't rain here much except in two separate seasons of the year.

This part of the country was very flat for miles, until it reached the forests, where it got more green and hilly. There were mountains on the north-west side which could be seen from the corridor, small bluish lumps in a row, stretching on for mile after mile. He could not see the immense lake hidden by the mountains. He had flown over it several times, during the time he was stamping out the last bit of resistance by the rebels who had made their final stronghold in these mountains.

He had been told that the lake was renowned for its fishing. Some Earthman administrator before him, with a craze for fishing, had introduced fish from Earth into the lake, which had grown to monstrous sizes. There were several other local species that could be caught, if they could be called fish. These had survived the alien invasion. He did not know how all this had altered the ecology of the place, but it didn't matter. As far as he could see this at least was one thing which was appreciated by the natives. They enjoyed the alien fish tremendously.

Mrs Davis opened the door and Brown looked around. She was wearing a kimono type dress, which made her look quite seductive.

"Come in, Brown," Mrs Davis said. "I'm almost ready."

"Please, call me Jim," said Brown, smiling.

"And you call me Sheila." She turned away and carried on getting ready.

"There are one or two good nightspots in town where people from Earth congregate." Brown had given strict instructions that Mrs Davis was to be off monitoring that evening, but he still preferred to take her elsewhere, in case any of the staff decided to eavesdrop. "I'd be happy to show you around."

"I didn't really come here just to see the Earth community. Can't you take me somewhere where I can meet the natives and get their views, Jim?"

"I'm afraid that's out of the question in the present climate. Tension is still running high so it could be dangerous to go anywhere like that. By the way, is Miss Lanzy coming with us?"

“I think she’s gone with Kirkan. I’m afraid you will be stuck with me all evening.”

“I think that would suit me admirably, Sheila,” he lied glibly. He was thinking of Miss Lanzy’s gorgeous figure. This lizard-man Kirkan was certainly a fast worker. There was a rumour that they had an appendage that satisfied Earth-type females very well.

They left, with Mrs Davis taking Brown’s arm, for the clubs he had mentioned.

Brown was beginning to feel relaxed. He wanted to enjoy himself, but he was not taking any chances. He was accompanied by two mandroids, maintaining a discreet distance. One of them looked like an Earthman and the other a Pirrusian.

“Shall we move along to some place else?” Mrs Davis asked. “This place is beginning to bore me a little.”

Brown, who was watching the Pirrusian floor show intently, felt annoyed and nodded without looking up. The leading dancer was none other than Gina, the daughter of Zalamus. He looked on in tremendous admiration as her beautiful lissom body glided on the floor with ease of movement, which was more graceful than he had ever seen. The different coloured lights shining on her bejewelled body had him completely bewitched.

“I see you have your eyes on that native beauty over there, Arbitrator,” Mrs Davis said tersely.

“She is a good dancer,” Brown said without looking around.

“I’ve seen a lot better.”

“Maybe, but I haven’t. But then you have been around longer than I have,” Brown said cuttingly. “We’ll go in a minute. But I’ll tell you something you might be interested in.”

“You mean about that slut?”

“That slut, Sheila, is the daughter of Zalamus, one of the most important natives on this planet.”

“I remember, he’s one of the men you pardoned.” She looked surprised. “What’s she doing performing at this place? I thought such professions were looked down by the Pirrusians.”

“So they are,” said Brown. “You see, that’s precisely what I am wondering. Why is she here?”

“Ideal place to make contact with people,” Mrs Davis said. “Especially

with visitors from other planets.”

“I think you might be very, very right. Look who has just come in through the door.”

It was Kirkan and the girl Lanzy who had just entered the club. Brown was sure they had not been seen yet.

“If you would excuse me, I have to visit the men’s room. Ask them to join us if you want to.”

The dance had just ended. Brown slipped away towards the men’s room but that was not where he was going. He wanted a chat with the Pirrusian girl.

He made his way to the back of the stage. The Pirrusian-looking mandroid automatically followed. He found the dressing room easily. He wondered if she had seen him. If she had, she had given no indication of it.

“Watch the door,” he said to the mandroid. “If anybody comes, get rid of them.”

He eased the door open lightly and entered, his right hand forearm holster was ready to eject the hidden gun for use if required.

The girl sat alone looking at the mirror and gave a start as she saw his reflection in the mirror.

“Hello,” he said. “That was a great performance.”

She was reaching for one of the drawers, when he reached out and grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him. There was a gun in the drawer.

“That was a naughty thing to try,” he laughed. “Now, even if you managed to get me, I would only be replaced by a more ruthless person.”

“Get out,” she spat in his face.

He slapped her but not too hard. “Don’t do that again,” he said angrily as she tried hard to hold back the tears in vain.

“Now listen. I want to know what you’re doing here,” he said.

“I work here,” she was fighting back tears. “Can’t you see?”

“I can see that,” he said tersely. “I want to see you again.”

“I can’t. They’ll find out,” she pleaded.

“You should be able to slip away tomorrow. If you don’t, I will have to take drastic measures. I’ll have them all re-arrested and you brought to me forcefully.”

“No please, I’ll try to come,” she pleaded.

“Make sure you do. It’s up to you what I do next.” He smiled and reached into the drawer and took the gun out.

It was a big, rather unladylike thing, of Baccran origin.

He took the charge cartridge out and threw it in the bin in the corner of the little room and handed the gun back.

“You shouldn’t play with dangerous toys like that,” he smiled. “You know all weapons are banned. You could get ten years for that. Good thing I am a benevolent man.”

“You must leave quickly, I am expecting a visitor,” she said.

“He’s going to be late,” said Brown without explaining.

“My fiancé is in the club watching things. He will kill you if he sees you here.”

“He will try, of course, but it will be his bad luck,” he smiled.

“Please go,” she said. “I will come tomorrow.”

There were sounds of a scuffle outside and he turned around sharply. “Don’t move,” he said. “And be quiet. I am leaving.”

He opened the door, looked out and shut it behind him.

Kirkan was lying stretched out on the ground. He was unconscious. The mandroid was crouching next to him.

“Well done,” said Brown. “Leave him, let’s go. I don’t want him to see me. Did he see you?”

“No,” said the mandroid. “I was hiding out of sight in that corner. He was going to enter the girl’s room when I knocked him out.”

A few minutes later, he was back at the table. Miss Lanzy was sitting there with Mrs Davis.

“Well, well, this is an unexpected pleasure,” he said smiling. “I thought you were with Kirkan, Miss Lanzy?”

“He’s gone to the men’s room.”

“Has he now? Funny, I didn’t see him there.”

“You took a long time getting back,” said Mrs Davis.

“There was a queue,” said Brown. “You want to move to another club, Mrs Davis?”

“Don’t you want to see Mr. Kirkan?” she asked.

“Not particularly, I might get to like him,” he said. “Don’t forget, Miss Lanzy, I would like to take you around sometime. Say hello to Kirkan for me.”

“I will and will look forward to seeing you, maybe tomorrow,” she gave him a dazzling smile.

He paid the bill, took Mrs Davis and moved towards the exit.

“Do you really want to go to another club, Sheila?” he asked suggestively.

“Why? What do you have in mind?”

“Let’s go back to my quarters,” he smiled. “I have got some real fancy movies that I think will interest you.”

“You are very persuasive.” She took his arm as they walked to the hovercar.

On the way back home however, he couldn’t stop thinking about the Pirrusian girl. Her wonderfully exquisite body and the way she moved it. But there was something out of place.

She was a girl from a noble family. This method of earning a living was frowned upon by society, but she could have been doing it for money. He had all the details, though the family was loaded, their property had been recently confiscated. He would have to do something about that.

Something was brewing though. She had been waiting to see Kirkan. The gun she had tried to pull out on him in the dressing room was of Baccran manufacture. He had been careful not to show that he realized this. It was very lucky that the dressing room was in an isolated part of the club. This fact had worked out in his favour, otherwise the mandroid knocking out Kirkan would have attracted a lot of attention.

She had mentioned her fiancé being outside, though Brown had not seen him. Brown knew what he looked like, from his observation of him when he was under arrest. So he was in on this too. He must have known Kirkan was meeting the girl. He was jolted back to the present by Mrs Davis digging him in the ribs.

“You seem very thoughtful,” she said. “Still thinking about your Pirrusian beauty?”

“I was thinking about tomorrow,” he lied. “It’s going to be a hard day.”

“Well I think I’d better get back to my quarters then, and let you prepare for tomorrow, whatever it is you’re going to do. I have lots to do myself.”

When they reached EPA headquarters, he bade goodnight to Mrs Davis and headed instead to the data room. He wanted to know if anything unusual had been picked up on the scanners. However, there was nothing very interesting reported. He issued an order for a twenty-four hour scanning on Miss Lanzy and Kirkan.

A few minutes later he was alone in his room, watching a movie projected

on the ceiling. It was going to be a restless night, but he was prepared for it. Brown injected himself.

He still remembered every detail of the last waking-dream. The drug soon took hold and Brown was back in Levita with a bang.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was again in the period just over ten years ago. Brown could not work out the significance of this period in Levita in his life, except for the fact that it had been an exceptionally violent one.

It was almost two weeks after his first visit to the mine. Things had not gone so well on the trip. After a very long journey, the promised working mine was anything but. It was all under lock and key and the manager was out on an errand, so Brown couldn't verify if any machines were actually there for mining to take place.

They had told him about a tribe of head-hunters who occupied the adjacent forests and who loved human flesh when they could get hold of it. Brown half-believed the story; he had seen some strange things in his long life.

Following the visit, Brown decided to back out of the investment, but Narissa had been very attentive. She had just left after spending a whole week with him. Session after intoxicating session with her had taken their toll on his mind and body, and left him exhausted and almost delirious. Nothing in his life had prepared him for this. In the end he had been almost convinced that there was nothing untoward about the investment.

Brown decided if he wanted Narissa he would have to take a chance on the mine. But what perturbed him, more than a little, were her habitual disappearances for extended periods, when he was unable to contact her. She had assured him this was all to do with the nature of her work in public relations that took her away from the city a lot. Brown was far from convinced, but every time he saw her green eyes sparkle, he was absolutely sure she was worth every penny. It was a price he had to pay.

* * *

Brown was sitting in a bar, waiting for a man. He was getting ready to transfer his hidden funds from off-world. These clandestine funds were invested for him by an organisation, which he had done some favours for over the years and the man was his connection to it.

Brown had hated to see Narissa leave, but in the end he was glad she had

done so, even though his old body ached for her. How he looked forward to his regeneration, to restore his youthfulness again. He would definitely surprise Narissa with his new vigour; there was nothing like it. Yes, youth and beauty would rule again. The theory of regeneration was simple in practice. In the twenty-first century, scientists discovered that every cell in a person's body has a control panel in the form of individual chromosomes. These defined how cells work. For example if it was a lung cell the chromosomes ask it to breathe air and collect oxygen for the blood. If these chromosomes become worn out or messed up, they couldn't send the right message to the cells and the cells couldn't function properly and the body began experiencing problems.

To prevent this from happening, each chromosome has a protective cap at both ends, like the metal tip at the end of a shoe lace that stops the lace from fraying. These protective caps are called telomeres.

Every time the cells divide the telomeres gets a little shorter and the chromosomes have less protection. The shorter one's telomeres, the older one feels and the older the person is. Eventually the telomeres get so short that the chromosomes don't have much protection, so they get frayed and start sending wrong signals to one's cells. The body then starts having problems from these confused messages and the cells don't make perfect copies any more. Then the aging process starts and the hair starts going grey, the joints start seizing up, eyesight and hearing gets worse, sex drive falters and memory erodes and brain fog sets in.

The immune system gets weaker and one feels less well and finally when the telomeres shrink to about half the size they were when one was born, one dies of old age. The scientists noticed that the longer one's telomeres, the stronger one is and the longer one lives. Telomeres were humanities actual biological clock, and as they shortened the clock wound down.

The race was then on to find a way of stopping the telomeres from winding down or shortening and in fact reversing the process. Firstly they experimented with supplements which would introduce the telomerase enzyme into cells and this would temporally halt the decline but finally came up with the renewal process which would restore the telomeres to its original condition at about the age of twenty and therefore make one young again. Brown wanted to be young again...

After spending the first two years of his retirement on Earth, he had spent

the next year off Earth, mainly on Levita, as life held much less restrictions in most of these 'new' planets. He still had seven years of his compulsory retirement to go and he meant to enjoy them. He had got rich and wanted to live his life out in style, without going back to work, after his next renewal.

Brown ordered another drink while he waited. The man he was going to meet was late. He was a member of a secretive and outlawed banking organisation. Ever since the abolition of paper money all financial transactions of any kind were electronic and were dealt with by computers and tracked continuously. Nothing could therefore be hidden away from the government's prying eyes and so obviated the need for any bankers moving money around.

The bankers had become redundant or so one thought, but they did not die out, they just became secretive and if one did manage to acquire illicit funds through mainly off-world transactions, they were the people who looked after matters for a small but substantial cut.

Normally one would have to be introduced and people were only accepted on the recommendation of a current client. Some people said they were actually a secret arm of the government itself, keeping an eye on those deviants who transgressed, but they did not interfere. It was easier to keep an eye on potential troublemakers if one knew what they were up to. However, as long as they did not make trouble but only fiddled, the government did not care.

Brown had been introduced to this organisation by somebody he had helped out in his long career. He had got the man out of a jam, and the man had been very grateful. Since then his fund had built up to a substantial amount, by grateful donors who had contributed generously for the little favours he had done them.

Brown was just about to finish his drink, when a man approached him. The man had been sitting all the while in the bar. He was a short fat man with thinning hair and a broad smile.

"Hi, I'm Max," he said. "Let's get a table, before we start talking."

They walked in silence to a table away from the bar. The man opened his case and pulled out an e-book, which he laid on the table. He then signalled the robotic waiter for two more drinks.

"Now we can talk," said Max. He pointed at the electronic book reader. One of his hands hid his mouth from view. "This is a disrupter so if anybody

is recording our conversation they will not hear anything, however, cover your mouth if you do not want them to lip read you.”

Brown did as he was told. Security cameras were everywhere. There were not many people in the bar at the time and nobody paid much attention to them. The robotic waiter brought them their drinks.

“You’re asking for all your funds to be transferred to your account here,” Max smiled politely. “Are you sure?”

“That’s right,” said Brown. Of course he was sure. What business was it of Max or the organisation to question his instruction? It was his money after all.

“We requested this meeting with you because you’re a long-time client. We like to look after our clients. It is your money, but we’ve had one or two instances where people and their money have gone missing on this planet.”

“Really? What would you suggest?” asked Brown.

“I would suggest that you don’t transfer all of it. Hold something back in case of an emergency.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” admitted Brown.

“This planet is in a different stage of development than Earth. They have just discovered fast travel through hyperspace, though they’ve been trying to get hold of the technology for a while. Their government is also fragmented,” Max smiled.

“What’s your point?” asked Brown.

“They’re people on the make and can be quite ruthless.”

“They seem alright to me,” protested Brown.

“It’s an exciting place and the women are very beautiful. You’re not the first to come here for a good time.”

“Am I in any danger?” asked Brown.

“Not that we know of, but there’s always a risk when you’re wealthy and a stranger to the place.”

“I see, so what can I do? I would like to live here.”

“Take some precautions.” Max produced a card from his pocket and passed it to Brown upside down. “Put that in your pocket, don’t read it here. There’s an address on it where you can buy yourself a weapon. Say Max sent you. There’s also a number, if you need help in an emergency, no questions asked. Of course it is going to cost you.”

“Of course, but is all this really necessary?”

“It’s up to you. My job is to advise you. As I said one or two bad things have happened here recently to off-worlders.”

“How can I get in touch with you again?”

“You can’t. Maybe you haven’t realised but I’m an AI. I will change shape once I leave this bar.”

“You can change shape?” asked an incredulous Brown.

“Up to a point. My artificial body mechanism allows me to be taller and have a bigger chest. I can change the colour of my eyes and manipulate my facial muscles to make my face look quite different to the casual observer.”

“Of what origin are you, may I ask?”

“From Earth, of course.”

“I thought AIs were banned,” said Brown, surprised.

“That’s what you’re supposed to think,” Max laughed. “We exist secretly. Nobody wants to publicise the fact as it may cause panic, but we’re a fact of life.”

“You’re not part of the government, are you?” Asked Brown, who was still taking all this in.

“No, I’m from a private organisation. But the government also uses AIs.”

“I always thought it was a load of bull what they gave us about artificial intelligence being banned.”

“What’s your instruction about the money?”

“Hold back a couple of million,” said Brown reluctantly.

“I think that’s a wise move. Think about the other things I said. Goodbye.” Max collected his e-reader and rose from his seat without a further word.

“Goodbye,” said Brown. He also got up and left the bar. The whole situation seemed a bit surreal to him to say the least, but he resolved to visit the address he had been supplied with the very next day. After all, as Max said, he was dealing with a lot of money and it didn’t hurt to be a little prepared.

* * *

The next morning Narissa showed up unexpectedly.

“What’s up?” asked Brown.

“I just had some free time on my hands. Did you manage to transfer the funds?”

“Not yet, everything is proceeding well. I’d like to see the mine again before the transfer completes.”

“Ito has to arrange it. You shouldn’t worry, though. He told me everything is going well,” Narissa assured him.

“Still it would be good to see it for myself.”

There was not much further talk on the topic. They had lunch, after which Narissa reminded him why exactly he needed to buy a share in the diamond mine. She left the next morning and by that time Brown knew, he wouldn’t be able to pull out of the deal. His body and his mind would just not accept it.

* * *

That afternoon he made his way wearily to the address on the card he’d been given. It turned out to be a little jewellery shop.

“Yes?” said the proprietor. He was a large swarthy man, and Brown wasn’t sure if he was from Earth or Levita.

“Max sent me,” said Brown.

“Okay, come to the back.” The man opened up the counter to let Brown in and followed him to the other room.

“So you want to buy a gun,” said the man.

Brown nodded. The man asked him to wait and went further into the interior of the building through another door. He came back a few minutes later holding a case, which contained several guns. Brown chose a small calibre compact hand gun, which could be easily concealed on his wrist and forearm.

“A good choice,” the man said. “I see you know your guns.”

“How much?” asked Brown.

“Don’t worry, Max will take care of it. Can I interest you in a communication device, in case you need to get in touch with somebody in a hurry?”

“I’ve got a phone,” said Brown.

“Nothing as obvious as that,” the man produced a tiny rectangular box, which dispensed little breath freshening sweets, through a pull up flap. “Press the flap on both sides like this for two seconds.”

A small display screen formed in the air in front of the device.

“You can dial in from anywhere via satellite link and it will also pinpoint

your location.” The man closed the flap and the holographic display disappeared.

“Neat,” said Brown. “I suppose Max will take care of it.”

“Of course,” said the man.

“Is there anything you can give me to keep track of my girlfriend?”

“I have some earrings and a necklace that will enable you to track her if she is wearing them.”

“Well that will also explain my visit to the jewellery shop, if anybody’s keeping an eye on me.”

Brown headed back to his apartment with his acquisitions. Things seemed to be moving quite fast. Did his fund managers really suspect anything was up? Or was this all just a sensible precaution? Brown decided to assume that the latter was the case.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brown was roused from his slumber when a mandroid injected him with the antidote.

“You are late for your doctor’s appointment,” the mandroid said.

He looked at the mandroid, his head still groggy. He was a bit concerned as to why was he suddenly having these vivid dreams about his past in Levita? They were actually more recollections than dreams, but what was the cause of it? He had to get off the drugs, but he knew it was impossible.

He had acquired the habit during his ten years in prison on Earth for tax evasion on his return from Levita. However, he had been given a second chance when he was pardoned and sent to Pirrus to put down the revolution. Only after successfully completing his mission could he return to Earth with enough funds to go through regeneration, which would cure him.

This was not like him, normally he was very punctual. He knew what the doctor was going to tell him already, but he had to go through it, it was routine. In any case, he liked the doctor, even though he was actually a machine. He had the sort of personality that agreed with Brown.

As Brown entered the doctor’s surgery, he turned to look at him. The doctor was an upgraded mandroid, with medical knowledge and proper bedside manners.

“You’re late again,” the doctor smiled. “You need to take extra care, you’ve already missed your optimum renewal date.”

“I know, but there’s not a lot I can do about that,” said Brown. “Do you think you can give me something to stop taking this damned parasitic drug?”

“You already know the answer to that. Only a renewal will cure you. But maybe I can give you something to lessen the effects of it, after I’ve checked you.

“So what is happening to me?”

“Because of the drug use your cells are deteriorating faster. At this rate, very soon you will start feeling and looking very old.”

“I’ve got a job to finish here, before I can travel to Earth for regeneration,” shrugged Brown.

“There’s always a price to pay,” the doctor sounded sympathetic. “I know your situation. Without the job you can’t get the therapy you need, but if you start deteriorating too fast, you may not be able to finish the job.”

“As bad as that?” Brown was shocked, but tried not to show it. “So what can you do for me?”

Stand in the machine there, let’s see what state your internal organs are in. The images will be projected on screen, and I can go through the diagnosis with you, step by step.”

Brown did as he was told and soon images of his vital organs appeared on the screen.

As you can see, your heart is slightly enlarged and your lungs and kidneys are not in good shape either. Have you been experiencing any pain lately?”

“Not that I can think of. What can you do to help?”

“Difficult to say, you see you are dying,” said the doctor. “You can see the discolouration in your kidneys.” Brown strained his eyes.

“Well!” the doctor started again. “We’ll target them with some chemotherapy. It won’t get rid of the parasites completely, but it will give you some relief.”

“What about the lungs and the heart?” asked Brown.

“We’re going to fumigate your lungs and give you a shot to reduce the swelling of your heart. But these are just temporary measures.”

“How long will the effects last?”

“A few weeks, maybe a few months, each person is different, but without renewal you will not survive very long.”

“I didn’t know I was in such bad way.”

“Unfortunately, that is the case; if they didn’t get you out of prison, you would’ve died there by now.”

“How do you know about prison? That’s classified.”

“I have all your history here,” the doctor smiled and tapped his head. “Don’t worry, nobody else has access to it.”

“They didn’t tell me about my condition back on Earth. I mean how bad it is?”

“Maybe they didn’t want to panic you. They were probably worried that you might turn the job down. Anyway I was under strict orders not to tell you until things had quietened down.”

“So they sent me here knowing this, fully expecting me not to return?”

“You’re probably right. They’ve got nothing to lose.”

“When do we start?”

“Right now. First I’ll give you the shot, then you’ll go into the fumigation chamber for ten minutes. Lastly I’ll give you a drink for your kidneys and some extra sachets, which you must mix with water and drink in the next two days and come back here to check if it is working.”

“You’re not sure it will work?”

“It should work,” the doctor shrugged, “but I can’t be hundred per cent sure.”

“It seems medicine is still not an exact science even now,” Brown was disappointed.

“I’m afraid so. Shall we get started?” the doctor smiled again. He was fond of smiling and it did have a calming effect. “You’re going to feel terrible for a day or two, but it will pass.”

Brown took his tunic off for the shot, which did not hurt at all. He then entered the fumigation chamber, which soon filled with a pungent fume and Brown found it very hard to breath. He was almost about to pass out and desperately tried to get out of the chamber, but found that he was locked in. However, he did manage to survive the ten minutes and was released gasping for air.

The doctor then gave him a drink, which tasted awful. He also gave him two more sachets for the next two days.

“Try to stay off the drug, at least for today. See you after two days, we can assess if things are working,” Brown kept his opinion to himself while he went through the treatments.

“Here are two more sachets of chemo,” the doctor said. “Be careful over the next few days.”

Brown said goodbye and headed for his quarters. He was already beginning to feel a bit wobbly with an intense headache, from the effects of the three lots of treatment he had been subjected to. His lungs were on fire and it was difficult to breathe. He just about made it to his quarters and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

* * *

Brown was unable to move for a while, but his mind still worked. He was in

serious pain. Was he dying? Would he survive much longer? A thousand questions shot through his mind. Why hadn't they warned him about the state of his health? They really weren't expecting him to make it back after this mission. They just wanted to patch him up enough to make sure that he got here to do the job required.

It was an uneasy relationship between himself and the EPA at the moment. He had been one of their brightest stars. Now he was a black sheep with a muddied name. The only saving grace was that he had been on retirement when he committed those things and not directly in their employment. Even then they had made an example of him.

But they needed him and he had already served ten years in prison. So they let him out to see if he could still do the job, not caring if he survived or not. He was on his own with only the good doctor to help.

After an hour Brown managed to crawl to his bed. By any standards the treatment had been intense. It was a case of kill or cure, except he couldn't be cured: the Doctor had already told him.

* * *

As he dozed off with his head throbbing and lungs burning, the intercom buzzed. It was Benson, the intelligence officer.

"What is it?" hissed Brown. He was in no shape for any polite conversation.

"It's Miss Lanzy. She's here to see you for a personal interview. Apparently you promised to see her."

"Not what I had in mind. At least in any case no time was fixed." He was in no mood to be interviewed.

"Well she's here, do you want to see her or not?"

"Not today," said Brown. "Tell her to go." He could barely hear over the pain in his head and chest.

"She says she has some information about you she'd like to discuss before making it public."

Brown turned off the intercom a moment to swear loudly. "Fine, but I need half an hour first. Entertain her until then."

"Will do," said Benson and rang off.

* * *

Half an hour later Brown was ready to face Miss Lanzy, though he felt like death. His body was in severe pain and he was burning up. On top of this, the withdrawal symptoms were beginning to kick in. His hands kept going into spasm, and he hoped it would not be too noticeable if he kept them in his pocket.

Miss Lanzy walked in. She was wearing an outfit which cycled at random from opaque to almost transparent. Brown's eyes were glued to her body without getting bored of the process. Of course her body was exquisite, like the other women Brown had met on Levita. Years of eugenics and selective breeding had ensured that they were all goddesses, perfectly formed and stunningly beautiful.

His mind raced even through the pain and throbbing. What was she there for, what was she really after?

They exchanged perfunctory greetings and she sat down, beaming at him. The dress kept switching on and off.

"How can I help you?" asked a slightly flustered Brown.

"I need an update on the current situation, for the readers back home. You said the other day that you were willing to help us, with our reporting here."

"I thought you were here to cover the festivities."

"Well you can hardly ignore the fact that you've had a full scale revolution here not so long ago," she smiled again.

"I would hardly call it that," Brown tried to smile back, but found it difficult. He was trying very hard to stop his body from shaking uncontrollably.

"Is something the matter?" she had noticed, and looked concerned.

"I'm not too well at present, but it will pass," said Brown, but he was not so sure that it would and he was not at all sure how much he should tell her.

"Maybe I should come back another time?" she suggested.

"No, I'll be alright," Brown fought for control over his body.

"As I was saying, you can hardly ignore the revolt, even though you managed to suppress it very quickly."

"Why would people in your planet be so interested in a small, failed revolt in a solar system so far from your world?"

"We've just discovered hyperspace travel, so distances have shortened

suddenly and we are very interested in Earth's affairs as humans look just like us. What are the chances of that happening?"

"Except we're all not as good looking."

"You seem to have been quite a ladies' man in your short time on Levita. Perhaps we have the same curiosity about each other?"

So she knew about him. But did she know all the circumstances of his stay and his hasty retreat, he wondered.

"Tell me, how did you acquire hyperspace travel? Who gave you the technology?"

"Well you did, by you I mean Earthmen. Even though you refused to give it to us, when you arrived to Levita all those years ago, you opened our eyes to it and on our visits to Earth on your ships we were busy trying to get the information. It took us a long time to get hold of it but finally we managed to put a ship together capable of interstellar travel some years ago and now we have many ships."

"Good old industrial espionage," smiled Brown. "Your women can be very persuasive."

"The men too," she laughed.

"And now that you have hyperspace travel and have built up your fleet, you want a piece of the action?" he asked.

"We only want to explore and trade, not have a war with humans."

"What did you come here for, Miss Lanzy? Surely not a discussion on interstellar trade routes?"

"Our readers would like to know why you're still holding onto your regeneration programme."

"It doesn't work on a species without our DNA. Your readers should know that."

"So you Earth people always tell us, but we're not that far apart genetically," she protested.

"We still can't interbreed with you," shrugged Brown.

"So everybody used to think, but you proved them wrong, didn't you?"

"Me?" Brown was flabbergasted.

"You have a child with Narissa, the woman you were seeing. Didn't you know?"

"I didn't know."

"I suppose all those years in prison kept you ignorant," she sounded

sympathetic.

“You have been busy doing your research, Miss Lanzy,” Brown tried to laugh, but he was beginning to get some involuntary shivers.

“Call me Lara. You seem like you’re suffering from withdrawal symptoms, Jim. May I call you Jim?”

“If you want,” Brown didn’t see any harm in it. “You seem to know a lot about me.”

“Well your drug habit was induced with help from Levita’s Government. That was the only way they could get to you. It was meant to kill you, but somehow you survived.”

“Are you really a reporter, Miss Lanzy?”

“Of course. And also the Levitan Government wanted me to give you a message. They have been monitoring you.”

“Do they still want to kill me?”

“Not since they found out you were the father of Narissa’s son. Everybody thought it was Ito’s in the beginning. They are willing to pardon you now so you’re welcome to go back.”

“I don’t think so. Narissa and Ito swindled me out of a lot of money.”

“The government says it is willing to compensate you.”

“If they seem to want me so badly, why did they want to kill me at the hotel?”

“I saw something in the news about that. So you were responsible for their deaths,” said Lara.

“They were trying to kill me. A man was tortured to death there, but not by me.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything about it,” said Lara, maybe she was telling the truth.

“Why do they want me so badly?”

“Well you’re the first human who has managed to have a baby with a Levitian woman. They want to know why.”

“I bet. Do you have a picture of him?”

“They gave me this,” she produced a picture.

“He’s a good-looking boy.”

“You’re not bad looking yourself,” she smiled. “Were your parents human?”

“Why do you say that?”

“There is a rumour circulating that the humans mixed with another species from another planet in the past.”

“I don’t know much about my parents, they died when I was quite young. But they had provided quite well for me so I survived. Anyway, those rumours have no basis in fact.”

Brown knew the rumours well. It was said an early colony ship had encountered a super-intelligent fish-like species of shape-shifters. Once the colonists had settled on their planet they had taken on the human shape, and had either been assimilated by or had assimilated the humans.

Apparently they had been extraordinarily adept at adopting Earth technology from having no technology of their own and travelled back to Earth on the original ship. Very soon afterwards a more efficient and faster form of hyperspace travel had been developed. As this species even mimicked human DNA, there was no way of telling them apart. It was said that they now controlled Earth and was on the whole a benign species. Technology had progressed extraordinarily fast since the arrival of their ship.

The location of their planet had been kept a secret for a long time, until one of the new ships had chanced upon it in the previous century. This is when the rumours had started, and Earth had been gripped by paranoia: all new colonies discovered had been banned from being recognised as human in the aftermath.

However, with no further evidence, things had quietened down and people accepted the status quo or went back to believing the rumour was just that. If the rumour was true, there was no way of telling humans and shape-shifters apart and they seemed quite happy to interbreed with humans and carry on normally.

The rumours grew, of course. Hybrid off-springs, if they existed, were said to possess the ability to change shape too, but there was no proof and it was generally thought that they could not assume another person’s identity even if they did change.

Whatever the truth was, human IQs seemed to improve exponentially after that original colony ship had returned.

“I suppose your government wants to dissect me to find out what my genes are?”

“We’re not that brutal, Jim. You’re letting your imagination run riot.”

“Isn’t that why you ran a eugenics programme on Levita? To progress your

species and make yourself beautiful? We had similar programmes on our planet too.”

“What’s that?”

“Selective breeding.”

“That was a long time ago. We don’t have any selective breeding programmes anymore. No harm will come to you if you return.”

By now Brown was shaking uncontrollably and could hide it no longer, he needed the drugs badly but he was determined to stay off them.

“I should go and let you rest,” she got up.

“Are you really a reporter?” asked Brown.

“You already asked me that. Come back to Levita, take the pardon.”

“I doubt I’ll live long enough to get there,” said Brown bitterly.

“I hope you survive. You are a fighter. And we have the antidote for your habit on Levita. I suggest you take a vacation. There’s nothing much that’s going to happen here.”

With that she left, leaving Brown more confused than ever.

He was a father, he had a son. And, the Levitians had a cure for his drug-addled body.

CHAPTER NINE

It was two days later.

Brown woke with a start. He was feeling lot better, and he had been off the drug for the whole time. What was happening to him? He needed to see the doctor again soon; maybe he would have an explanation about it. In any case he needed to find out how much longer he had to live. Meanwhile the Pirussian girl hadn't shown up as she had promised. He contacted her.

The official festivities had only just started with the banquet the previous night, but there was already a lot going on. The event itself had passed peacefully and the idol of Durkali, made in the image of the ancient priest king, was already in the great banqueting hall.

The priests had already started the ceremony with chanting from the sacred books, the pealing of bells and banging of cymbals. The hall itself was big enough to accommodate all the ten thousand people who were present for the ceremony. It was an inflatable structure or rather it used pressurised air to keep it up like a tent without poles. It had been set up at one end of the festival quarter for this very purpose.

Security was paramount. Everybody had to go through a scanner, which revealed any weapons. All baggage was similarly checked. After the attempted overthrow of the EPA, nobody was taking any chances. Brown made his way to the data room. He was relaxed and certainly feeling a lot better since his treatment.

Brown had misgivings about Mrs Davis after her revelation that she wanted to dine with Kirkan. Anyway Mrs Davis had been quite informative and she might be able to find out more about Kirkan than he had so far. He wanted to know desperately anything he could find out about this man.

One of the large scanners in the observation room was displaying scenes from the festivities hall, showing how the ceremonies were proceeding. The camera focused briefly on the raised platform on which the priests were standing in front of the clay idol. The idol itself was twenty feet high, made of local soil, supported by a skeleton made from natural materials and strengthened with a cement-type material.

Brown watched fascinated as fat, bare-bodied priests recited religious verses at the foot of the idol. Charcoal fires burned in a circle around the idol, forming an enclosed area in which the priests were situated. Around them in a vast semi-circle were rows and rows of people, worshippers who were listening to the priests.

The more fanatical of the religious elements were in the area directly in front of the priests, dancing and shouting praises to Durkali. These people were highly intoxicated on a local drug similar to hashish. They danced incessantly until they eventually collapsed from exhaustion. Men and women beat themselves about their breast and backs with chains of gold. This flailing was supposed to purify the body and get rid of any evil spirits of sickness. The longer one could sustain the beating, the more purified one became.

Brown looked at the proceedings with amazement. He had seen quite a few religious festivals in his career as an arbitrator, but the sheer size of this fiesta got him. He looked into some of the other screens, which were scanning other sections of the hall in which the religious ceremonies were taking place.

There was some activity going around the air pressure generator. Everything seemed normal and he almost overlooked it, but it was the face that caught his eye. There was something familiar about the face. He could not see it anymore as the scanner moved elsewhere. But he knew without a doubt it was the face of Zedan.

What was he doing there? Brown was definite, Zedan was not in there for the ceremony. In any case he needed to check it out.

“Move the scanner back quickly to the last section,” he ordered, and the operator moved hurriedly to comply. There was something wrong: he couldn’t see the mandroid guard assigned to the area.

Brown felt he knew what was happening. It went through his mind in a flash.

“Shall I sound the alarm?” the operator asked.

“No, don’t do that. We don’t want a stampede happening – that will kill half of them.” Where was Benson, his security chief? Brown couldn’t see him. He knew he needed to get down there immediately, something was very wrong and there was no time to waste. He motioned the two humanoids standing in attention to follow him, as he ran for the car port.

It took him two minutes to get to the back entrance of the hall and he could see the bomb disposal team in another vehicle behind him.

As Brown leapt out of the vehicle he was in, there was a shot from the doorway. Two figures started moving towards them, firing as they came. Brown hit the floor.

One of his mandroids returned fired, and the one of the men shooting at him crumpled up. The man was not killed but simply stunned by the electromagnetic shock wave of the gun. Brown shot the other man, as he turned to run.

Brown ran into the building and one of the mandroids followed, while the other stayed in the car to cover the doorway. A car with bomb disposal personnel were drawing up behind them, this was routine in these circumstances.

It took them another few minutes to find the bomb. Brown let the bomb disposal team deal with it, who managed to disable the bomb and carry out a controlled explosion outside. They also found the disabled mandroid guard, who had been on duty earlier, lying motionless outside on the ground. There was a disc-like object stuck to his back. This was the first time a mandroid guard had been immobilised. Obviously they had meant to carry it off, but only Brown's timely intervention had prevented this. Alarm bells were ringing in his head, if they were able to neutralise the mandroids or even worse turn them against his forces, all was lost.

The people inside had not heard the shots over the din made by the chanting, bells and drums. But they had heard the explosion of the bomb and started moving towards Brown and the guards.

While his experts were studying the inert humanoid, Brown quickly took over the internal broadcasting system. He asked the crowd of worshippers not to panic, reassuring them everything was alright. He asked them to stay in their places. A search would be made soon and he asked them not to resist.

He knew Zedan was missing. He was sure it was him he had seen earlier in the scanner screen but he was nowhere to be seen now. But he had to be somewhere in the crowd.

He was angry at what they were planning to do.

"They were trying to blow up the air pressure generator, to make the hall collapse. The death toll would have amounted to hundreds," said the bomb disposal mandroid. It was a pressurised hall.

That would have put paid to all his efforts to put an end to the rebellion in the planet. There would have been a new uprising again. That, he thought,

would have been the end of his career as arbitrator.

“But why? Why had they tried to kill hundreds of their own people?” asked one of the men, but Brown didn’t have the answer.

They could not possibly win against Earth’s forces and would be crushed mercilessly sooner or later. He was either dealing with fanatics who did not care about the fate of hundreds of people or there was something more to the plan. Something that he did not know. But he was going to find out, he was going to show those bastards that they were dealing with a real professional.

The crowd stopped moving and started moving back. The ceremony had halted. People were too nervous even to chant religious verses. The priests were addressing the people to get back into orderly rows.

Brown ordered the search to start to see if there were any more bombs, posted fresh guards, both human and humanoid, near the pressure generator and ordered that the prisoner be moved to the headquarters for questioning immediately, for he did not want the crowd to witness any brutality. He asked the experts what they thought had happened to the humanoid, but they did not know. As soon as they thought it was safe to move it, they would take it to the lab to examine it.

Brown left; he wanted to question the prisoner before the girl turned up. She was also in for some questioning if she did turn up. He would have to arrest her if she didn’t. He ordered the body of the Pirrusian he had shot to be taken to the morgue to see if somebody came to claim it. He then drove off on his hover car back to the car port of the EPA headquarters.

Normally interrogation would be carried out by Benson who had suddenly showed up again, the intelligence officer and a highly trained interrogator. Brown told him that he was in a hurry and went down to the interrogation centre to watch the progress of the interrogation, instead of waiting for the findings.

* * *

By the time Brown arrived at the interrogation centre, the suspect had already undergone the necessary minor operation to insert two electrodes into his brain. Under the influence of drugs, he would be unaware of these when he woke up. By that time the individual brain pattern would have been analysed

by the computer through the probes. When the subject was then asked questions, he would have to answer under the right stimuli applied by the electrodes to compel him to answer truthfully. This was a very old method of interrogation, but tried and tested and still in use.

Hardly anybody had been known to resist this ‘treatment’. This was normally the third stage of interrogation, and there was a chance the subject’s mind would be totally destroyed, but they were in a hurry.

Much to Brown’s disgust, the suspect knew nothing. He ordered the man to be held for trial and went up to his quarters.^[P]_[SEP] Somehow he was damned sure that they would not find Zedan in the festival building. He was also eager to know about the latest development about the immobilisation of the mandroid guard. He would have to rethink his whole law enforcement and protection strategy, if these mandroids were no longer invulnerable.

* * *

As he sat brooding in his headquarters, the intercom buzzed. A screen display appeared. When he touched the switch he was told that Gina the Pirrusian girl was there to see him. He touched the button on the transmitter and asked the girl to be shown to his headquarters after the proper checks had been made

In ten minutes’ time the girl was shown in. He smiled at her, but Gina did not smile back, though she came and stood near him. He had no time to feel sorry for her. What he wanted now was information.

“Sit down,” he said, more harshly than intended.

“Do you want me to take my clothes off now?”

“If it makes you feel better by all means do it.” He could be sarcastic as well. “I want to talk to you.”

“We have nothing to talk about,” she snapped. “The arrangement I think is purely sexual.”

“I think we have a lot to talk about,” he said. “You either talk to me or you talk down in the interrogation room. Make your choice. It can be pretty humiliating for you down there. There are a lot of people itching to lay their hands on a beauty like you.”

“It couldn’t be any worse than being with you. I am not afraid of what they can do to me.”

He saw her eyes then, afraid yet defiant. She held her head high, she was

proud. He admired her, she had guts.

“You don’t know what we can do to you,” he smiled, but did not mock her. In his mind, he pictured her being physically violated with the electrodes sticking into her head. He would have it done if he had to but there would be no pleasure in it.

“You are a heartless man,” she snapped. “But you won’t get any information out of me because I don’t know anything.”

“Come on, you take me for a fool,” he said angrily. “I saw Kirkan going to see you. Whatever he is, he’s not a reporter. The gun you tried to pull on me was of Baccran manufacture.”

“We had a lot of Baccran arms during the revolution. A girl has to protect herself in that sort of a place, so I took the gun with me. I got it from a friend.”

“Listen to me,” Brown shook her by the shoulders; normally he would have slapped somebody else, but he couldn’t do it to her. “Do you realise your boyfriend tried to kill hundreds of people in the festival hall tonight? He tried to blow the place up. He would have killed your own people to start another revolution. I suppose you don’t mind a thousand people being crushed to death. But the thing is, would the revolution have succeeded? I don’t think so. We would have crushed it again, bringing more death to your people.”

“I don’t believe you,” she cried. There was a look of horror in her face. “Zedan wouldn’t do it.”

“You’d better think again. We picked him up in the scanners when the bomb was being planted. We haven’t caught him yet, but we will, don’t worry.”

She sat down on the couch, dejected.

“Kirkan was there to meet Zedan, wasn’t he? But he met you instead, because Zedan didn’t come.”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

“What did he say?” Brown asked.

“I didn’t get to talk to him, somebody knocked him out.”

“Are you sure?” He didn’t believe her, although her eyes looked sincere.

“I think my father has found out I’ve been coming here. I haven’t been told anything recently.”

The intercom buzzed. He had it directed to his earpiece so the girl couldn’t hear it.

“Message just come in, sir,” the man on the other end said. “Baccran space fleet manoeuvring ten thousand miles off Pirrus. Our fleet is covering, but we’re outnumbered.”

“Full alert,” he said. “I don’t think they’ll make a move, but keep me informed.” He turned round to face the girl.

Gina looked at him, obviously trying to decode what he’d just said.

“I think you are telling the truth,” he said to her. “And I’m sorry about what’s about to happen to your boyfriend.”

The shock registered in her face immediately. “You’ve caught him.”

“Not yet,” he said. “But we will. And he won’t escape.”

“You have to catch him first,” she relaxed.

“You’re right, of course. The time has come to finish Zedan. I am going to give him a lesson he won’t forget.”

He reached for her and pulled her from the couch and into his arms.

“You’re very beautiful,” he said.

“I’m only an object to you, something for your power trip,” she cried. “I wish I could kill you.”

“I’m going to let you go,” he released her.

She stood back unbelieving, quiet and watchful.

“You are more than just an object to me,” he said softly. “I don’t want to harm you. I have given you no choice in this matter, but I admire your strength and I do respect you. There are not many people for whom I have real respect.”

“The woman I saw you with, did you make love to her?”

“Are you jealous?”

“Jealous of you?” she tried to show disgust. “You must be insane.”

“I think I arouse a strange interest in you. You think I’m ruthless and it excites you.” He stroked her cheek, “Anyway, I was telling the truth. I’ve decided I’m going to let you go, even though I don’t want to. You don’t have to see me anymore.”

She looked surprised, but not as surprised as he felt at his own words. What was happening to him? Was he suddenly having a pang of conscience? He had never felt much guilt but he had never come across such antiquated morality before. He was scared for himself. Was it only guilt he felt or was he becoming involved with the girl?

“You are a strange man,” she said before she left.

“Try to keep out of trouble. There’s something brewing and people are going to be hurt before it’s finished. I don’t want you to be one of them, if I can help it, even if you wish me dead. I expect we will not meet again.”

“That will suit me very well.”

“Good luck. I really mean it.” He turned and went to the shower. He had a lot of work ahead of him.

* * *

She had left when he came out of the shower. He dressed and made for the data room. Suddenly he felt very weak, all that exertion had taken its toll on him.

Brown forced himself to stop thinking about the girl and to start thinking about the problems on hand. It had been very, very close. The Berkai Empire had been ready to invade on receipt of a signal from Kirkan. They would occupy Pirrus after waiting a hundred and fifty years. Why was it worth their while to suddenly risk open hostility with Earth over such a worthless planet?

If Zedan had succeeded in blowing up the festival hall, the revolution would have re-started again. It was perfect cover for an invasion. The EPA would have been blamed for its incompetence on both fronts. There was nothing he could have done then that would check the new revolution except suppression by force. While EPA forces were fully engaged in restraining the revolution, the Berkai forces would swoop down and destroy them. His overstretched forces would have been no match against such overwhelming odds. But the Pirrusians did not realise that they were jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

He supposed that after such an atrocity like the killing of hundreds of Pirrusians in the festival hall, they would accept anything other than Earth’s rule.

Once Berkai had occupied Pirrus, it would then no doubt appeal to the Inter-Planetary Organisation that they had invaded in response to appeal from the Pirrusian people, fabricating facts to prove the atrocities. Earth would be condemned and they might even back down from re-invading Pirrus. If he was still alive he would be put on trial and at least dismissed from the service if not executed. Maybe he had been lucky.

But there were still a lot of unanswered questions. Though Berkai had

always wanted to occupy Pirrus, they had never felt it worth enough to risk war with Earth. Did they now have help from somebody else? But then the stakes would have to be very much higher than he was aware, for any other government to risk confrontation with Earth.

In the control room, Brown was informed by Benson that the search for Zedan was still continuing. Brown asked him to issue arrest warrants for Zedan and Kirkan.

Benson seemed a bit baffled, but Brown cut him short. "Do as I say," he ordered.

Benson was a good man but Brown did not have time at the moment to explain everything to him. The big man nodded his head and moved away with a puzzled expression.

"I will be in the data room," he said. "Report to me when you have either of them."

Benson always intrigued Brown. The intelligence officer, a plump and normally placid man, seemed to find certain perverse enjoyment in interrogating people. Brown had learned to trust Benson implicitly over the years. Probably the only man he ever trusted in the organisation. His life often depended on the information Benson had supplied and he had never been wrong. But now suddenly he was not so sure.

The lab had not finished analysing the information on the disc found on the mandroid yet. In the meantime there was a message from Earth. It was the report on Mrs Davis for which he had issued special instructions.

He read through the report and asked Benson whether he had read it. He said he had.

"What do you think?" Brown asked.

"Well, she is susceptible to psycho-telepathic suggestions. It may be possible to hypnotise her, I suppose."

"Well, those lizards are reputed to have that power."

"There's no proof. I don't believe Kirkan is capable of it," said Benson.

"I hope you have already issued orders for his arrest?"

"But he has already left the festival quarters with Mrs Davis. Possibly he has kidnapped her."

Brown realised that Kirkan had probably guessed that he was onto him. But how so quickly? It was almost as if the man had anticipated his next move. Where would he strike next?

Brown was angry with himself. He had been too slow to realise that Zedan was in the pay of Berkai and Kirkan was the paymaster. He wondered if the girl knew what was really going on. She had seemed shocked at the way Zedan had been trying to start a rebellion again. Brown had believed her when she had denied knowledge of anything going on. It was the innocence in her eyes which had convinced him. He wondered if she would really prefer the rule of the Berkai to that of Earth.

Earth had a lot to answer for, but he believed she and her kind would not like Earth's rule to be replaced by another. Her people wanted freedom but Kirkan only offered a subjugation to the Berkai Empire.

Brown watched the search going on in the banqueting hall in one of the scanners. In another he saw a man entering Kirkan's room. He hailed Benson in the intercom and asked for Kirkan's room to be searched thoroughly and to bring all his possessions up for analysis. They would be lucky to find anything, he thought.

He was impatient for the latest report on the mandroid, which had been immobilised. He asked Benson if he had any information.

"They have separated the disc from the back of the mandroid. It now seems to be functioning normally. Apparently the disc was in some way short circuiting it. They are studying it now."

Brown asked him to redouble his efforts to try and trace Mrs Davis and Kirkan and then left for his quarters. He felt frustrated and was looking forward to the evening for some relaxation.

* * *

As he expected, the search for Zedan turned out to be negative. But there was some good news from the lab. They had not yet found out how the disc worked but what they had found was that its range was limited. It could only work in contact with a mandroid.

Somebody, therefore, had walked past the mandroid and slapped the disc on its back. At least that was good news. They had to get very close to the mandroids to immobilise them. But how long would it be before they found a way to increase the range, though? He issued instructions straight away that all mandroid guards must avoid close contact with the enemy while on the guard duty until the scientific team came out with a counter measure. What

seemed alarming was the mandroid had failed to self-destruct.

CHAPTER TEN

That evening Brown injected himself again. He needed to relax. He had somehow survived without the drug for the period he was taking the medicine, but wasn't prepared to do without it anymore. He did not see the point: if he was dying anyway, it was better to go out in a blaze of excess. He was determined to enjoy himself.

He suddenly remembered what Lara had told him, about his drug habit and his son. He could hardly bring himself to believe any of it. They wanted him to come back to Levita, but why? What was so different now that he had a child with a Levitan woman? The boy was nearly ten years old. Why had nobody tried to contact him before?

Well they had in a way: they had tried to kill him by introducing the drug habit to him. That must have been before they realised that he was the father of Narissa's son. This must have happened recently; he would have to find out how. When did Narissa realise that he was her son's father and did she want him back as well, he wondered, but not for long. The drug started to take hold.

* * *

He was back on Levita, back in the strange waking dreams that descended upon him now whenever he took the drug these days. Again it was the period just over ten years ago. The dreams seemed to have been following a sequence and were subconsciously leading him to some point in his life on Levita. But for what reason and to what point wasn't clear. However he enjoyed the dreams in a masochistic way.

The money had been transferred to his account, but he still had hold of it. He wanted to make sure that the mine was operating before he parted with it.

Brown asked Narissa for a meeting with Ito and her father Demba. He had more questions for them and needed to sort out the follow-up trip to see the mine again.

The following day they made their way to Demba's house for a lavish lunch. Ito was already there when they arrived. Brown followed Narissa

across the marbled floor of the huge hall, behind the servant who met them at the door. The others were by the swimming pool at the back of the house. It was a particularly hot day and though the dry heat felt quite pleasant for Brown, the others complained about it.

They wound their way through the lavish lounge and then another sitting room. Brown remembered all of it from his previous visits, the place was a veritable palace. No wonder Narissa turned her nose up at Brown's apartment. "This place must be worth a packet," said Brown. "Your father must be doing well."

"This is his city residence, you should see his country one, his ancestral home," said Narissa.

"You sound like it's not yours," said Brown.

"I'm his step-daughter, though I did grow up there."

They had arrived to the pool, which was by any standard a massive one.

"Can you swim?" asked Narissa.

"Sure," Brown nodded his head. He did not want to overstate the fact that he had always been an excellent natural swimmer.

"We have lots of spare swimwear, if you'd like to swim, but a word of caution: don't take up Ito's offer to race you, he used to be the regional champion."

"I'll bear that in mind."

"So, you have some good news for us?" asked Demba. He was lounging next to the pool with Ito. "We're having a swim before lunch, care to join us?"

"Have you received the money?" asked Ito before Brown could reply.

"I have received some of it," Brown lied. "Yes, I'd like a swim, if it's alright."

"When can you transfer it?" Ito seemed very eager.

"I seem to remember something about a second visit to the mine, to see it actually working," smiled Brown. "Where can I get changed?"

"Yes, yes," Demba sounded impatient. "Ito will take care of it. You can get changed over there, Narissa will show you."

Brown joined them a few minutes later and dived into the water. It felt good. He always felt good in water. He could not remember ever learning to swim. He remembered he could just do it.

"The machinery has come in already, so we could go next week," said Ito

as he and Narissa joined him in the pool.

“Great,” said Brown, “I’m looking forward to it.”

“You look like a good swimmer. Care for a quick race to the other side and back?” asked Ito.

“Sure,” said Brown. “Why not?”

Narissa looked at him and smiled, as if to say he was being foolish.

“Start us off,” Ito said to her.

Brown got ready and then they were off at her signal. It was a long way to the other side and Brown shadowed Ito a few paces behind. Once they completed the turn, he heard Narissa cheering him on. Ito was expecting him to tire and fall behind even more, but hearing Narissa, he began to increase his strokes, faster and faster, as if something had taken over his body.

Halfway down the return length Brown eased past Ito. When he was two body lengths ahead, Ito pulled up abruptly, shouting he had a cramp.

“I’ve never seen anybody beat him before,” Narissa seemed genuinely overjoyed by his success.

“You’re lucky I got a cramp,” said Ito as he swam up to them, but they all knew the truth.

“Where did you learn to swim like that?” asked Narissa

“Honestly I don’t remember, all I know is that I’ve always been good at it.”

They sat down to lunch soon after. Brown was enjoying himself.

“So next week, we’re going to see the mine again?” he asked.

“But meanwhile you could show us some goodwill, by transferring some of the money to the company,” said Demba.

“How much?”

“How about five million, to show you mean business and you’re not just wasting our time,” said Demba.

“That’s a lot of money to show good faith,” said Brown. “Who else is involved in this project? I would like to meet them.”

“There’s nobody else at present,” said Demba.

“We’ve ruled the others out,” said Ito. “Because of you.”

“Surely you trust us a little by now,” said Narissa, mock-hurt.

“I suppose so,” Brown could hardly contain his urge.

“So that’s agreed then. You transfer five million to our account and then we go next week to see the mine,” said Ito.

“Narissa will give you the details” said Demba.

That was the end of the meeting. Brown thought that Narissa was going to come with him but she decided to stay behind, much to his disappointment.

“Oh, Jim!” she said, just as he was leaving. “One of my friends saw you going into a jewellery shop yesterday, what was that about?”

Interesting, thought Brown, so they were having him followed.

“Which friend was that then? Are you having me followed?” Brown said aloud, wanting to see her reaction.

Narissa didn't flinch. *She's good*, thought Brown, *a very polished liar*. But then quite a lot of people were good at it. In fact so was he if the circumstances warranted.

“Nobody you know really, but she knows you. Seen you at the parties I suppose. You're quite famous in some circles, almost a celebrity,” Narissa sounded nonchalant.

“I wanted to get you a present,” said Brown. He had been debating with himself whether to give Narissa the jewellery to keep an eye on her but this made up his mind instantly.

Brown pulled out the necklace and the earrings from his pocket and handed them to her.

“Oh! That's very nice of you,” she was surprised.

“Why don't you put them on? I paid a lot of money for them,” Brown lied. “I hope you like them.”

“The necklace looks lovely,” said Narissa, as she took it out of the very slim case. “Can you put it on me?” She handed him the necklace.

“Something you can remember me by,” Brown obliged.

She looked gorgeous, the necklace really complemented her. In fact it was the other way around, she made the necklace look even better.

Ito and Demba were looking at them. In fact, Ito gave Brown a funny stare, as if he was jealous, something Brown had not really noticed until now.

Funny, thought Brown. Was something going on between them? Had he been too besotted by her to notice before? He dismissed the thought from his mind.

“Well I better be getting back,” he said aloud, “See you tomorrow, Narissa.”

“Don't forget the transfer,” Ito reminded him as he left. Brown thought he detected a slight snigger in the man's voice.

* * *

When Brown got back to the apartment, he switched on the tracking system to see where Narissa was. It showed her right down to the name of the street and the house number: still at her step-father's house.

Brown was not overly perturbed by this at all, although he wished that she had come with him to his apartment. He was, however, intrigued by her disappearances, sometimes for days, and wanted to know where she was spending her time. He was also worried about the fact that they were keeping tabs on him.

They seemed too eager to get their hands on Brown's money. Why did they need the money so badly if Demba was as well off as Narissa had intimated? Was it all just a big scam to relieve Brown of his money?

Brown decided he would visit Earth's consulate in Central City to dig up any information he could find about mining activity in the area of the mine and on Demba and Ito. After all intelligence gathering was one of their principal activities, but they also kept tabs on their own citizens on the planet. If Brown wanted to stay under their radar this was probably the wrong move.

Brown easily noticed the small, unobtrusive man who shadowed him all the way from his apartment to the consulate, now that he was looking out for him. However, Brown tried he could not make out the reasoning behind being followed, it just didn't make any sense.

The consulate turned up nothing. As far as they were aware there was no mining activity going on in that region where the so-called mine was located. His search on Demba and Ito proved fruitless also: there was no adverse information on either.

On the way back, Brown decided to talk to the man who was following him, just out of curiosity. He turned a corner and waited for the man to turn after him.

"Why are you following me?" asked Brown, cutting off the man's escape route.

The man looked at him, considering his limited options. "It's about the bank transfer. We don't care how you got the money, but we do want to make sure that you don't lose it too quickly."

"So you're from the government?" Brown wasn't sure if the man was telling the truth.

“No. Max sent me to warn you,” said the man.

“I thought somebody else had employed you,” Brown didn’t know what to believe.

“You mean the people you visited earlier?”

“Yes.”

“Not me. Though they’ve had you followed separately for a long time.”

“I didn’t notice anybody,” Brown said surprised.

“Maybe you weren’t looking, but they stopped when they saw me. You may have a problem. I’m sure you got nowhere with your enquiries about them.”

“They seem to be clean.”

“Just very careful. They’ve been involved in some dodgy dealings in the past.”

“What about the diamond mine? Is it a good investment?”

“I can’t advise you on that. All I can say is we’re not going to stop you losing your money, if that happens.”

“So you think there is a risk of losing my money.”

“Well there are safer investments,” the man laughed again. “Be careful. I’ll say goodbye now.”

“Thanks for the warning. I’ll make sure I won’t part with the money unless I’m completely sure.”

It was all very strange. First of all the man didn’t look like a typical Levitian, but probably that was intentional. Secondly he had just warned Brown about his investment in the diamond mine. What was going on?

When Brown got back to the apartment, he decided he must dig deeper, before he parted with his money. He understood now why there had been no reaction to his accusation from Demba and others about being followed.

There was another surprise, too. Narissa had moved location. Brown noted the address, but made no effort to find out more. The next morning Narissa was still at the same address.

When Narissa showed up later that day, she seemed eager to see him. Brown asked her how her evening had gone the night before.

“I stayed the night at a friend’s place.”

Brown thought no more about it. He just wanted to make love to Narissa.

* * *

When Brown woke the next morning he was in for a shock. Narissa was already up and getting ready to go out. Brown was looking forward to a late lie in with her, but it was not to be so.

“Got to run,” she said. “I’m going out of town for a day or two.”

“I was looking forward to a nice lie in with you.”

“We can do that when I’m back.”

“Where are you going?”

“We’re preparing an advertising campaign for one of our clients. The presentation is going to take place in a country house outside the city. We’re staying there for a couple of days.”

“You seem to be away a lot these days.”

“What can I do? It’s work. I can give it up when we have the diamond mine.”

“Are you sure?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think maybe you’ve got somebody else.” Narissa came over to Brown and kissed him passionately. Brown pushed her onto the bed and she didn’t resist.

“I’m going to be late.”

“Let them wait.”

Brown made love to her as if she was never going to come back. It was the most intense love he had ever made and at the end of it even she was overcome with passion. Brown had never been satisfied like this before, he could never doubt her.

“When are you going to transfer the money?” she asked when she was about to leave.

“Soon.”

“Which bank have you got your money with?”

“Interstellar Credit. Why?”

“Just asking, that’s all. My dad’s friend is on its board, I think.”

Brown was worried now. Would they be able to find out exactly how much he had there?

“Do you still distrust me?”

“No. Take your necklace with you so you can think of me when I’m not there.” Brown brought the necklace over to her and put it on her neck.

“I think it rather suits me,” she laughed and left.

Brown didn't understand what had made him insist she wear the necklace. Maybe it was the readiness with which she had made love, or her frequent disappearances lately, he was just curious. There was no harm in checking, before he parted with the money.

Later that evening, before going to sleep he decided to have a look at her location and he was in for a surprise. She had not left Central City at all. In fact, she was at the same friend's address as she had been the last time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When Brown woke the next day he decided to go and see the doctor for the follow up check-up. He had missed it the day before, because of all the commotion.

“I’ve been having these crazy dreams lately,” he said.

“How crazy?”

“Well, I’m re-living my life ten years ago. Every time I take the drug I’m back in Levita. It’s never happened before.”

“Maybe you had a very significant experience there. You’re back on the drugs, then?”

“I laid off for a couple of days, like you asked me to, but then I didn’t see the point, if I’m dying anyway.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re having the dreams, you’re re-living the most significant period of your life before you die.”

“Thanks for cheering me up, Doc.”

“I’ll give you a check-up and see how you’re doing. I’m sorry the prognosis was not very good the last time. Try and keep off the drugs.”

Brown stood inside the scanner while the doctor checked him in silence with a quizzical look in his face. There seemed to be something that was not quite right. Brown feared the worst, but was in for a surprise himself.

“You seemed to have made an astounding recovery. I can’t understand it at all.”

“Am I cured then?” Brown asked hopefully.

“Of course not. The treatment I gave you was never meant to cure you, but your symptoms are nearly sixty percent down. Your heart has reduced to its original size and your kidneys are almost clear and your lungs are functioning like normal.”

“Maybe you don’t know how good you are, doc.” Brown laughed. “I have been feeling a lot better. Thanks.”

“I just don’t understand it. I’ve never seen this before. Normally we expect a five percent improvement, ten if things go really well, but never so much.”

“So I should survive for a bit longer then?”

“I could have sworn you only had a few weeks to live last time and that was after the treatment. Listen, I’ll have to check the machine to make sure it’s running okay, but I don’t see any reason why it should be malfunctioning. You probably won’t need another treatment till you get back to Earth.”

“Let me know why you think this has happened, but I better get on with the job at hand,” said Brown.

“Remember, things will get worse again. The normal rules of life still apply. You will die without rejuvenation. Meanwhile enjoy your new found health.”

“Thanks, doc,” with that Brown left.

* * *

Brown went to see the other girl reporter, Lanzy, early that evening. Brown was primarily interested in any information he could get from her about the antidote.

Though Brown could not find any fact to link her with Kirkan, her presence in Pirrus seemed to be an anomaly. Why was she suddenly interested in reporting from a small place like Pirrus? It was an out of the way planet with little interest to anybody except the Berkai Empire.

There was nothing in her background to suggest that she was anything but a reporter. But she had seemed very friendly with Kirkan. There was possibly nothing in it but physical attraction, as he had to admit Kirkan cut an impressive figure. But if she was so attracted to Kirkan, why had she sent him an invitation so readily? Quite possibly she wanted to get some information out of him, which was natural as a reporter. But she had also known about the unidentified ships landing on the planet.

The EPA people had found several crude landing sites in the remoter regions of the planet. The only explanation was that they had been prospecting for minerals. Civilised planets were always looking for deposits of mito-carbonium, the basic spaceship fuel now used. What EPA investigators could not tell was whether these were prospectors who were making unauthorised one-off landings, or if they were well organised landings sponsored by an alien government.

There had certainly been some landings by the Berkai fleet before the revolution. A cache of arms seized, which were of Levitian manufacture,

were too large to have been smuggled in any other way.

The point that worried Brown was what was the interest of Levita, in the planet, if any? But as Levita was an interplanetary arms exporter, they could have come in from anywhere, as suggested by Ms Lanzy.

Ms Lanzy opened the door and greeted him with a kiss on his cheek in a familiar fashion, as if they were already good friends after their last meeting. He was there ostensibly to take her to the banqueting hall. She looked absolutely gorgeous and Brown could feel the animal sensation creeping through him at her touch.

“Shall we have a drink first, before going down to the carnival?”

“Well, of course, Lara,” he began. “This will give us a chance to have a chat first.”

He looked around the room. It looked like any of the several hundred other rooms in the building. There was not much difference in any of these rooms, built like cubicles, to give comfort to a certain standard.

Lara poured him a drink and came and sat next to him on the soft comfortable couch. The drink in his hand tasted like nothing he had tried before. It was good.

“Tell me something,” she said. “Have you thought any more about going back to Levita?”

“I have a job to finish here first.”

“Why? You don’t owe the Earth Government anything. They imprisoned you.”

“So I can have my regeneration treatment and get rid of the drug habit.”

“It’s a shame, because Narissa would have really liked to see you again.”

“Not with my drug habit.”

“But we can offer you the antidote, so you won’t have a drug problem.”

“If you know about the antidote, why didn’t you bring it with you to show good faith?”

“They want you back on Levita. If I were you I would take up their offer.”

“You seemed to be very concerned that I go back to Levita. I have a job to do here.”

“Even if you die while trying to finish it? Is it worth the sacrifice?”

“I’ve accepted the job, so I have to finish it. My loyalty will always be to Earth, I can’t help it. I hope I will survive.”

“I hope so too. It’s still such a pity you won’t take up my offer.” There

seemed to be a hint of genuine regret in her voice.

“I will have to survive until I can get back to Earth.”

“Maybe you will. Tell me, what was all the commotion in the hall yesterday morning?”

“Nothing to worry about,” he said reassuringly. “It’s all under control now. I think there was a plan to blow the hall up.”

She appeared to look shocked. Brown could not tell whether she really was or whether she was pretending.

“Did you know Kirkan before you came here?” he asked, trying to catch her unawares. But she said she did not know him.

“Is he connected with this attempt to blow up the hall yesterday?” she said.

“No, no,” Brown lied. “I just wondered. You two seem to get on really well with each other.”

“Well, to tell the truth,” she blushed, “I was rather intrigued by him. But he is not quite what I thought he was like.”

Brown took this explanation to be adequate because as he had found that morning, after checking with the data room, there were no acts to the contrary. He relaxed a bit and thought he might as well enjoy himself. Lara moved a bit closer to him.

“You must be very brave,” she said. “To handle all those men. You saved a lot of lives.”

“It’s nothing, all part of my job. Were you in there?”

“Yes,” she said. “I would like to show how grateful I am for saving me.”

There was something gnawing at the back of his mind, but Brown pushed it back. His desire to make love to Lara that moment became paramount to everything else.

She poured him another drink. He did not worry, she was drinking from the same bottle. In any case what could she possibly do to him?

They drank to each other and then she moved in closer. Brown had never felt anything like this since Levita, but he did not care.

“Please make love to me,” she asked as she slipped her arms around his neck and moved her magnificent body even closer. Brown was so overwhelmed by desire he could hardly restrain himself and within a few minutes, Brown was making love to her with an all-consuming passion.

“You were magnificent,” she breathed heavily, when they had finished.

“You are wonderful,” Brown heard himself exclaiming.

He certainly thought she was the most wonderful creature he had met in a long time. He did not understand how he had ever suspected her. He must have been mad to think that she could have been involved in any plot against him.

“You were going to show me around the carnival today,” she interrupted his train of thought.

“Yes, that’s right. I wanted to see it myself, as this will be my first time too.”

Brown felt in a highly elated mood. As time went by, his excitement grew. Something at the back of his mind still troubled him, however, he pushed it away. He did not feel like thinking about anything at that moment.

They walked hand in hand to the festivities going on in the hall. There were different shows going on, on different parts of the floor. Some were circus acts, and some were magic shows.

The religious ceremonies were now over. The idol still stood in the centre with the fires burning around it. It looked queer shrouded in darkness except for the firelight, which shone dimly on the polished parts of the statue. It was a fascinating spectacle and Brown watched it, momentarily transfixed.

“Do you think he will rise again?” Lara spoke softly, at his arm. “He is supposed to, you know.”

“Who knows? We’ve got enough trouble as it is. We don’t want him to rise up and sweep us off the planet, do we?”

“Is that the legend?”

“That’s the popular version. He is supposed to get rid of the oppressors from this planet. That means us,” Brown laughed. “I think it has been spread by the Berkai Empire agents, or at least that’s what my assistant thinks.”

“You are not superstitious?”

“I can’t afford to be. Are you superstitious, Lara?”

“I suppose not,” she said. “But he is not the only one who can make a revolution. Tell me about these unidentified landings.”

“That’s classified information,” Brown stopped himself. “Tell me how you know about them.”

“Everybody seems to know about them, it’s an open secret,” she smiled. “You can tell me. Don’t you trust me?”

Brown did trust her. There was something wrong in him. There was that feeling again at the back of his mind. His desire to tell her everything was

overwhelming.

“We don’t know much about them,” Brown was telling the truth. His training checked him from going further. He tried to concentrate on something else.

“Why did you come to this planet, Lara?” he asked.

“Just an assignment,” she said.

“I hope it is just a reporting one,” Brown heard himself laughing. He thought it was funny.

“Of course,” she said with a mock anger. “What do you think I am?”

“You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” he said happily. He found it difficult not to be happy.

“Let’s go to the town,” Lara said suddenly. “There will be a lot to see there. Will you take me there? Let us enjoy ourselves tonight. Afterwards we will make love again.”

“Yes, let us enjoy ourselves.” He felt the memory of exciting moments he had had with her almost overcome him. Something in his brain was trying to tell him that he should not go to the town with her but he ignored it. At that moment he could not bear to be without her.

They made for his hover car and slipped away unnoticed from the car port. He forgot to ask his bodyguards to follow him.

Brown followed the directions she gave him. She seemed to know the roads really well. A few minutes later he ended up in the same club he had been in a few nights before.

“I was here with Mrs Davis,” Brown exclaimed like a man in a daze, when he stopped in front of the club.

“Yes, it’s a nice place,” she said. “I like it.”

“You came here with Kirkan that night.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s gone missing with Mrs Davis.”

“She must be fascinated by him,” she laughed. “He has that effect on women. No, I don’t know where he is. Come, let’s go in, I want to see the show.”

They took a table near the raised dais where the dancing girls came on. Brown ordered drink and a meal. He felt relaxed as he waited for the compere

to finish, and started to enjoy himself.

The dancing girl recognised Brown the moment she came on stage. It was Gina, and she seemed clearly shocked to see Brown. He watched her recover her outwardly emotionless expression instantly as she went through her motions. Emotions bubbled inside him. What was he doing here? All he could concentrate on was her dancing.

“Do you know her?” Lara asked.

“Yes,” he blurted out, then checked himself. “I saw her here last time. Isn’t she a good dancer?” he added trying to sound convincing.

The girl on the dancing floor was trying to catch his eye. She wanted to tell him something.

He looked around. Zedan was standing near the doorway. Brown felt for his gun, it was still there. It reassured him. He tried to think clearly, but couldn’t concentrate. He was enjoying himself too much. Zedan went out of the door. I should go after him, Brown thought, but decided he would wait till later. He wanted to finish watching the show first. His mind seemed to clear one moment but he could not concentrate the next. It had been like that all evening.

“That’s the best show I’ve ever seen,” he heard himself saying when the show had finished.

“Please, excuse me a moment, there’s a man I want to see.” He got up and made his way towards the door but another dancing girl bumped into him before he reached it.

“Watch where you’re going,” she cursed loudly and then in a soft whisper, “Gina wants to see you right now.”

He slipped backstage and let himself into Gina’s dressing room, carefully closing the door behind him. The thought of seeing Gina was somehow still paramount in his psyche.

“You want to see me?” he asked.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “Don’t you know this is a trap? They are waiting to kill you as soon as you step out through the front door.”

“You’re joking. Lara wouldn’t do that to me. She loves me.”

“Don’t you know you’ve been drugged?” She looked at him pityingly. “Here, take this pill, it’ll clear your mind.”

“Why are you doing this for me? You want me dead more than anybody else. You hate me. Are you trying to poison me?”

“Believe what you will,” she snapped. “I’ve found out that Berkai Empire’s forces are ready to invade. I don’t want them here anymore than I want you humans. A war between Berkai and Earth on this planet would do us more harm than anybody else.”

“Why is Zedan helping Kirkan?” he tried to concentrate.

“He has found out that I have been seeing you and he knows what for. He wants to kill you above anything else. He has rejected me.”

“I’m sorry,” he felt genuinely sorry for her.

“Don’t worry about me. I want to kill you as much as he does, but you must live for the sake of Pirrus. Go out the back way, but be careful. They may have somebody there. Your mind will clear slowly but your best bet is to have the pill. Sorry I don’t have the correct antidote. You must go now! Hurry.”

“You are the most beautiful person I have ever known,” he said sincerely.

“You poor creature, look at yourself. You will fall in love with anybody at this moment. It was probably in the drink that you had with Lara.”

“But she drank it as well.”

“She had the antidote already.”

“Alright, I will try the capsule,” he put it in his mouth. “I hope I can do something for you sometime.”

As he walked out of the door, his head began to clear. He took his gun out and checked it. The charge cartridge was empty. The full one in the gun had been replaced with an empty one. He pulled open his jacket lining and took out the spare. So Lara had missed that one. It paid to have one or two aces up one’s sleeve. It had saved his life before.

Slowly everything began to seem a lot clearer. He had been lucky that he had not followed Zedan out of the door. That is what they had intended him to do. Ironically it was the drug Lara had given him which had made him stay put to watch the dancers.

He remembered now what had been bugging him all through the evening. He had seen the security videos that morning and Lara had not been in the hall, during the attempt to blow it up. She had been in her own room in the guest house away from the hall.

However, it was useless information now, for her involvement was already established. Anger surged in him for a moment; he felt like going into the club and shooting her, but he controlled himself.

Part of his training had been to control his anger. He had to be unemotional to be a good decision-maker. His first priority was survival, before he could take reprisals. He had to get out of the place and back to the base. He went down a flight stairs into a landing, which led to the back door. There was an attendant sitting there, reading a book.

Brown took his gun out but decided against killing the man. True, he was ruthless, but did not like to kill for the sake of it. He changed the setting of his gun to stun and shot the attendant. The man arched back at the shock of the charge and then slumped forward on the floor. He would be out cold for a few hours.

The landing was lit by a low-powered light, Brown looked for the switch. His gun had not made much noise for it had been designed to be extra quiet and was a popular service weapon. Brown set his gun to full-density charge again before switching the landing light off. He tried the back door but found it locked. As his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he went back to the attendant and searched him for the keys. There was a dim light filtering the stairs, which made it possible to see a little. And his luck was in: he found a small torch in one of the man's pockets.

There were two other doors on the landing. Brown decided to explore these first. He did not want to go directly out of the back door if he could find another way. If there was a man waiting outside the door, opening the door was bound to attract his attention. It would then be a matter of chance whether he would make it, as he would be at a disadvantage, coming out of the door. And they might be equipped with night vision.

The first door led into a crammed storeroom, which had no windows. Brown moved to the next door along. It was a toilet and there was a small window in one corner, which was at right angles to the back door. That would be useful.

Brown switched the light on. He did not worry, for if anybody was watching, they would expect the light to be switched on when the attendant went to the toilet. Brown went back to the attendant and dragged him to the store room and locked the door. He returned to the toilet and set to work on the window. Though it wasn't a difficult job, he was in a hurry. Lara would be missing him by now and would soon raise the alarm if one of Zedan's men told her that he had not gone outside.

He needed a diversion. He had noticed earlier the cupboard which housed

the electric main switches, so he went there and switched all the main lights off, plunging the whole club into darkness. Switching on his torch he made his way into the toilet and locked the door behind him. Brown opened the window and peered outside. Just as he had thought, it was a side street. Taking care not to shine his torch outside, Brown let himself out, snapping the window shut behind him.

It was twilight outside. As he came up to the corner and peered around it, he could see a man with a gun, directly opposite the back door. He was hiding behind a tree, out of sight from the back door, but Brown had a clear view of him.

Brown shot the man before he had a chance to turn around and see him. He was enjoying himself: the tables were turned, and he had the element of surprise. There was still commotion going on inside the club and people were spilling out through the front door and milling around. The man watching the back door had clearly been distracted by them.

Brown crossed the street to take a look at the man. He looked shocked, as if he couldn't believe he was dead. Brown relieved the man of his cap and put it on his own head.

At the end of the street he turned into the main road and away from the club. He didn't even bother to look around. He walked on a few yards and crossed the road. Ordinary wheeled vehicles and hover cars were parked down both sides of the road and Brown watched the scene from behind one of these.

There were people standing outside the club. Most of them had obviously rushed outside in panic when the lights had gone out. There was nobody lying on the ground, so they could not have shot anybody. The people waiting for him must have been as surprised as the ones inside the club when the lights went off.

The lights came back on and the people started going back into the club slowly. Brown surveyed the scene in front of him. It was getting quite dark now and the twilight was fast melting into the darkness of the night.

The lights of the Club Royal shone dazzlingly on the other side of the road. One set of lights in sequence showed a girl doing a striptease.

Brown needed to steal a car and get away, but he also wanted to catch Zedan. From where he was standing he could make out a man standing behind a box, which looked like some sort of a power installation. Brown

could only just make him out in the yellow street light, a bit further away.

It was quite a distance and Brown decided against taking a shot. There would be others around there probably and Brown would not be able to take them out at the same time.

As Brown was pondering his next step the man behind the box moved and went to a car. He talked to somebody through the window of the car and then crossed the road and made for the club. Most likely they were getting a bit impatient.

Brown waited until the man entered the club, then he edged forward slowly towards the car. He walked normally with the cap pulled down low over his face. It took him a minute or so to come up to the car door. Without hesitation, he pulled the door open and fired inside. The two Pirussians turned with a frozen expression of pain in their faces. They didn't even have time to scream, there was just a look of utter horror. It was too late for them, in another moment they were dead. Their bodies slumped over each other and their weapons clattered to the floor of the car.

Brown dragged the two bodies out, dumped them on the pavement, jumped in and drove away. He didn't have time to worry about blood on the seats, hoping the discharge from his weapon had cauterised the wounds. He had not even made an effort to get to his own hover car: there was a high probability that it was booby-trapped. Even if it wasn't, it was sure to be under surveillance.

He was disappointed that none of the men he'd killed was Zedan, which probably meant that was the person who had gone into the club.

The car's communicator fizzed static. Brown activated it and dialled into his own personal security force. "It's Brown. I need an armed squad at the Club Royal immediately."

"Message received," said a man's voice. "We'll be there within ten minutes. There's already a squad out looking for you."

This was a stroke of luck he had not expected. There was a distinct possibility that he would be able to capture Zedan before he had a chance to escape again.

He wanted to capture Zedan badly, because that would lead him to Kirkan, wherever he was. He also wanted Lara, for she was clearly involved in whatever was going on and her involvement implied that maybe the planet Levita was also involved.

Had Levita and the Berkai Empire joined forces? In which case what was Levita's interest in Pirrus. This was what Brown had to find out. Something big was afoot. He already knew that Berkai's forces were nearby and ready to invade at short notice.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brown waited till the last of the EPA cars had pulled up. He got out of the vehicle he had stolen and into one of the EPA vehicles.

The poison and antidote lingered in his system, making him tired. Though he had felt perky at the doctor's, the effects of the treatments he'd gone through were also still there, reinforcing the tiredness he felt.

Benson leaned into the car window.

"What are your instructions, Arbitrator?" he asked.

"I want Zedan and Lanzy alive," Brown ordered.

* * *

Apparently alarm had been raised after they saw his hover car leave the base without reporting to transport control first. Security had not stopped the car as they had seen Brown himself in the car. But when they had not heard anything from him for a long time, they had gone looking for him.

It was his own orders that any personnel leaving without clearance from the base, must be investigated. This had made them come looking for him. Only the fact that Brown was the boss had delayed the search as they thought that he had his own reasons for not informing them.

Within a couple of minutes they were inside the club. Twenty armed mandroids entered the building and Benson followed behind. Brown stayed in the car to control the operation outside. It took them half an hour to empty the building of all its occupants. Some of these turned out to be the richest and the most influential people in the city. Brown ordered the whole lot to be questioned and some brought back to the base for further questioning.

They found Lara amongst these people. However, there was no sign of Zedan. That man seemed to have the ability to melt into the air.

Gina was also one of the many arrested. Brown was grateful to her for saving his life but he had her arrested to avoid casting suspicion on her straight away. He made a point of ignoring her in that company and ordered that Lara be brought to his car.

When they brought her to him, he smiled grimly at her.

“Well, Lara, I think your little plan has back fired. You didn’t think we’d meet again, did you?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she spoke tersely.

“Where is Zedan?” He snapped again. “Tell me, if you know what’s good for you.”

“I don’t know,” she pleaded. “I don’t know who Zedan is.”

“When did you find out I had escaped?”

“I thought you had gone to the men’s room.”

After perfunctory questioning of other prisoners, some were allowed to leave, the rest were all herded into two large vehicles built specially for the purpose and they started the journey back to the EPA headquarters. The prisoners had no idea what was in store for them. There were cries of outrage from the more well-off parties, but Benson silenced them with a sharp rebuke. He ordered that anybody trying to escape would be shot. He cut out any protests savagely, his eyes glinting with sudden ferocity.

As Brown had anticipated, the aerial search did not uncover Zedan. The city was not large by Earth standards, but it was big enough. By the time Brown had a chance to bring in more reinforcements, Zedan would have long since disappeared. Knowing the man, he was sure that he would have his escape route planned meticulously beforehand.

Anyway, for a house to house search of the area, he would have to recruit the help of the native police force, a much under-strength force, which had sent a couple of officers to investigate the commotion at the Club Royal. They had kept out of the way once they had been told that it was EPA business.

Brown did not trust the native police, not that he trusted many people. He only trusted people as far as it was necessary, after he had worked out their self-interest. He was a believer in people’s own self-interest and always relied on controlling other people by knowing their weaknesses and being careful to hide his own.

But the planet’s police were a different kettle of fish. He had no hold on them except fear and he could not control their self-interest. Under the present political climate, though they would go through the motions of obeying his orders, they were hardly likely to be enthusiastic about it. Zedan was a hero to them and if they could turn a blind eye towards him, they would.

An EPA security guard approached, wires trailing from his hand. "This was under your car, sir," he said. "You were right, it was booby-trapped."

"Well done," Brown said.

As he had thought, they had found his car wired with explosives, but had let a mandroid take it back for him, after the bomb had been defused.

He thought of the Pirrusian girl. She troubled him, because he could not make her out. He knew she hated him and the Earthmen, but she had turned against her former fiancé to help him. Why? There had to be something more than simply being rejected by Zedan.

The important thing was that she did not want the Berkai hordes on the planet, whereas Zedan was working towards it. Therefore the factions opposing EPA were splitting into two groups. Zedan had a sizeable following, but there must be more people like Gina. The question was who would win control.

He had made a serious mistake in letting Zedan go. He hoped Lara had some answers. He would have to put her through the treatment, there was no alternative. He had to find Kirkan and Zedan because time was running out. He had been lucky, but he never believed in luck.

* * *

They returned to the base, where Brown went up to his quarters intending to sleep. He gave instructions for preliminary questioning to determine who they were going to let go. The arrested were to be questioned separately by experienced interrogators. He asked Gina to be escorted to his quarters after a suitable period of detention with the others. Miss Lanzy was to be subjected to questioning with the electrode treatment later. He didn't feel like torturing her, but it would probably need doing.

Brown switched on the auto music composer which instantly analysed the mood of the person who turned it on and composed music to suit. It also supplied set pieces from its memory bank, as requested. Brown let the music box make its own music and dozed off.

When he awoke it was morning and the music was still playing. He showered and entered the vibro-masseur. He was lost in thought when Gina entered. A light inside the machine warned him that somebody had entered his quarters. He came out with a towel around his waist and saw her sitting

on the air cushion.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t let you go,” he said. “I didn’t want to cast any suspicion on you. Anyway, it gives me pleasure to see you again so soon.”

“What are you going to do with everybody?”

“I’m going to let most of them go after interrogation. They should be harmless enough. There will be a few we will want to hold for further questioning. You can leave when I let these people go.”

“You know you surprise me,” she said. “Why did you ask me here? You could have let me go anyway.”

“I wanted to thank you for saving my life. I am still puzzled about your motives though. Was it revenge against Zedan for rejecting you?”

“You insult me. It seems that you think of everybody in the same lowly terms you think of yourself. If there is anybody I should hate for Zedan rejecting me, it should be you. He was only doing what is expected of him in our society.”

“You mean you don’t hate me?” This was a new revelation to Brown. It worried him. He was used to hate, he could deal with it, but this he could not understand, he had used the girl ruthlessly and yet she did not hate him.

“I thought you hated me and everything I stand for.”

“I did hate what you did to me,” she said. “I am against what you stand for, against this system that so ruthlessly exploits our people. But when Zedan rejected me, it made me think. He was doing what the society expected him to do, he could not help himself. He is a good boy, but he has lost his senses because of hate. You see, you are also doing what you have been trained to do, to use your power ruthlessly as long as it is in the service of your government. In your way, you are no more different than Zedan is.”

Brown was amazed. He didn’t know what to say. This was a young girl, a hundred years younger than him, who was telling him something he had never questioned in all his life. Here was a girl from a so-called primitive race, reacting to him in a way he never imagined possible.

“I have made you suffer terribly.” That feeling of guilt reared its head again.

“You couldn’t help yourself,” she said understandingly. “As you said, in your way, you are honest. You were blunt but you explained what you did. You have been brought up only to respect power and I have no power, but you kept your word.”

“But I do respect you, you don’t know how much,” Brown found he was pleading, to his surprise. “I let your father and Zedan go because I thought they could not harm me. I was blind with power and I was also wrong about Zedan. But I only kept the promise because it was convenient.”

“Power has corrupted you,” she said. “I pity you.”

“I don’t need your pity,” Brown was angry. “You’d better save it for Zedan when I catch up with him. It was a mistake to let him live.” In his anger Brown felt more like himself again.

“You said you would do something for me for saving your life,” she said.

“I did say so,” he looked questioningly at her.

“Let Zedan live.”

“I can’t do that. Ask anything else,” he was baffled. “You know it’s either him or me. Why should he be of any importance to you now that he’s rejected you?”

“I know. And I can never take him back.”

“Then don’t waste your time on him,” Brown said angrily. “He has joined Kirkan. We have information that the Berkai Empire is ready to invade Pirrus. You said you didn’t want that.”

“I don’t.”

“I am telling the truth. Our forces have never usually killed unnecessarily. Yet the Berkai Empire with Zedan’s help were ready to kill hundreds of innocent people so that they could invade the planet when the revolution started again.”

“Zedan is bitter with hatred,” she pleaded. “He can be reasoned with once he gets over it. This is the only thing I want from you.”

“I’ll see what can be done. I can’t promise anything.”

“I know you take your promise seriously after all,” she smiled. “I suppose you require the usual price,” she said seriously.

“That’s not necessary. I would like to make love to you, but only if you wish it of your own free will.”

“Maybe one day. For now you have my consent.”

“I don’t understand you,” Brown said.

“I think you are a very lonely man. It must be difficult to be the Arbitrator.”

There was some truth in the statement, he had to admit that. But what was her angle, he wondered. Why was she being so friendly all of a sudden? However he was not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. He sat down next

to her and putting his arms around her, drew her gently to him.

She did not resist as he kissed her on the lips and slid her clothes off. In a few moments he was lost in the throbbing of ecstatic passion.

“I think you enjoy making love to me,” he said surprised.

She did not reply but looked away.

“I am just another woman to you,” she said suddenly.

But he knew she was different. She was not like other women he had had. Whether it was the innocence of her sensuous young body, or her lack of experience, she was something else.

“I think I should keep you here a bit longer,” he said at last. “There is something about you that is so refreshing, so beautiful, which I have not found in anybody else for a long time.”

“I think I had better not stay any longer or you will grow tired of me. You have Lara.”

“I’m not interested in her, she drugged me. She wanted to have me killed.”

“What will you do to her?”

“She will have to be interrogated.” Brown noticed she shivered visibly. “I am sorry but that’s the price you pay for being unsuccessful, especially if you’re a spy. I have to know what she knows, which means she must talk. There is no easy way.”

“I suppose you have tried your charms on her and failed,” she sounded scornful.

“It was she who seduced me, to kill me. But she failed because of you. She is in with Kirkan and Zedan. We will find out where they are if she knows it. We can’t let her go after that, she will warn them.”

“Did you enjoy making love to her?”

“It was the drug. I suppose I enjoyed it, but I hope you understand. In a way it is good that we will part, for our ways will always be different.”

“You managed so quickly to turn the tables against Zedan yesterday. I suppose one must admire your ruthlessness, even grudgingly.”

“I wanted to escape, but I had no alternative but to attack. I was lucky. But why did you help me?”

“You have probably guessed that we are rapidly dividing into two factions. One is in favour of repulsing the Earth force with the help of Berkai, which means an invasion by them and the other group are against it. They want to win independence from you by negotiation. They believe the first way will

involve too much violence and the only people to suffer would be us.”

“You are right there, but Earth will never negotiate with you.”

“We were hoping to negotiate with you,” she said. “After all you are the Arbitrator.”

“Ah, ha,” he laughed. “So now I understand. I wondered why you were being so nice to me all of a sudden.”

“That is not true,” she cried. “You must believe me. I belong to the latter group, but I have no authority to approach you. I did not save your life for that purpose, but to prevent the planet from plunging into chaos. Then all would be lost. I hope though that you will help us.”

“I have no authority to negotiate such a settlement.” He sounded stern. Anger surged inside him for a moment, then he calmed himself. So this was really her reason for being so good to him. He had been ready to believe otherwise, but the truth had come out strangely. He was angry with himself, not with her, for being ready to believe her motives were different.

“I cannot help you,” he said finally. “There is nothing either of your factions can do. We will crush any revolution whether they are with or without the help of the Berkai Empire.”

“Yes, I suppose you will.” She was angry. “I suppose it means nothing to you to trample over millions of peoples’ desire to be free. Maybe I should have let Zedan kill you. You always talk of other people not being human, but what are these qualities that make you humans so special or better than other races?”

“We will not discuss this matter anymore. You will stay here till I come back. There will be a mandroid guarding the entrance, so don’t try to go anywhere else. I must attend to other matters.”

“So you are going to keep me here by force?”

“No, I will let you go with the others. I think you will prefer my quarters to a cell till you go. It is much more comfortable.”

“I will take a cell anytime,” she said haughtily, “rather than owe you any favours.”

“Don’t be foolish, you stay here till I come back, as my guest. I owe you at least that much.”

Brown was about to make his way to the interrogation section of the EPA headquarters, when a call came through from Benson. He was letting most of the prisoners go.

“You can go,” Brown said to Gina. “They’re letting some of the others go, but keep in touch. You may be in danger. If there’s a problem, call me or come to the base.”

“I’ll be alright,” she said.

“Don’t do anything foolish,” Brown felt himself soften. “You know I would help you if I can.” He grabbed her and gave her a kiss; she didn’t resist.

“The mandroid will take you, it’s safer. I’m assigning it to you, keep it at your place as your friend for the moment. It’s made to look just like a woman. Nobody will know.”

“I don’t need her.”

“Please do as I say. Now go.”

Gina left without a further word. Brown’s mind was in turmoil. His attachment to the girl had grown more than he had thought possible. He had to put an end to it, somehow shake himself loose. After all, men like him could not afford ties and he had been trained to be above such emotions. Part of his quick rise in the EPA had been attributed to the fact that he never had a susceptibility to such involvement. All his wives had played the purely functional roles of sexual partners and companions, but nothing more.

He forced himself to put her out of his mind. It was very difficult for him not to think of that beautiful face, and those bright innocent eyes looking at him with an expectation so unreasonable, that he could not understand it. Things had been much simpler when he knew she hated him. Hate, he could understand that.

But what she wanted from him was the impossible. She spoke of her desire for freedom for her people. Surely she knew it was a hopeless cause? He might be all powerful on this planet, but when it came to Earth’s government, he was nothing. Even if he believed in her cause, he would not dare to oppose Earth. He would be crushed mercilessly as he had crushed so many people before him. It was madness even to think of opposing the regime.

That evening, after concluding preliminary interrogations of the people still being held, he ordered the release of the next batch. Quite a few were still left, including Miss Lanzy, who was being interrogated by Benson.

Brown decided he would carry on with the interrogation the next day and rang Benson to give instructions. It had been a long day. He ordered his favourite drink and slipped into the shower. It had indeed been a long day and

even though the good doctor had ordered him to stay off the drug, he needed it badly.

When the mandroid brought him the drink, Brown had a few sips. He then injected the drug and reclined back on his much loved contraption, the bubble.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Brown's drug-dream sequence continued: he was back on Levita.

It was two days after his last experience of being back on Levita. Narissa was back. She looked radiant as ever and very eager to please him.

"Did you have a good trip?" Brown asked her, to hear what her answer would be.

"It was great," she said. "We got a lot of work done. How about you? Did you miss me?"

"Every minute." Brown already knew where she had been all the time she was supposed to be out of town. He had already looked up whose address it was that she was staying at. Should he tell her he knew she'd stayed in town instead of the out-of-town trip she'd pretended to be on?

"Did you transfer the money?" she asked.

"No."

"Ito isn't going to be very happy."

"How about your father?"

"My step-father." It was her step-father, when it suited her. "He's not going to be very happy either."

"What about you?"

"I'm not too bothered. But tell me why you have changed your mind suddenly. I thought you were all for it."

"I've been thinking it over. To tell the truth, I've never been very sure."

"I see. What shall I tell Ito?"

"Tell him what you like."

"Why are you being like this all of a sudden? What about us?"

"I'm not sure there's going to be any future in us," Brown tried to smile, but found it difficult.

"What's got into you all of a sudden," Narissa looked exasperated.

"I know where you've been the last few days."

For the briefest moment Narissa looked shocked; but only for a moment, she recovered straight away.

"It's not what you think. Ito and I are long-time friends and it's difficult for

him to give me up. I'm trying to make him understand that I want to be with you." Her face looked so innocent that Brown almost gave in.

"You lied to me," he said at last, trying to control his temper.

"Only because I knew you wouldn't understand." She moved over to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Can you forgive me?"

Brown was not sure how to react, the presence of the woman, so close to him, was overwhelming him. He tried to push her away, but she knew she had him and there was no getting away from her.

"It won't happen again," purred Narissa.

Brown gave in and they made love several times. He was addicted.

"I'm not transferring the money though, until I see the mine again," he said finally. There, he had put his foot down, but deep down he felt it was still a mistake. However, there was no harm in looking at the mine again if they agreed to his terms, he thought.

"I'll tell Ito, but he won't be very happy," Narissa looked gloomy.

"He can like it or lump it, but that is my position," Brown was adamant.

"Well if you insist, he will have to agree to it. He's got no other choice if he wants your money," agreed Narissa.

Brown felt calmer, but something still worried him, he wanted to be sure about Narissa's intentions.

"I don't want you to go and stay with him again, is that clear?"

"Sure. It will not serve any purpose. I will explain it to him," said Narissa.

* * *

Two days later, Brown was busy packing for the trip to the mine. It was going to be an overnight trip, there and back. Ito had assured him that all the machines were in place and they were gearing up for full production to start soon. He had even apologised to Brown about Narissa being at his place and had insisted that they were just good friends.

Frankly Brown didn't believe him, but what choice did he have? He hoped Narissa would keep her promise and slowly he would win her away from Ito. If he felt that things were not working out after the trip to the mine, he could just walk away. The money was still tucked away safely in his own bank account.

"I'm surprised you're not coming with us this time," Brown said to

Narissa.

“I’ve got things to do. Believe it or not, I do actually have a job and I have to meet deadlines.”

“You mean make up lost time?” Brown could be sarcastic.

“You’re still not going on about that, are you? I told you it won’t happen again.”

Ito arrived duly at the appointed hour and he was all smiles. Demba was with him.

“Just came to make sure you don’t miss the trip,” he said jokingly. “A lot is riding on it.”

“So who’s the muscle?” Brown asked jokingly. “You or Ito?”

“We don’t need any muscle. I’m not going with you, just wanted to let you know that. I think you will be surprised at what you find there.” Demba’s shark teeth glistened in a very broad smile.

They were having a few drinks when Brown pulled Narissa to one side.

“I wish you were coming,” he said.

“Maybe you shouldn’t go,” Narissa whispered. She looked a bit apprehensive.

“What do you mean?” asked Brown.

“Maybe you should think more carefully about investing your money.”

“It’s too late for that now, we’re leaving in five minutes,” interrupted Ito, giving Narissa a very stern look, which didn’t go unnoticed by Brown.

Narissa didn’t say anything more and soon they were away to the small airfield, from where the flier would take off for the mine. Brown was still puzzled by Narissa’s last remarks but did not get any time to dwell on it. An hour later they were taking off for the mine.

“I hope you’re looking forward to the trip,” Ito smiled, when they were aboard the aircraft.

“I’m not sure what to expect,” Brown was a bit perturbed but tried not to show it. “What was Narissa trying to tell me?”

“I expect she didn’t want you to come because she’s going to miss you,” said Ito. “She’s getting very sentimental lately.”

“Is that why she’s still visiting you in secret?”

“As I already explained before, we’re just good friends now.” But it seemed like Ito was irked, Brown wasn’t sure, if it was because, he was actually beginning to lose her to Brown.

The rest of the trip passed in silence. Something in Ito's attitude was bothering Brown but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He decided that it was to do with Narissa and decided to let the matter lie. He almost felt happy that as soon as the matter of the mine was sorted he could move in with Narissa and have a happy life with her.

The aircraft was making good progress. Within a few short hours they were passing over the last big city and started flying over the forested area following the river.

There was a small town along the route, a settlement by the river, where it was beginning to get much wider than it was further upstream nearer the mine, having been joined by another tributary.

"Soon be there," said Ito, breaking his long silence. "Once you're satisfied with things we can go ahead with the transfer of funds from your bank."

"So Narissa already told you that I have the money in the local bank?"

"I didn't know why you wanted to keep it a secret. Actually she didn't tell me. I know the director of the bank very well."

"I see," Brown was disturbed. "And you say you have everything in place?"

"Everything that is needed to satisfy you. I suppose it feels good to come to another world to land on your feet, with lots of money and a beautiful girl."

"Well, you're going to benefit from it as well."

"And why not? We can't let you off-worlders lord it over us."

The conversation seems to be getting a bit hostile, thought Brown. Was Ito leading up to something? Brown tried to diffuse the tension.

"I don't want to lord it over anybody, just want a little share of the wealth. From the sound of it, there's going to be plenty for everybody."

"Of course," Ito smiled. "More than you think."

Brown was going to say something but the craft had already started its descent, so he decided it could wait.

"How long are we staying?"

"Not long. Soon as we've taken care of things here, we'll be off. A couple of hours maximum."

When they landed Ito mentioned they needed to wait for the manager to turn up, so they should have a drink in the canteen first. Brown noticed the place looked totally empty as if nothing had changed since his first visit. The pilot stayed with the craft.

“Where’s everybody? I thought you had started production.”

“They’ve got a day off, but don’t worry you’ll see the machinery is here.”

But Brown was worried. As they entered the canteen, the lights came on automatically. There was nobody there.

“What’s going...” He never finished the sentence. Brown felt a sharp pain on the side of his head and everything went black.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The next day Brown awoke still feeling dazed by his dream the night before. His head still hurt, as if the blow had happened yesterday, instead of years ago. He remembered the dream vividly but it was the effect of the drugs that was hurting his head and not any physical trauma.

Brown wanted to go through the data assimilated from the people who had been questioned so far. Benson had been conducting some of the interrogations. They were still holding some prisoners. Benson came out of one of the cells after finishing a first-stage interrogation with one of the prisoners. The interrogation procedure was a three-stage affair. First a detainee would be requested to give details of his actions and whereabouts for the past twenty-four hours, or longer if necessary, in a written statement. He would then be presented with evidence contrary to the statement and induced to co-operate with small scale bribery such as lessening of sentences, punishment or reward.

If he or she still did not co-operate and it was found under cross-examination that there was enough evidence to suggest that the person was holding back information, then a second stage interrogation would begin. This stage took longer because psychiatric or other more sophisticated or physically painful methods were used to break the prisoners, a method of torture that had survived the centuries. In short, they were things which would cause a sense of loss and despair and fear without causing any permanent damage.

If a detainee was able to resist the first and the second stage interrogation as people could if they had been trained to do so, then the third stage was brought into operation, when electrodes were inserted into the brain directly.

Brown himself had to authorise this procedure as there was a small chance that a person who underwent this form of interrogation sometimes became badly brain damaged afterwards and then usually had to be shot in secret. Therefore, the use of this method was not too prevalent unless the circumstances justified it. EPA forces, of course, denied any knowledge of it and other than a handful specialist staff and a few other important people,

nobody in the forces had any knowledge of it.

Brown greeted Benson and chatted to him over a cup of coffee about how the interrogation was proceeding. Over the years they had grown quite close. Benson had joined the service much later than Brown, but he had got to know Benson before his last retirement.

“Well, Benson, have you had luck with them?” Brown asked him when they sat down for a cup of coffee.

“Nothing much so far, Arbitrator,” Benson said. “The first stage is nearly complete. There are only two or three I would like to try a second stage interrogation on. We are waiting for the local police report before we decide to let the others go.”

Benson was one of the most experienced interrogators in the service. He had an uncanny sense, probably nurtured by years of experience which allowed him to guess when a person was telling the truth or was lying. Very seldom had he been proved wrong. If there was information to be got out of anybody, Brown trusted him to do the job better than anybody else.

“Those people are always slow with reports,” Brown said disgustedly. “I’ll have to do something in the near future.”

“You can hardly blame them,” Benson smiled, “it’s not exactly a labour of love for them to help us run this place.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Brown agreed. “It is a good thing we don’t have to depend on them too much.”

Brown liked the way Benson worked. Like him Benson was not aggravated by difficulties of doing his job. He accepted these as a normal part of his work instead, something to be make allowance for and surmount. Brown had noticed over the years that this functional approach to his work had made Benson one of the best men in his service. He did not mind difficulties, he did not welcome them, just accepted them and dealt with them.

“Have you started the third stage on Mrs Lanzy yet?” asked Brown.

“No,” said Benson, “I wanted to talk to you about that. It’s not really the proper procedure. I don’t think she has any more to tell us.”

This was not meant as a criticism of Brown and the latter knew that. Benson accepted that in the end all procedures depended on Brown’s decisions, but there was a general guideline that one followed.

“There doesn’t seem any point in risking her life if she has no real information of value to give us,” he began again.

“She is a trained agent,” Brown said. “She was in the middle of the plot to kill me. In any case there’s only a small chance she will be damaged.”

“But she may not necessarily know anything else,” Benson interrupted. “The Levitian Government representative is already enquiring as to her whereabouts.”

“Which just reinforces my suspicion. I think she knows where Kirkan is. We have to find him as soon as possible.”

“But we could try the second stage first,” Benson still argued, “There might be protests from Levitan and repercussions from Earth as a result of any hasty actions.”

Brown knew he was taking the wrong decision. Benson was right, there could be repercussions for Earth. Like other planets Earth also liked to pretend it was running a clean house, without any skeletons in its cupboards.

“Okay, we’ll do it your way,” Brown said. “Proceed with second stage. If she’s not a trained agent and is just under Kirkan’s influence we should break her.”

“I think it is better this way, Arbitrator.”

“I hope you’re right. Let me know if you come up with anything.”

As they were discussing the second-stage procedure for Miss Lanzy, a message came through on the intercom that a local police officer had arrived with the police files.

“I think I had better have a look at these files with you,” said Benson.

Brown walked with Benson to the elevator, which took them to the next level where the reception rooms were.

A junior EPA Officer met them on the corridor as they came out of elevator.

“Where is the police officer?” Brown asked him.

“In room eight, sir,” the man replied crisply. “We have a mandroid standing by with him. Would you like to have a look at him through the CCTV before you meet him?”

“Yes, I think I will,” said Brown. “Has he been checked out?”

“Of course, sir,” the man replied. “Regulation weapons only, submitted for holding at the perimeter inspection.”

“Good,” said Benson. No one except the most vetted personnel were allowed to carry weapons in the building. All outsiders had to check their weapons at the outside perimeter of the EPA quarters. There was an

impressive security system surrounding the quarters. This did not however encompass the Festival buildings.

Brown and Benson entered the viewing room. The officer was wearing a black police uniform. He was of enormous build: nearly as big as Benson and superbly muscular. He struck Brown as being a cross-breed of the Northern and Southern Pirrusian races; the Northern were tall and thin and Southern short and squat.

“Get me his details,” Brown said to Benson.

The EPA computer possessed details of every native working for the EPA controlled services, such as the Police or Civil administration. The records also kept details of any local politician or notables or potential trouble makers. However, petty criminals and local police matters were recorded by native police in their own computer files. There was obviously a link between the two, but the presence of a local native officer was always requested when questioning Pirrusian detainees. It had been found that however complete the files were, they never contained enough information.

“Interesting man,” muttered Benson, staring at his datapad. “He stayed loyal to EPA forces during the rebellion. He was cited for valour by his commander, whom he rescued single-handedly in the face of overwhelming odds. Rapid promotions followed.”

“Seems a good man,” Brown agreed. “What’s that he’s carrying?”

“Identity disc scanner,” the junior officer chipped in. “Plus detailed records of some detainees.”

“Thank you,” Brown said. “Let’s go and see him. Make sure there’s a mandroid on standby at all times.”

Brown left the viewing room with Benson and walked to room 8. The officer stood up as they entered.

“Major Rogan reporting for duty from the Police Office of Investigation, Your Excellency.”

“Good day, Major Rogan, I hope you will be able to help us with some problems we are facing at the moment?”

“Arising from the assassination attempt on your person, sir.”

“I see you are well informed.”

“We have our job, sir, though our forces were not called in to assist you at the Club Royal.”

“It wasn’t necessary,” Brown said. “Our forces were at hand, it was a small

operation and we wanted all the detainees here. We sent you a list of their names.”

“Yes. I’ve dealt with a few of them before. That’s why I was sent for.”

“You were highly recommended by your EPA commanding officer after the rebellion,” Benson said.

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Tell me, Rogan,” Benson smiled, “How is it that you remained loyal to our forces?”

“I am a man of peace, sir.”

“You killed a lot of people, Major,” Brown cut in. “Your own people.”

“Well, I did not like doing it, but it was necessary,” he said, looking between them. “I see what you are getting at, Your Excellency. First there was no way the rebels could have succeeded against overwhelming Earth forces with superior weapons. After all I’m not just a man in the street, I had knowledge of the balance of power of the two forces. In my opinion, I had only one choice, to bring the revolution to a quick end to save the massacre of my people.”

“A good explanation,” Brown interjected. “But tell me, Major, what would be your feelings if the rebel forces were superior?”

“A hypothetical question, sir. I deal with facts,” Rogan met Brown’s eyes. “If I told you I would still remain loyal, would you believe me? Well, I have never hidden the fact that I would like to see peaceful transition of the colonial government into Pirrusian hands.”

“That’s treason,” said Benson.

“But it has got to come sometime.”

“Maybe,” said Brown. “Let’s attend to the matter at hand. However, there seems to be quite a few of you around, who want to change things peacefully.”

“Yes, Your Excellency. After the last revolution this idea is gaining strength.”

“But it is futile,” Benson snapped, “Earth would never agree.”

Benson was called away soon afterwards to attend to other matters

“It is either that or another bloody rebellion,” Rogan said, “You will not be able to hold it eternally, surely your own history proves that.”

“You’ve read Earth history?” Brown was impressed, “You’re an interesting man, Major Rogan. Tell me, what do you think, are the chances of a rebellion

succeeding by force.”

“As it stands, not much, Your Excellency,” Rogan smiled,

“What about this intelligence?” Brown asked.

“There are rumours the rebels may have help from outside,” said Rogan. I expect you know.”

And Brown knew.

“I think this was not the first attempt on you, Your Excellency.”

“Oh! What do you know?”

“I’ve seen the footage from the Star Crest hotel. I know it was you who killed those men in the Star Crest.”

“Only two of them,” said Brown. “They killed the other one before they tried to get me.”

“Where’s the footage?” asked Brown.

“Well I’ve got the surveillance record from the hotel. I’ll take care of it,” said Rogan. “They were off-worlders, so not the concern of local police.”

“Thanks. I owe you one.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“A call has come through for you, Arbitrator,” the communication officer hailed him on his personal com. “It seems like a local call.”

“Who is it?”

“Won’t give a name, wants to speak directly to you. It’s about Mrs Davis.”

“Put a trace on the call,” said Brown. He waited a moment while the trace was put into action, and the comms officer had put the call through.

“Who is it?” he asked. “How can I help you?”

“Never mind who it is. Listen carefully, if you want to see Mrs Davis again,” said a man’s voice. Brown thought he could detect the sound of a little hiss in the voice, even though it was coming through a muffler to disguise it.

“I’m listening,” said Brown.

“Don’t bother trying to trace the call. It’s scrambled at source and being rerouted through several relay stations.”

“I wouldn’t dream of tracing it,” said Brown.

“Would you like to have Mrs Davis back?”

“I didn’t know we’d lost her,” said Brown.

He knew Mrs Davis was missing since she went out with Kirkan and so was he.

“Don’t be flippant,” hissed the voice. “We’ve kidnapped both her and Kirkan. You know Kirkan, the lizard-man.”

“Why have you kidnapped them?”

“We don’t like lizards on this planet.”

“So, why have you taken Mrs Davis?”

“She was with the lizard.”

“So what do you want from me to set them free?”

We can only let you have Mrs Davis. We’re keeping the lizard-man to deal with him ourselves.” There was menace in his voice.

“Be rational, tell me what you want and maybe we can do a deal,” said Brown.

“Maybe... so you don’t really care about Mrs Davis.”

“I didn’t say that, but let me warn you that it is normal EPA policy is not to deal with terrorists or to give in to ransom demands.” It was true, though Brown had an overriding thought: he was better off without Mrs Davis and Kirkan.

“All governments say that,” said the voice, “but in practice they do the opposite.”

“What are your demands?” asked Brown.

“We want the reporter Miss Lanzy,” said the man.

“Why do you want her?”

“That is our business. Do you want to exchange or not?”

Brown was sure Benson was listening in on the conversation. It was base protocol, he would have been automatically informed of the situation.

Brown had a suspicion that it was actually Kirkan he was talking to. He had noted at the press interview that Kirkan was fluent in Earthspeak 1, but the voice muffler meant he couldn’t be absolutely sure. It made sense though: it was in his interests to have Lanzy free. If Levita and Baccra were doing a deal to join forces to invade Pirrus, then Kirkan would be looking out for Lanzy.

“Like I said, the EPA doesn’t give in to ransom demands,” said Brown. “But say we did. How would you want to proceed?”

“Bring Miss Lanzy to the coordinates we’re going to give you. Come alone by yourself or no deal.”

“You must be joking,” said Brown. “You think I’m stupid.”

“Take it or leave it, but if you want to see Mrs Davis again, that’s the deal.”

“What are the coordinates?”

“Any sign of drones flying over and the deal is off.”

“How do I know Mrs Davis is still alive?”

“You can speak to her now. I’ll put her on.”

“Hello, Jim,” Mrs Davis sounded very weak. “We’ve been taken prisoner. Please help me.”

“That’s enough,” said the man, cutting her off.

“I’d like to see her. Put her on video.”

“I’m sure you’d like a lot of things, but it’s not going to happen. Do you want the coordinates or not?”

“Okay, let’s have them,” Brown resigned himself, but he was not sure he would go. He had to decide if Mrs Davis was expendable.

The coordinates came through and Brown noted them down. He checked them on his wrist display quickly to see if they were genuine.

“Be there 10.30 sharp,” rasped the voice. The line went dead.

The satellite image of the coordinates showed a derelict warehouse in a run-down part of the city. The building was fronted by a main road, with a network of alleyways leading from it on either side. It backed onto the yard of another warehouse which was accessible by another main road, which ran parallel and on the other side of the second building.

Brown’s communicator buzzed: it was Benson.

“Are you going to go?” Benson asked.

“I’m thinking about it.”

“It seems too risky to me,” said Benson, “but ultimately it’s your decision.”

“I suppose you never managed to trace the call?”

“Sorry, no luck, they were good.”

“I didn’t think the Pirussians had the technology to circumvent our surveillance systems.”

“They don’t, as far as I know,” said Benson.

“So this is an off-world group with more sophisticated technology.”

“It could be so,” agreed Benson.

“Have you checked if there are any alien vessels orbiting the planet at present?”

“No such information has come through from our space fleet.”

“How many ships have we got in orbit at present?” asked Brown.

“We’ve got a cruiser and three battleships,” said Benson. “Not enough to repel a full-scale invasion.”

“I’m not worried about an invasion at present, just if the call is coming from a ship we don’t know about.”

“I’ll contact Captain Peterson and see what they can do to locate any such vessel,” said Benson. “But it will be difficult if they’re cloaked.”

“Baccra does not have any cloaking technology, as far as I know, however I’m not sure of the Levitians,” said Brown.

“What about Mrs Davis? It’s only an hour to the deadline.”

“We’ll call their bluff and do nothing.”

“So you’re not going,” Benson almost sounded disappointed.

“I’m thinking about what to do,” said Brown.

“Meanwhile there’s a delegation from Levita on its way here. They say that

we're illegally detaining Miss Lanzy, since Levita is not at war with us."

"Now that is interesting," remarked Brown. "Try to put them off until tomorrow."

Brown was not sure what they were hoping to achieve, but he knew following the original instructions given by the abductors was suicide. They would have to release Miss Lanzy anyway if a delegation arrived from Levita, so it didn't make any sense to ask her to be released in exchange for Mrs Davis.

Brown became convinced that whoever this group demanding the exchange were, they were dangling Mrs Davis as bait, in the hope that he would show up and they could take him out. However, maybe he could just surprise them instead and turn things around.

"What are you thinking of doing?" asked Benson

"Nothing. If they really want to negotiate, they'll call again."

"Maybe we should organise a party to meet them with Miss Lanzy," suggested Benson.

"We're not going to meet them on their terms," Brown was adamant.

"But what about Mrs Davis? How can we rescue her?"

"She knew the risks when she came here. She's a war reporter. My decision is final," said Brown.

Benson nodded, but he didn't seem very happy.

"Meanwhile I need a team of four mandroids to go in ten minutes," Brown said again. "I've received a tip about something else."

"What tip?" Benson was surprised.

"About the whereabouts of Zedan. Maybe we can pick him up. I want to handle the bastard personally," lied Brown.

"Who's your informant and why do you need to go personally?"

"I have my own sources," Brown was annoyed at the direct questioning.

"It's the girl, isn't it?"

"If you think she's going to report on her own fiancé, you're getting too old for the job," retorted Brown.

"Where is it you're going?" asked Benson.

"I want to keep the location a secret, until I meet with my source," Brown lied again.

Up to now he had implicitly trusted Benson, but recently he had noticed a reluctance on his part to fulfil Brown's orders. Also the failure by him to find

any information about the whereabouts of Mrs Davis and Kirkan was beginning to worry him.

“Don’t you trust me?” asked Benson.

“Of course, but this is something I want to handle personally. He did try to kill me after all. You don’t think I’m going to forget that, do you?”

Benson hung up and Brown rang the communication officer.

“Can you connect me on a secure channel to Captain Peterson? I need a word with him.”

* * *

The flying craft set down in the backyard of the adjacent warehouse almost noiselessly. Brown and the four mandroids emerged and surveyed the scene. The warehouse was still in use, unlike the one where the exchange was to take place, but there was no sign of life.

They waited until it was almost half an hour after the appointed time of exchange. Brown wanted them to think there was nobody coming. He ordered one of the mandroids to cut a hole through the wall with a plasma torch. Once completed in a few minutes, Brown sent in three of the mandroids. Brown followed their progress with virtual reality goggles, which fed him the view from their eyes.

The backyard of the other warehouse seemed to be clear and the mandroids made it to the backdoor without any incident. Brown ordered the door to be blasted open and for them to enter the warehouse. The mandroids had orders to shoot on sight anybody they found there, except Mrs Davis and Kirkan, who were to be taken alive if found.

They encountered resistance as soon as they entered and drew fire from the other side of the building. However the mandroids were well prepared for this as they could pick up the heat signatures of the people in the building.

There were three people in the warehouse. Two were up on the second level and one on the ground level, whose heat signature was quite different from the ones upstairs.

That’s Kirkan, thought Brown, as the two figures upstairs made a dash for the ground floor to join him, once they realised the presence of the mandroids. The mandroids brought them down before they reached Kirkan, who was holed up in a corner behind some old redundant machinery.

Brown decided to go in, carefully avoiding being caught in the open as he entered the building. The firing from the three mandroids was keeping the third person pinned down.

“I know it’s you, Kirkan,” shouted Brown. “You’re surrounded on all sides, so give yourself up or you’ll be killed like your friends.”

“You’re not going to take me alive.” It was definitely Kirkan’s voice.

“So it is you. You’ve decide to show your hand at last.”

“You decided to come after all. We were expecting you from the front.”

“Where’s Mrs Davis?”

“I didn’t bring her. This was meant to be a surprise for you.”

“Maybe the surprise is on you, then.”

“You think yourself very clever, don’t you? Where’s Miss Lanzy?”

“I didn’t bring her, either. You might as well give up now.”

“You’re not going to take me alive.”

“So what was your plan? You thought I would show up with Lanzy and you would shoot me and grab her.”

“You will find out soon, as will the rest of the planet. Tell me, are you enjoying life here?”

Brown’s highly attuned sense of intuition kicked in: an alarm bell rang in his head. He needed to get out of there urgently. Without alerting Kirkan he ordered the mandroids to make for the door after him.

“I’ll enjoy it more as soon as I get you. We’re coming for you now,” shouted Brown as he moved the opposite way to the back door.

“I didn’t take you to be that stupid,” said Kirkan. “Though I did expect a frontal assault, however, now that you’re here this will have to do.”

“I wanted to ask you something,” said Brown. He wanted to keep Kirkan talking as he moved as fast as he could towards the door. He had an inkling what Kirkan was up to.

“Sorry, you’re out of time,” said Kirkan.

Brown ordered a mandroid to lob a stun grenade at Kirkan, and dived for the door. The first explosion had already started on the other side of the building. Brown scrambled through the door, followed by two of the mandroids, but the third didn’t make it out. More charges started going off. Brown ran for the flyer, followed by his two surviving mandroids. He was seriously out of breath. By the time he reached the car, his whole body was screaming in pain. As the vehicle took off and cleared the wall of the

backyard, they could see the whole building was beginning to collapse. Brown had a funny feeling that they would not find Kirkan's body in the rubble.

So that had been his plan. If they could not take him out during the so-called exchange, they would try to lure Brown and his forces into the warehouse and then blow up the building. However, Kirkan had been expecting a frontal assault with a much larger force. Therefore, it was the front of the building that was heavily booby-trapped. It was just sheer luck that Brown and his mandroids were near the back door and so managed to get out. Brown thanked his intuition for saving him again.

The building would have to be cleared later and the third mandroid recovered. It would probably be heavily damaged but salvageable. They were difficult things to kill. Kirkan had most likely already escaped through the sewers of the building or a tunnel. By the time they managed to get the equipment to survey the tunnel, he would be long gone, disappearing into the multitudes in the city.

* * *

There was some unexpected good news when he got back. There had been another call to the base when nobody had showed up at the rendezvous as directed. The EPA spaceships had been waiting for the call and they had managed to triangulate a cloaked spaceship and had fired on it.

The ship had been damaged, but had managed to escape by making the jump into hyperspace. Brown assumed it was a Levitian ship. So they had cloaking technology. They were making such rapid progress that soon they would be challenging Earth for supremacy in Space.

Brown was happy, the threat of invasion was receding. Soon he would be able to wrap up things in Pirrus and be on his way to Earth and his long awaited renewal.

When he reached the security room, Benson was waiting for him. He gave Brown a funny look back at the base, when he asked him to send out a detail to recover the mandroid.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to the rendezvous?" Benson was furious.

"I wanted to keep things as quiet as possible," Brown forced a smile. "You

would have insisted on a much bigger force and with more equipment.”

“That would’ve made more sense,” protested Benson.

“But that is what they were expecting,” said Brown.

“How do you know that?” Benson was incredulous.

“It doesn’t matter. Kirkan was there. I spoke to him,” said Brown.

“He was there?” Benson looked surprised.

“His heat signature gave him away. Being a lizard, his profile is totally different from us mammals. Once I told him, he owned up.”

“And Mrs Davis? Where was she?”

“Not there, of course. It was a ruse to get us into the building, so that they could blow it up around us.”

“Looks like they’re desperate to get you. They almost succeeded,” sneered Benson. He clearly didn’t like the thought of being left out of the loop.

“Ah, but they didn’t and we have a result. We’ve located a cloaked Levitian spaceship,” Brown smiled. “They were routing their calls through the spaceship so they couldn’t be traced.”

“You didn’t tell me about that either,” quipped Benson, “and I’m your intelligence officer.

“Didn’t have time,” lied Brown

“Anyway, how do you know it was a Levitian spaceship?”

“We have it on very strong authority that Baccrans don’t possess cloaking technology.”

“But it doesn’t mean the ship was Levitian,” argued Benson

“I would bet my life on it,” said Brown.

“So what about their delegation tomorrow, coming to see you about Miss Lanzy’s release.”

“They can go to hell. We’re going to hold her.”

“It’s going to cause a diplomatic incident. Are you sure that the EPA is going to like it?”

“I don’t care, I’m in charge here.”

Brown didn’t mention that he knew that there was leakage of information from the base. He was going to find out and fervently hoped it was not Benson.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The prisoner interrogation was going nowhere. The information supplied was virtually useless. There was Lanzy, of course, but Benson seemed very sure that her knowledge of operations was very limited and she was just another cog doing her part.

Yes, it had been a frustrating day going through the records with Benson and Major Rogan, who was a good man but maybe not cut out for the seedy world of counter-insurgency. He seemed too honest to bend the rules and Brown needed results fast if he was going to stay on top of things: if he was going to survive.

The next test results on Brown's health were rather inconclusive. He showed no further signs of improvement according to the doctor, in fact his health was on a downward trajectory again. His heart had stopped swelling; his lungs were functioning better and so were his kidneys, but he was still dying slowly. At this rate he would survive longer than he was originally going to, maybe even a few months more, but the doctor wasn't sure. The doctor had warned him that there would be good days and bad days, but a quick repeat of the treatment would be too dangerous.

Brown needed relief and in some strange way his dreams were just that, though they were more like nightmares. He was escaping into his past, which nevertheless had a calming effect and was becoming more addictive than the drug itself. A chapter in his life he had cast aside totally was now unfolding again in fantastic detail. Perhaps subconsciously he was seeking a clue to his existence that would unlock his life. The dreams seemed to be leading him in that direction and he needed to delve further into it. Brown reached for the injector.

* * *

He was back on Levita.

He tried to move but his head hurt. Ito was standing over him and another man who he recognised as the manager of the complex was kneeling next to him on the floor. The man injected him with something, and his whole body

started burning.

“Ah, sleeping beauty, waking up at last, for a while I thought I had hit you too hard,” Ito laughed.

Brown was in a dimly lit, dingy room. He tried to move again, but to no avail. Whatever they had injected him with was taking effect immediately and he could not move a muscle.

“I think it’s taken effect, he can’t move,” the other man said.

“How long will it last?” asked Ito.

“Several hours, long enough for us to finish our job. I’ve given him enough to stop a large animal.”

“But he can hear me alright?”

“Of course. That’s the beauty of it. He can feel pain, but he won’t be able to move a muscle.”

“Just the way I want it,” laughed Ito as he kicked Brown hard in his stomach.

Brown winched, at least he wanted to, but his facial muscles were totally immobile. The man and Ito bellowed with laughter.

“So you thought you’d just come here and steal my girlfriend did you?” Ito kicked him again. “Well your fate was sealed the day you met her.”

Brown looked at him. The pain was unbearable, some tears spilled out from his eyes. At least they weren’t going to get his money.

“Oh! I bet you’re thinking, why are they doing this? They haven’t got the money yet,” said Ito as if reading his thoughts.

What’s happening, have I totally miscalculated? Brown thought. He had thought he would be totally safe until he parted with the money and the trip would be of no danger to him.

“Are you sure you’re going to get the money?” the other man asked.

“The director of the bank is arranging it right at this moment. It will be in my account as soon as I get back to Central City and tell him the coast is clear.”

Brown couldn’t believe his ears. So they had it in for him as soon as the money had arrived in the bank.

“Why don’t we get rid of him now?” asked the other man.

“No, that’s too easy for him. I want him to suffer. You will deliver him outside the perimeter so the tribe can have him. It’s about time we fed them some live meat again.”

“You think of everything.”

“You’re in touch with them?”

“Of course. Actually I’m delivering some supplies to them today. They’ll get a nice surprise.”

“And you’re going to get a nice surprise,” Ito spoke to Brown again. “Well actually quite a nasty one, when they chop you up limb by limb to eat you raw.”

“Well they are a bit more civilised these days, they will roast him first.”

“I’ll be on my way then, if you’re sure you can take care of things here.”

“No problem, leave it to me. I’ll take him out there once you’ve taken off.”

Ito looked at Brown and smiled.

“Any last words for your girlfriend then?” Ito asked Brown. “Oh! Sorry I forgot you can’t move your lips and it’s my girlfriend.” They both laughed.

“What will I do with his things?” the man asked.

“Leave them on him, if anybody looks for him they’ll find them in the jungle. They can’t blame us if he wandered off, can they?”

“Will anybody look for him?”

“I doubt it, but just in case.”

Ito left with the man and in a short while he heard the aircraft taking off. A little later, the man came back and carried Brown to a land vehicle, outside in the compound. They hadn’t bothered tying his hands as there was no need for it.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes to take you to your final destination. Until then you’re going nowhere, friend,” said the man and dumped Brown face down on the open back of the vehicle, which also contained numerous sacks. Brown guessed they contained provisions for the local tribe to keep them sweet, to stop them head-hunting any workers.

As Brown lay there he suddenly realised that there was some feeling coming back to his fingers and toes. That was strange, because the dosage they had given him would knock out an ox. That was what the man had said and was the reason why they had not bothered tying his hands, but somehow he was recovering rather quickly. They must have miscalculated the dosage, there was no other explanation. Brown started wriggling his fingers and toes like mad to accelerate the return of feeling in his muscles. If he could get away before the man got back he could escape.

However, he was out of luck: the man returned soon and after a cursory

check on Brown, got into the cab and drove off. Brown still couldn't move much but he concentrated hard to overcome his disability. Slowly but surely he began to move more and more, until suddenly he found he could move his hands. Brown checked the inside of his wrist: yes, his miniature hidden gun was still there. They hadn't found it. Most likely they hadn't even bothered looking for anything. Everything was still in his pockets except his packet of mints, but he needed that badly if he was going to have any chance of being picked up.

Half an hour went by and slowly he was beginning to feel his legs. Another fifteen minutes later the vehicle stopped at a clearing in the forest. They had reached their destination. Brown could hear voices. The man got out and greeted somebody in a strange dialect. The voices approached the back of the vehicle. Brown was ready.

When the man turned Brown over, Brown shot him in the face. The man crumpled silently, he was so surprised he didn't have time to scream. He also shot the tribal man with him, who was shocked long enough, though it was just a second, for Brown to shoot him, too. He went down with a loud shriek. There were two other tribal men behind, who turned in total panic and ran away, screaming. Brown jumped down from the vehicle, with some difficulty, assessing the situation as he did so. His years of training had kicked in.

He ran his hands through the dead man's pocket and retrieved his packet of mints and the vehicle's keys. He also retrieved a weapon from the man's belt. His own gun was a very short-range weapon so the other one would be more useful. There was a group of tribal men and women not too far away, who were beginning to regroup. They would be back very soon, so there was no time to waste. Brown jumped into the cab of the vehicle and drove off back in the direction they had come from. He looked at the satellite navigation system and headed towards the river. He was going to follow it until he reached civilisation.

Brown could hear other vehicles starting up. Sure enough in the rearview camera screen he could make out two vehicles following him. Strange, he thought, even cannibals had motorised vehicles. They also had guns and they were firing at him.

Brown did not bother firing back but concentrated on his driving. If he could get out of the clearing and get into the forest he had a chance. Some

bullets were beginning to hit the vehicle. Luckily for him they only had primitive weapons and not state-of-the-art pulse weapons like his. At last he made it out of the clearing and into the forest. The tree cover would give him a chance. He soon noticed that there was only one vehicle still following him. The other one had veered off and he could not see it any more.

Well at least that evens the odds a bit more, thought Brown. He was getting nearer to the river. The track he was on bypassed the mining complex and meandered a bit until it reached the river, but just before he reached it there was the other track which joined it from the left. Too late he realised that it was in fact a short cut from the clearing he had escaped from. As he neared the junction the missing vehicle turned onto the track and came directly at him.

Brown took aim at the oncoming driver and fired. He was a good shot and did not miss. The long burst from the pulse gun shattered the windscreen of the oncoming vehicle and made a big hole in the driver, but the vehicle kept on coming. As there seemed no possibility of avoiding a collision, Brown slowed and jumped. He hit the ground hard and rolled, then ran for cover amongst the trees.

His vehicle collided head-on with the other. A few bodies were flung out and some jumped of their own accord. Brown didn't hang around to look. He ran towards the river, which by his estimation was half a mile or so away. He was a good swimmer, if he could just make it to the other side he had a sporting chance of survival.

He could hear the other car that was following him pull up. People were shouting and some of them were moving towards him. Brown hoped they would not be able to follow him in the other vehicle as he was now travelling off track. He had a small head start but he was up against people who lived in these jungles and could most likely travel faster than himself.

Though he was not as fit as when he had left the service, he was still in fairly good shape and made good progress. It was tempting to stop and ambush some of his pursuers but he knew it would be the wrong strategy. His only option was to run as fast as he could towards the river.

The ground was fairly dry underneath feet but he still left tracks. Luckily for him the bushes covering the ground were sparsely situated and he could easily run through on a fairly straight line without deviating too much. However, this also meant that his pursuers would be moving just as fast, if

not faster.

After about half an hour of running Brown could see the river, but he could also hear the chasing group getting closer. They were a noisy lot so he could hear them but not understand them. Then suddenly he heard a shot and a bullet whip past him, too close for comfort. Brown dived for cover and looked back and as the first man broke cover and ran towards him Brown took careful aim and shot him. The man flung his arms up and fell to the ground with a shriek, but it also had the effect of slowing the others. Brown got up and ran. He was close, very close to the river.

As Brown neared it he came across another track which ran parallel to the river he saw the first vehicle that had been chasing him earlier was barrelling along the track. It resembled a small truck and there was a man standing on the back looking for him. Brown had no time to waste, he broke cover on the run firing at the man and the vehicle. The man dived for cover and the vehicle drove off as it was hit. Brown could not be sure if he managed to hit any of the occupants or not.

Whipping his boots off, Brown waded into the water. The river was about a hundred yards wide. The distance in itself was not a problem for him, but the current was swift and would present a challenge. Behind him, on the other side of the track, he could see people were beginning to emerge from the forest. Securing the gun in his belt and his packet of mints in a pocket with a flap Brown dived in and swam for his life.

Very soon bullets were whistling past him. Brown dived down into the water and swam underwater as far as he could, but reached a point where he had to surface for air. He was about a third of the way across. As he was about to dive again, a bullet hit him. It grazed his right temple, knocking him close to unconsciousness.

Brown struggled but could not hold the air in. He was going down, drowning, desperate to breathe. He began swallowing water and tried to surface, but was sinking deeper. Brown lost consciousness.

* * *

Something stirred in his brain. He wasn't dead; was he dreaming? The current had taken hold of him and he was drifting downstream, in suspended animation several feet below the surface. Brown started coughing, his lungs

were expelling water, somehow he was breathing underwater, very laboured but nevertheless his body was beginning to respond.

The coughing fit subsided and he started swimming. He felt very strange, as if his body was going through a change. He was gliding through the water, slowly at first and then faster and faster. His hands and feet felt very different as if they had elongated and were webbed. There was also a strange pain in his back, something was straining at his clothes as it grew out of his body and then his clothes gave away and he could feel them rip.

Now he was really motoring, he was swimming at an amazing speed, heading downriver. He surfaced a mile or two further down to get his bearing. Yes, he was a long way from where he had entered the water.

Brown swam on until he was in sight of the town about fifty miles downriver, and came out of the water at a secluded spot. He had to crawl out of the water and up the bank. He felt quite tired and lay down under some bushes to rest. Unconsciousness took him again.

When he came to it was dark. He sat up with a start and looked at his hands and feet, which looked just as they always had been, but he could feel a cool breeze on his back. When he put his hand on his back, he could feel there was a tear in the garment he was wearing. He took it off: there was a long slit right down the middle.

It was all very strange, he had the distinct impression that he had changed shape and swam down the river to the spot where he sat. But, had all that really happened or had he just, by some stroke of luck, washed up ashore? And how had he recovered so quickly from the immobilising drug? He didn't have time to dwell on it for long, he had to get back to Central City.

Brown had lost both his weapons but found his packet of mints were still in his pocket. He brushed off the water and made the call. He felt great, almost as if he was renewed. Revenge was waiting.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was nearly morning when Brown got back to Central City. He didn't bother going back to his flat in case he bumped into Narissa, but instead booked into a hotel recommended and paid for by Max. The next morning he met up with the AI in the same café he had first met him.

"Thanks for all you're doing for me," said Brown, after the initial greeting formalities. Brown was not sure if all the usual expressions of greetings and gratitude was strictly necessary, as Max was a machine, but went ahead with it anyway in case Max actually had feelings.

"Think nothing of it. In any case you're paying for it," said Max matter-of-factly. "Have you thought of your next course of action? I have a fair inkling what it is going to be."

"Why do you ask then?"

"I was hoping to dissuade you from that course of action as it will only cause you further problems."

"So if you think revenge is not a good idea? I should just let things drop and go back to Earth."

"It would be a more prudent course of action."

"I don't think I will be able to get my money back. They will try to kill me again if I come out into the open. As I've killed several people already, I don't think I'll get a fair hearing in the courts either."

"You could just walk away and start again with the EPA, after all you won't be so badly off."

"No I just can't do that."

"I guessed as much," smiled Max. He took a package out from his case and forwarded it to Brown. "Your new I.D. and interplanetary credits. You're booked on a flight to Earth in two days on a freighter. They can't extradite you from there."

"Thank you again. You're a bit of a mind reader."

"Sign this paper. We'll try to take care of your apartment, if it is not seized by the government here, once things come out."

Brown signed the piece of paper forwarded by Max.

“You know you will be arrested on Earth if you go ahead with this course of action. Sorry but I can’t help you there.”

“I’ll take my chances, thanks,” said Brown.

“Well there’s not much more to be said. By the way, did you manage to work out how you survived earlier?”

“I think I was lucky, they must’ve used the wrong dosage on me and somehow I must’ve just washed ashore where I did.”

“You don’t recollect anything else?”

“Well I have a vague recollection of turning into some kind of a marine animal, but it must’ve been the drugs or the bullet grazing my head.”

“I see,” said Max. He was a man of few words.

“Well it’s ridiculous, don’t you think? Anyway I’m glad I survived,” said Brown.

“Strange things happen. Anyway if you visit the jewellery shop again, they will help you with what you need. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye and thanks again.”

“Remember we can’t help you on Earth.”

Max left the meeting. Brown waited a few minutes and then made his way to the jewellery shop immediately. He didn’t have time to waste, if he was departing in two days.

A little later that day Brown left the jewellers shop well equipped. In addition to the concealed wrist weapon he had first acquired, he also had a more conventional weapon.

He had been at a loss to figure out how he had lost the original one as it had been strapped to his arm, but didn’t waste much time trying to figure it out, he was busy planning his next course of action. He wanted to find out if there was any chance of getting his money back as it would have been most likely transferred from his account by now.

He had also acquired another tracking device from the shop and decided to find out where Narissa was, providing she was still wearing the necklace or the earrings. She was at her father’s house, Brown decided to visit the place that evening. He was completely sure that they wouldn’t be expecting him to return.

However, when he checked later on, she had moved, she was now at Ito’s place. He decided he would drop in there early the following morning.

* * *

The next day, on the way to Ito's, he dropped in on a fancy dress shop he knew, to pick up a cap and some dark clothing to pass off as a delivery man. Soon afterwards with a fake packet in his hands and after putting on some dark glasses, with the cap pulled down to hide his face, he pressed the buzzer in Ito's door. He hoped Ito wouldn't recognise him from his image on the security screen.

"I wasn't expecting any pack –" Ito began.

"Surprise!" Brown showed him the nozzle of the gun under the package and motioned him into the house, closing the door behind himself.

"How did you survive? I got word you had drowned."

"It would be better for you if I had."

"You're here to kill me I suppose. You left quite a mess behind you."

"They were trying to kill me."

"How did you manage to escape?"

"It's a long story. I haven't got time for that right now."

"What do you want? Maybe we can work something out."

"I want my money back, if you want to live. Before that where's Narissa?"

"She's sleeping upstairs"

"Let's not disturb her. Call your friend the Director of the bank and ask him to come here."

"He won't come here."

"If he doesn't, you die right now."

"I will try," Ito's face was totally expressionless, Brown couldn't guess what was going through his mind. He would have made a good poker player, maybe he already was, if they played poker in Levita. The game had survived on Earth.

"Good. No tricks please, I've nothing to lose."

Ito rang the banker, keeping the conversation to a minimum. There were some details that needed clearing up and would be better discussed away from the bank.

"It'll take him an hour to get here," said Ito after finishing the call.

"See it wasn't that difficult. Let's go and wake Narissa."

"Follow me," said Ito, still expressionless. *He is probably still trying to work out how I survived*, thought Brown.

They went towards the stairs and Ito started to go up, but as Brown stepped on the first step, Ito kicked him in the stomach with a back kick. As Brown fell back, Ito grabbed Brown's gun hand and the gun went flying as they both crashed to the floor. As they both tried to get up, Ito's weight advantage was beginning to tell. Brown punched Ito but he just shrugged it off and punched him back. Brown was still exhausted and weak from his ordeal during the last couple of days and reeled from the blow. Ito punched him again and then dived for the gun.

As Ito recovered the gun and turned with it, Brown shot him in the chest with the other gun on his wrist. It all played out in slow motion in front of Brown's eyes, the surprise on Ito's face was palpable as the gun dropped from his hand and he fell backwards on the floor.

Narissa appeared on the top of the stairs, she had heard the commotion. Brown picked up the other gun and motioned her to come downstairs.

Disbelief showed in her face as she came down the stairs, she was crying.

"You're alive," she said, "Thank God."

"Yes, no thanks to you."

"Is he dead?"

"Quite. He made the mistake of underestimating me."

"I suppose you want to kill me now," Narissa looked resigned to her fate.

"You think I should?"

"You probably think I deserve it, but I did try to warn you when I found out that he wanted to murder you. Believe it or not that wasn't in our original plan."

"I suppose you were going to settle down with me," Brown smiled.

"That wasn't in the plans either, but, believe it or not, I did want to."

"You expect me to believe that? I've only been gone two days and already you're back shacking up with Ito."

"It's not what it looks like. I came to plead for your life, when I heard Ito was back, but he told me you had drowned trying to escape. I told Ito I wasn't going back to him."

"You could just be making up the story to save your own skin."

"Can't you see that I've been crying? I've been regretting my involvement in this matter for quite a while and tried to stop things but without success."

Brown could see that her face was indeed a bit puffed up.

"My father and I, we just wanted your money, but I became involved and

Ito became jealous. He threatened us.”

“How were you going to get away with it?”

“We knew your money was an illegal stash, once the mine went bankrupt, if you tried to make a fuss the government would’ve deported you.”

“So there are no diamonds.”

“There’s some, but not commercially viable, otherwise we wouldn’t need your money.”

“Great.”

“So what do we do now?”

“The director of the bank is coming here. According to Ito he’s transferred the money to Ito’s account.”

“Maybe he can transfer it back.”

“You think so? That was the original idea, but now with Ito dead who knows.”

The buzzer rang.

“That must be him, you open the door and ask him in. Help me move Ito first.”

Narissa went to open the door and invite the man in, after they moved Ito out of the way. As the man entered, Brown slammed the door behind him.

“Let’s go in there, you too, Narissa.”

The man recognised Brown and surprise showed on his face.

“I thought you were...”

“Dead.”

“I didn’t say that,” the man protested.

“You helped Ito in his crooked deal by transferring my money.”

“Where is Ito?”

“He’s not here.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I want my money back.”

“I can’t do anything from here. If you let me go I will take care of it when I get back to the bank”

“Why don’t you try now? Call your bank and give instructions.”

“I want to talk to Ito.”

“He’s dead and so will you be if you don’t do as I say.”

“Alright I’ll make the call.” The man said reluctantly.

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a phone and dialled a

number, but instead of giving instructions to the other person he shouted out what Brown did not want to hear.

“Help, help, I’m being held prisoner —”

Brown shot him before he could say anything more and grabbed Narissa by the arm, she was in a state of shock.

“Get your things, be quick, we’ve got to get out of here.”

They left shortly afterwards after Brown wiped any evidence as best as he could and deleted all recordings on the door entry device, before switching it off. Some distance away, he asked Narissa for her phone, which he smashed up and threw into a rubbish disposal machine.

“In case they try to trace you.”

“Did you have to kill him?” Narissa sounded desperate.

“It was him or me, you saw what happened. He was complicit in the whole thing. I gave him a chance, but he blew it.”

“You won’t get your money back now,” Narissa stated the obvious, she looked at a loss about the whole situation.

“No chance of that. I should make your step-father pay for it as well.”

“Haven’t you killed enough people? I suppose you’ll kill me as well.”

“If I was going to do that I would have done it back there and left you with them.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“I’m just going to hold you until I leave for Earth tomorrow.”

“And my step-father?”

“I’m thinking about it. As you say, maybe I’ve done enough killing already.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Brown woke up with a headache. Somehow he was sure there would be no more dreams. He felt very confused about what the message was in those dreams. Was his subconscious trying to tell him something? He had a vivid recollection of his last dream but the others were fading. Why had he relived his life in Levita and not some other period of his life?

However, he was still not sure how he had survived the river in his dream, he just remembered that he had felt great afterwards. Brown was not clear about what else exactly had happened; did he actually change shape or had he just thought that because he had been grazed by a bullet and the elation was the result of surviving his ordeal? Of course he remembered what happened next. How he had taken his revenge and then got out of the clutches of the Levitian government by escaping to Earth, from where he could not be extradited.

But as Max had warned him, he had ended up in prison for ten years for tax evasion. It had been a very harsh fifteen-year maximum sentence for the crime of hoarding secret off-world funds and not for the killings he had carried out on Levita. Most probably it had been meted out by the EPA under a great deal of pressure from Levita. The sentence had been commuted to ten years on his acceptance of the job in Pirrus.

* * *

That morning Brown had other things on his plate. He needed to see the scientists working on the disc found on the humanoid which had been immobilised by Zedan.

He received bad news on that score. They had not found any answers to the problem. All they could say was that it was a short-range weapon, which would only work if actually stuck on the body of a mandroid. Brown instructed them to come up with something that would stop the discs sticking to the mandroids.

This worried Brown, for he was sure that the Baccran scientists would sooner or later find a way to neutralise the mandroids from a distance. They

had come up with this weapon within such a short time after the mandroids were introduced to the planet. That was what worried him, for there definitely had to be a leak from within the organisation for this to happen.

He was pondering on whether to order security checks on the personnel who had access to such information when the intercom buzzed and he was told Gina wanted to see him urgently. She had returned to the base.

He made a mental note to send the disc off to the main laboratories on Earth, if his own scientists came up with nothing in the next couple of days. He decided that he would see Benson about the security problems himself after seeing what Gina wanted.

Brown had already ordered the release of all other prisoners except for the three he wanted interrogated, including Lara. He made his way to his quarters to find out what was up.

He was met by a very distraught Gina who was pacing up and down the room anxiously.

“My father is in great danger. I must warn him. But I cannot locate him anywhere.”

“Why should he be in any danger? We are not trying to arrest him.”

“It is not you, but Zedan, I fear. For if he guessed that it was I who warned you in the club, then he may take it out on Father. I overheard their conversation and warned you at the club, but he may think my father deliberately told me everything.”

“In that case you won’t be very safe either. The man’s a maniac.”

“He will try to hurt me through my father.”

“You will both be safer under protective custody. I’ll send some men to bring him here immediately.”

Brown used the intercom and gave some orders. “Well that’s done.”

“I am in your debt.”

“Why don’t you stay here till we find your father?”

“That won’t be necessary. My father may be looking for me, but I’ll come back if you find him and bring him here. Thanks again.”

“It is nothing. I only wish I could do something to guarantee your safety. If you wish to leave this place you must keep the mandroid with you at all times. The last time I tried you rejected my offer.”

“Yes, but I will take up your offer this time,” she said.

The girl was obviously too proud to accept too much help from him, but he

could sense that she was in danger. There was only one way to watch her at all times for the next few days. He ordered the mandroid to shadow her at all times. He hoped that this would be enough to thwart any danger to her.

Brown called for a drink and relaxed. He had a lot to do. The festival of Durkali had been in full swing the last few days. He had to wind that up smoothly and then go through all the collected and processed data. It was a dreary job and he was not looking forward to it. But what was topmost in his mind was the fact that there was a security leak and he had to find the source quickly and deal with it, before it destroyed him.

After having his drink he went to see Benson. He wanted to go through the files of all EPA personnel himself, to try and spot any information which was incriminatory at all.

Benson was very surprised when he mentioned the leak. There had been no concrete evidence to point to that. He had been surprised himself when he had thought of it, but now he felt sure that there had to be a leak. The mandroids were top secret, but within days of his landing on the planet already somebody was making up weapons to immobilise them.

Somebody within the organisation was sending out the vital information needed to achieve this. His first thought was that it must be a scientist to have access to such information. But he discounted this: the scientists were always under surveillance.

Luckily there was very little information available locally regarding the working of mandroids. They had to be sent back to Earth for any repairs other than routine maintenance. But even such schedules were informative and could give valuable assistance to an enemy if they fell into their hands.

Brown gave Benson strict instructions that nobody was to know about the leak and ordered him to set up the system for him to have a look at the files when he came back from the festival. He was due to make an appearance there the next day as was customary for the head of government at the end of each such festival.

It was still at full flow the next day, which was the final day of the festival. A great carnival had replaced prayers in front of the idol, which still shimmered darkly in the glow of the torchlight.

The artificial lighting in the dome had been darkened to give a twilight atmosphere surrounding the idol. Torches had been lit just as in an authentic evening under the Pirrusian sky, where such festivities would historically

have taken place. There were artificial stars shining on the ceiling of the dome to represent the Pirrusian sky. Thus it gave a perpetual evening atmosphere in which the festivities carried on without pause for the two days after the saying of the prayers.

On parts of the floor, local merchants had been commissioned to set up stalls offering all kinds of things, from food to entertainment, free to the people. There were also shops where trinkets and ornaments could be bought.

The acrobats were in full swing, doing their stuff for the crowds, while singers and poets sang the praises and glories of Durkali.

Brown made his way to the ringed area where the priests were. It was strange and primitive as people danced under the influence of drugs hour after hour, around the idol, while others milled about watching the performers. It stirred strange primitive instincts within him. It was so different from anything that happened on Earth, where civilisation had claimed its toll on such archaic practices centuries ago.

In a few minutes the statue would be moved slowly out of the dome, pulled by the people towards its last destination.

When Brown reached the priests, a very large gong sounded, deadening the surrounding noise. Then it sounded again and again, not once or twice but ten times. All activities began to wind down and then stopped. The juggler stopped juggling, the high-wire walkers stopped walking and the dancers stopped dancing. This was the traditional signal to end the festivities.

The stars above began to fade slowly until they melted away into the ceiling. Slowly, like dawn breaking, the light became brighter and brighter as the dome became more and more transparent, and the daylight came in from outside to show a bright sunny day.

The people, who had been standing transfixed and watching the dome, suddenly rushed forward. They all wanted to be one of the rope pullers of Durkali. The fires were still burning, but the statue could now once again be seen in bright daylight. It stood out magnificently on a platform on wheels.

Ropes had been fixed to the front and back of the platform and people were fighting to get hold of these.

According to custom, the statue had to be pulled through the streets with the priests chanting around it until they reached the sacred site. Here the statue would be ritually broken up except for the metal parts, which would be used in the next year's statue.

Before the statue was moved away, it was customary for the arbitrator to give a speech to wind up the proceedings. That was why Brown was there. He was acutely aware of the danger he was in, when he climbed the platform next to the statue. If anybody wanted to assassinate him, they would never have a better chance. The crowd had been infiltrated with mandroids and security agents, but if any of Zedan's gang were still lurking in the crowd, it would be difficult for them to miss. But he had to do it.

However, the speech passed without incident and the crowd started moving with the statue. The people who had managed to get hold of the ropes in front started to pull. The others held the back ropes slack. They were only to be used to hold the statue back when they travelled downhill and in this way the people pulling in front were saved from being crushed under the wheels of the platform.

Most of the people who joined the procession were packed and ready and some had made other arrangements. As the wheels started rolling, the procession became more than a mile long, winding its way out of the dome and into the streets. It would have been so much easier to use a traction motor to move the statue, but this ancient ritual still held. Like his predecessors, the present arbitrator marvelled at the sight before him. Somehow the primitiveness of it all enthralled him.

* * *

Brown made his way back to the EPA headquarters to the bad news that was awaiting him. He was still thinking of the procession when he was told that the officers who had gone to pick up Gina's father, Zalamus, had come back empty-handed. The house was a wreck; there had been some sort of struggle and the old man was missing. The neighbours had shut up like clams at the sight of the EPA patrol. The local police were now investigating the matter.

Brown cursed himself for not anticipating the situation beforehand but there was nothing to be done. He did not know what he was going to tell Gina, who had been depending on him. Though Zalamus had originally been involved in the plot to kill him in the club, they now suspected him of colluding with Brown. The question now was whether they would stop at Zalamus? Gina had been sure that Zedan would not harm her. But how could she be so sure? He would have to do something to prevent it. But what?

He doubled the surveillance on the girl with orders to keep in touch constantly with the EPA headquarters. That was the only thing he could do. They were to contact him instantly if any attempts were made on the girl. If he could stop them there, he would have a lead to Zedan and possibly Kirkan. He gave strict orders that nobody other than he was to be informed if something did come up. He was not sure of the leak, but if something came up he would be better off if as few as possible people knew about his movements. Satisfied with the arrangements, he went off to the data rooms to have a look at the personnel files. But somehow he was sure it would be a futile search.

Brown felt the pressure as things were slipping fast. He was not controlling events as he would like to have done. He thought about the speech he had made earlier in the festival hall. How he as arbitrator was looking forward to peace and prosperity in the planet. How he would bring law and order and would deal severely with anybody who tried to disrupt the government, things which he himself only half believed in.

He went through the files slowly. He had done it before many times. He knew the background of the men in key positions by heart. Their weaknesses, their strength, he had to know them to command them well. That had always been his secret: to know his men and he prided himself for that. That is why he was sure he would not find anything in the files.

He was looking for things like ancestral descent, if parents or grandparents were from other planets or if a man had anti-Earth sympathies before joining the service. Not all the EPA servicemen were from Earth now. The higher ranks still consisted mostly of many people from Earth. And inevitably as the service expanded, the lower ranks were being recruited from allied peoples in the Earth's solar system and other Earth colonies in other solar systems. A certain amount of alien blood slipped in as a result of intermarriages with natives, where it was actually physically compatible. Actually it had been very surprising to Earth's diaspora when they started branching out to other planets to find how many of those planets were dominated by bipeds. It seemed that the essential thing required for development of a species was the use of hands to hold tools and then the development of the brain. It was, therefore, more normal that such species usually emerged from tree dwellers who were more likely to use their forelegs as arms.

These people did not always have five fingers on their hands and were

often of very differing height and build. But it seemed it was no accident that most were two-legged creatures, and on the whole, it was amazing that there was so much similarity between races on different planets of similar size and atmosphere.

In the beginning, the people from Earth had tried to enforce a racial purity, but due to one circumstance or other, the rules had invariably broken down wherever it was possible for sexual relations to take place between races.

Only when planets were newly colonised and the population of the Earth community was very small, as was in the case of Pirrus, racial mixing was frowned upon. It was held that the EPA could lose its authority that way.

However, as had happened elsewhere, the local women had been discovered to be particularly delightful and colonials, like everybody else, needed their pleasures; it was inevitable that racial purity was put aside when possible.

Brown started looking through the files of people who were uppermost in his list of suspects. People who had a grievance, or men who had done things in the past, for which they could be exploited. He was checking their movements in the last few days to see if any such people were acting suspiciously.

Brown had gone through only a few files, when the call came. They had observed two men acting suspiciously and were now following Gina. After being released she had first gone back to the club. The girl mandroid had followed Gina and spotted two men following her. At the mandroid's request, two other mandroids had been called in, disguised as Pirussians, and started following the two men.

Brown immediately proceeded to the control room where they were plotting the movements of the mandroids. The original two had now been joined by more and they now took turns alternatively to watch the two men and were using one unmarked vehicle for the purpose.

The plan seemed clear to Brown now. These men were definitely out to kidnap her. If they had wanted to kill her, they would have tried it straight away. They were likely to be in touch with a third person in a getaway car, who at an advantageous point would cruise up behind her, when the two men would bundle her into the car and be away. Unfortunately they had no idea where the getaway car was and when it would show itself.

Obviously the men would know her travelling pattern, which suggested

Zedan was behind the operation. However, they did not take any chances; the two men had followed her in case she changed her route.

It would be unlikely that they would know much about Zedan's plans. Most likely they were to deliver the girl to a certain place for collection. As soon as any moves were made against them, Zedan would be warned by the third man and would move out. It was, therefore, useless to intercept the men before the attempt was made as this was unlikely to lead him to Zedan. Both the men and the getaway car had to be intercepted at the same time, so timing was all important. There was only one thing to do, they would have to wait to the very last possible moment and intercept the car, so that plans could not be changed.

Brown ordered an EPA car to take off and circle and to disable the getaway car before it could pick up the girl. The two mandroids on the ground would stun the two men as soon as they started to close the gap between themselves and the girl. Brown was sure that they would not use long-range video link as these could be picked up by the EPA surveillance. They would only have short-range communication between the car and the two walkers. Brown decided he would also take off with another mandroid. As soon as the two Pirrusians on the ground and the driver of the getaway car had been overcome the mandroids would collect them and the girl. They would then have to be forced to reveal their destination point and one would then proceed to engage Zedan. It was an ambitious plan and would need fine timing to succeed. He ordered the control tower to be in constant touch with him. He gave orders that above everything else the safety of the girl was to be regarded as paramount and wanted to be personally there to collect her.

Benson had been preoccupied with the interrogations up to now. He came up just when Brown was ready to leave. He asked what was going on. Brown said he would explain later when he came back and asked him whether there was any information Benson could give him from the interrogation, but the reply was negative.

"We need a break through. I'm sure there is something about to go down. We must know what it is." Brown felt very frustrated, for there was nothing they could do at that moment.

He left Benson gaping after him as he donned his flying suit and left the carport for the city limits. He took a mandroid with him.

The car rose slowly on the jets under its belly till it was about twenty feet

above the ground, its main jets burst into life and it took off at an angle towards the sky. The powerful generator of the car humming under the strain of generating the colossal power required.

Brown was hovering on the periphery of the city, when the call came, but it was not what he was expecting.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Brown answered the call as he hovered above the city. He was speaking to the communication officer at the EPA control centre.

“We have bad news, Arbitrator. We have lost the girl and the car.” The communication officer’s voice trembled slightly, for Brown was a feared man.

“How did it happen?” Brown could not believe his ears.

“They attacked when the car covering was not in position. The mandroids stunned the two men on the ground but after they managed to get her into the getaway car.”

“What happened to the covering car?”

“Malfunction.”

“How long is it since they got away and where are you holding the two men on the ground?”

“Two mandroids are bringing them here now, while the others are trying to get the malfunctioning car moving. It’s been about half an hour since they got the girl.”

“Give me a direct link quickly with the car bringing the prisoners and tell the others to wait for orders as soon as they are ready.”

The picture on the car screen changed and another face came on.

“Report,” Brown said impatiently.

“We are bringing the prisoners in,” the mandroid said. “They are in good condition, just waking up.”

“Good,” Brown said. “Halt the car somewhere convenient. You’ll interrogate the prisoners under Arbitrator procedure Z7. We want the destination of getaway car.”

Z7 was a method of physical torture using the pressure points of the body under the influence of a certain drug which accentuated the pain. But it did not damage the body unless specifically authorised by the Arbitrator.

Brown watched the procedure on his car’s screen. The two Pirrusians who had been captured, were stripped and secured by wrist and ankle first, then the drug was injected into each of them. They were now fully awake and

there was a look of horror in their faces.

The mandroid waited five seconds for the drug to take effect and then began on one of the prisoners, while the other watched. As it started squeezing the various pressure points on the body, the man screamed in utter pain. The mandroid asked the question every time it put pressure on at different parts of the body, increasing the pressure as it went along. The man's scream had a horrible edge to it, revealing his helplessness in the knowledge that his screams wouldn't be heard outside the sound proofed car. No one could hear his pain.

The second man tried to close his eyes to the horror, but every time the other man screamed, he opened them. The mandroid changed over to the second man, but neither of them gave in and talked. There was no doubt one would talk sooner or later but sometimes they could manage to hold out for hours. Also when they did talk, there was no way to be sure that they gave the right information. The mandroid moved on to one of the man's testicles. Brown could have stopped him at this time, but he was in a hurry; he needed the information quickly.

The man screamed in pain, the other man screamed either in empathy or anticipation. The mandroid repeated the question, but still the man did not answer. He was too busy screaming. The second man became hysterical.

"Squeeze harder," Brown said. The mandroid did as it was told. It had enough force in its artificial hand to do it. Blood squelched out through its finger. The man let out an unexpectedly harsh scream and fainted. The second man screamed and fainted as well.

"Wake the other one up," Brown said. He was disgusted that it had gone so far.

The mandroid sprayed a chemical into the second man's nose and then slapped him hard across the face with its bloody hand. Brown asked him in Pirrusian where the getaway car was headed and the man blurted it out; he had been broken. Brown asked him to repeat it again and he did so between sobs, then he broke down into an uncontrollable spasm of crying. Psychologically there was something about losing one's manhood that was more fundamental than losing one's life.

Brown ordered the mandroid to patch the first man up as best as he could and take them to the EPA headquarters, where they would undergo more questioning.

Brown's destination was outside the city limits about a hundred miles away. He inserted the coordinates into the car's computer and set off towards the destination. The getaway car had a head start but it was travelling on the ground, so Brown hoped that he would be able to make up the distance. Only officials had cars which were capable of being airborne.

He opened up the channel to the EPA headquarters and spoke to the communications officer. "This is Brown," he said giving the officer the coordinates. "I require two mandroids in a flier to be sent to these coordinates as soon as possible."

"Any particular orders, sir?"

"They should back me up in any action, but should not engage enemies without my orders. Ask them to use my personal short range signal to contact me when they are in the area."

Brown switched off the communicator and looked outside through the heat-resistant clear plastic. At that moment his car was speeding directly over the city in the opposite direction to the EPA headquarters.

The city itself was not very big by Earth standards and there were not too many high rise buildings. But then the planet had a very small population compared to Earth.

Brown took over manual control of the car as he passed over the city limits. His destination was outside the city. The buildings gradually became thinner on the ground and more vegetation covered the area. He was heading into a vast farming area.

Brown thought about the men he had had tortured and strangely he felt a little sorry for them, but he had no choice, he told himself. The girl's life was at stake. She was suddenly quite important to him.

He had seen the same technique used many times before and it always had the same effect. The procedure was effective for many years before the implementation of the new third stage interrogation. That was, of course, a foolproof method, for there was no way anyone could resist it. But when there was no possibility of using the third stage, then he had to resort to cruder methods. Z7 was in fact a fairly sophisticated method, developed over the years for use by mandroids. For a man to use Z7 he had to be very highly trained. It was much simpler to use a mandroid. One could just programme them and indeed mandroids now had this sub-routine incorporated into their systems.

The trouble was Z7 did not always work quickly without resorting to the more brutal bits, as in this case. Some people could resist the pain for days on end. But in this instance he did not have the time to wait.

It was possible, of course, these days to regenerate a testicle as there were hardly any boundaries that science had not already crossed in the replacement of body parts. However it was an illegal method he had used and from time to time most governments had a prick of conscience when they made scapegoats of somebody or other, using such methods.

However, this did not unduly worry Brown at that moment as he skimmed nearer to the ground. He was just glad that it had worked. His main worry now was how to save the girl. It had been his fault that she was in such a predicament. She could have been safe now in the EPA headquarters, if he had forced her to stay there.

But inwardly he had been so bent on catching Zedan that this thought had been foremost in his mind when he had let her go, rather than her safety. He had thought in some misguided way that she would lead him to Zedan, when he showed his hand. He had been confident that he would catch Zedan, while preventing any harm coming to her.

He was over a hundred miles out of the city by now. The mandroid sat impassively by his side without speaking. They were not programmed to make small talk and only answered when spoken to. He had not seen the car yet, though he had a description of it.

His plan had been to take the direct route to its destination and then sweep backwards towards the city over the most direct road from the place.

This was the safest bet as there were many outlets from the city, but this would narrow to one or two main roads heading to the place. It would be easier for him to sweep these roads for the car then intercept it nearer to the city. It was also true that the car had a head start on him and he was more likely to catch up with it nearer its destination. He also preferred to engage the car where there was less traffic on the road.

He was coming up fast to his destination, which was a farmhouse. They were not very far from the forest which ringed one side of the city in a semi-circle. The car swept low over the farmhouse and Brown took in the view. A few figures scurried for cover, but Brown resisted the temptation to blow the building up. The firepower of the little car was really quite outstanding. He nearly tried it out, but halted himself at the last moment.

The girl's father would probably be there somewhere. He did not owe the man anything but he did not want to be known as the killer of her father. His feelings for the girl stirred inside him again; he owed her that much. He made up his mind to storm the place when his back-up car arrived. He felt he should have asked for more men but thought it possible to do the job with three mandroids and two cars.

On his first run over the farmhouse, he had spotted the road leading up to the place. He prepared now to start back on the road towards the city. As he swept over the farmhouse again he was greeted by small arms fire.

He ignored it and moved forward high over the road trying to spot an advantage point where he could ambush the rebel car. The warning peeps sounded too late, there was a blinding flash on the starboard side as the heat seeker made contact and then the car was falling.

The car was still intact but completely out of control.

The shield of the car had come on automatically and absorbed most of the impact, but the controls were gone. The missile had been too powerful for the shield.

Even though they had not been expecting him, they were very well prepared, it seemed. He had to eject, but he knew they would try to shoot him down. He would certainly make a beautiful target in his gliding suit, floating in the air.

There was a hill coming up to his right. If he could only get around it he would be safe enough. But he realised that the car would not make it that far. There was only one thing to do. He needed a diversion, it was not much of a chance but it was his only chance. He ejected the mandroid and he hoped it would keep the rebels occupied for a few seconds.

The car plummeted further towards the ground and then he ejected himself. The flash came within a few seconds as he floated around the brow of the hill. The mandroid blew up in the air, simultaneously followed by the explosion of the car as it hit the ground.

Cold sweat poured from his temple as he glided in his special air-suit, which inflated instantly on ejection to carry him towards the road. The view from the farmhouse was now blocked by the hill, so he was safe for the moment. But he knew that he had to get away as far as possible from the farm, for they would soon be out looking for him, in force.

Luckily for Brown, an upward current of air caught the flat, specially-

designed glider form of the air-suit. It lifted him again to carry him down the road in the direction he wanted.

Brown covered nearly six miles before he had to come down. His suit deflated immediately on touch down, to fit snugly. He hoped the enemy would not realise this and they would concentrate looking for him nearer the farmhouse.

He walked down the road further away from the farmhouse, still resolved to carry out his purpose. He was looking for a vantage point from which to ambush the oncoming car from the city.

He found the place he wanted soon, not far away. The road went around in a bend where the car would have to slow. He would ambush it there. He chose the spot carefully for he knew that he would have to make the first shot count. He had only a hand gun. The vehicle would be out of range after that.

There was a bit of high ground on the outside bend of the road which was unpaved at this point. On the inside of the bend there was a clump of trees which, he decided, was where he would hide.

The plan was simple. He already had information that the vehicle was a hover car propelled by a fan. As the vehicle came round the bend and was passing closer to him, he would disable it, by blowing up the fan. He hoped then the car's motion would carry it straight on towards the high ground on the other side, where the driver would either have to stop the car or hit the wall.

He would then shoot the driver when the car became stationary. There were obvious flaws in the plan, but that was the best he could think of at the moment.

Most of the cars used on the planet were hover cars, for the roads were very bad outside the city. It was cheaper to use these vehicles than to build roads, as the planet was very sparsely populated.

The total population of the planet was only ten million and most of these were concentrated around the city and its surroundings. There were some other centres of population, but they were like small towns and were not very important strategically and therefore, were fairly underdeveloped.

Brown did not have to wait long. He heard the roar of the fan before he saw the car. Brown had guessed correctly that the car would be on that particular road, for it was the quickest way. Though a hover car would travel over rough ground, it would be difficult to find a clear route to the farm from the

city.

Brown lay on his stomach beside a bush facing the road, as he steadied himself for the shot. The car came around and up the bend slowly, floating just above the ground. The seating compartment was in the front, while the propeller behind, rising high above the other parts of the car. He could make out Gina in the back.

As the car came up towards him and was passing by him, Brown fired. His gun was turned up to maximum. The charge shot out from his gun and licked around the propeller like a tongue of fire, which flew off making a clanging sound of twisted metal, not quite what he had in mind. The car lurched violently but still continued on its way at a tangent to the bend towards the rock wall of the high ground. The driver fought for control, and Brown stood up and ran after it as fast as he could.

It seemed the car was going to crash and Brown hoped desperately that the girl would be alright. The driver stopped the car inches from the wall, opened the door and ran. Brown fired at him but missed as he was too far away.

Brown ran up to the car. Gina was lying on the back seat of the car, held by her seat belt. She was unconscious. Brown opened the back door and pulled her out. The car was useless now for travelling. He hoisted the girl over his shoulders and then strode back down the road, away from the farm.

He would have to get away as far as possible from the car. Once the man reported back, the kidnappers would swarm the place looking for them.

He wished he had some smelling salts to wake up the girl; like this she would slow him down. Brown decided he would have to leave the road in a short while. The men from the farmhouse would be coming up the road pretty soon. He reckoned he would be safe for about forty minutes on the road and he would make the best time walking down it, away from the farm.

He hoped the back-up mandroids would arrive soon. He and the girl needed to avoid capture until that time. Meanwhile, his load was getting heavier and he did not think he could keep going for forty minutes.

Brown trudged on for fifteen minutes more. By that time he was too tired to carry her any further. He left the road and struggled into a grove of trees a hundred yards off the road and put the girl down. He sat down himself next to her, utterly exhausted. He was panting heavily. There were no signs of anybody around, so he lay back on the ground and drank water from his suit rations.

The girl opened her eyes and moaned. Brown looked at her, she was coming around. He pulled her up in his arms and she stared at him still dazed. He held the water tube to her mouth. After she'd drunk, she managed to sit up.

"How do you feel?" Brown asked her.

"Terrible," she said. "What happened?"

"You received a stun charge and then you were kidnapped. It was Zedan's crowd."

"Where are we?" she said. "How did you get here?"

"I'll explain as we walk. First we must try and see whether you can walk. We must be moving on."

He pulled her up slowly to her feet, but she was still weak.

She walked very unsteadily and he held on to her.

"You'll be alright in a few minutes," he said. "Keep moving."

"Where to?" she asked.

"Anywhere away from the car. They'll be here soon. I ambushed your kidnapper's car, but the driver managed to escape. You were unconscious. I had to carry you, so we haven't covered much distance."

They did not go back to the road, instead they moved into the countryside at a right angle to the road. It would soon be getting dark and he did not know whether this would be a good or a bad thing. It would make it more difficult for Zedan's gang to find him but it would be more difficult for his back up unit to find him as well. He wondered why the back-up car had not made contact with him yet.

"I am a bit mixed up," the girl said presently. "You say Zedan kidnapped me, so who were the others who tried to shoot me?"

"They weren't trying to shoot you," he smiled. "They were trying to shoot your kidnappers, you were hit accidentally. When I let you out of the EPA headquarters I had two mandroids following you."

"I thought it was the girl, but she left."

"It was to begin with, but when we knew you were being followed we rotated her, so they wouldn't get suspicious."

"What about my father? Did you get him?" she asked.

"They took him before we got there."

"Poor father," she said quietly.

"There is hope yet," he lied to comfort her. "I think I know where he is. As

soon as my back-up unit turns up, we can try to rescue him.”

However, Brown was beginning to think that there was not much real hope of that happening. They walked on out of the grove following a path over another hill. He did not want to get too far away from the area in case a car turned up.

Brown scanned the sky for an EPA transport vehicle. Where was it? He had left express orders for a car to be sent after him as soon as possible. They should have been here by now. Somebody was going to suffer for this negligence he promised himself. Yes, somebody would suffer when he got back to the base.

It was steadily getting darker but there was still no sign of the EPA car. They couldn't continue like this for very long, they would have to find shelter soon.

“Where is this rescue transport?” Gina asked him.

“Be patient,” he told her. “They'll be here very soon.” But he did not believe in it himself now. He knew already that something had gone catastrophically wrong and the car was not coming.

CHAPTER TWENTY

In the light that was still left, Brown and the girl moved on up the path. They did not have too much choice, for Brown knew they had to find shelter soon.

The nights at this time of the year were bitterly cold, often with a very hard frost developing. It would not matter to him too much with his electrically heated flight suit, but the girl was inadequately dressed for travelling in open country in such weather. There had already been reports of snow in the mountains and though people were still walking around in summer clothing in the city, winter was already here in this part of the planet.

By this time Brown was sure that something must have happened or an EPA vehicle would have shown up to look for him. Therefore, the chances were that no one was coming. This worried Brown a lot because there was nothing he could think of at the moment, which could have gone wrong with the plan. He had left the coordinates with the communications officer in the EPA headquarters and orders for the EPA car to follow him. How could something go wrong with those orders?

Unfortunately for him, when his car had been hit, his communication system had been damaged, so he had not been able to send out another signal to verify his position, but that should not have prevented them from sending a car to look for him. Unless, and that was what worried him, something had happened in the base itself. He had his personal com system, but that was short range and only worked in or near the city as the planet was not developed enough to have satellite relays to be deployed.

Brown could see the girl was shivering in the cold, though she did not say anything and tried to put on a brave face. It was getting colder by the minute and her light city clothes were not much protection.

Brown knew if they didn't find shelter soon, she would perish. Alternatively, he could make her put on his suit, but then he would freeze to death himself. His feelings for the girl were strong and they had been getting stronger every time he saw her. It was very difficult, therefore, to see her suffer. At several points, he thought of giving her the suit and try and suffer the cold himself, but his military training prevented him from doing so every

time.

He tried to think of the situation logically, without clouding the issue with emotions. The girl would survive for a few hours yet without the suit, though would be in a very weak state. If they managed to find shelter by then, she would be alright, he could always give her the suit before it became too late. But if he gave her the suit now he would himself steadily grow weaker and would ultimately reach a state when his mind and body would not function properly. If they then came across the enemy in his weakened state, he would not be able to do anything to prevent them from slaughtering him and the girl. The other consideration was that though he would be able to carry the girl for a while, she would not be able to carry him any distance.

Whatever the arguments were, it still seemed to him somehow that he was acting in a very selfish manner. This deepened his anger, but he forced himself to keep his suit on.

“How are you feeling?” he asked the girl.

“It’s getting a bit cold,” she admitted fearfully. “Are you sure this car of yours is coming?”

“Sure,” he lied without thinking. “Any minute now, it should be here. We must keep moving, you will stay warmer that way.”

It really hurt him to tell her that and he felt very guilty when he thought of his snug warm suit. For the first time in his life he felt somebody to be more important than himself.

“There must be some houses here somewhere, where we should be able to get some food and clothes.”

“We haven’t come across any yet,” she said quietly. “This part seems like very open country to me, maybe there are no farmhouses around.”

“There must be something. We’ll come across one pretty soon.”

Brown forced himself to dissociate from the problem at hand, but he was unable to do so. By this time he himself was beginning to think that the girl was right.

The girl was walking along with her arms folded over her chest. Her tightly clinging thin city clothes gave away the outline of her body through the shimmering material which seemed to be craze of the moment. Her unswept red hair fell low over her shoulders. Like a forest nymph, she made her way in front of him through the tree-lined path. A very cold forest nymph.

He made up his mind all of a sudden then. Actually he had been thinking

about it for some time but he had kept pushing it away from his mind. It was madness but it was the only chance the girl would have of surviving.

“Listen,” he said. “I think we’ll make our way to the farm, I know it’s definitely there. That’s the place where they were taking you.”

“But they’ll kill you,” the girl protested, her eyes pleading with him not to go.

“We have a chance,” he said determinedly. “There’s good chance that they’ve evacuated the place, expecting an EPA attack. They shot me down, so they would assume the EPA now knows about the place.”

“But if they haven’t left?” she looked at him warily. “Don’t worry about me, I will be alright.”

“Yes, you are going to be alright because you are going to put this suit on. We’re going to change into it alternatively till we get there.” He was frustrated with his lack of ability to provide for the girl and angry because the girl did not make any demand on him even under such extreme conditions.

“I don’t want your suit,” she said.

“You’ll do as I say,” he edged her up the path. “I’m going to push you hard, but I’m going to make sure you survive. I got you into this and I will get you out.”

“How are you going to do that? I don’t think the EPA cars are coming to pick you up.”

“We’ll think of something,” he said angrily.

“It’s better if you save yourself, otherwise we’ll both die when the rebels catch you. You should leave me.” She came to a halt and looked at him expecting his decision.

He shook her by the shoulders till he hurt her. “You must stop thinking like that. We are going to survive, both of us.”

She was crying. Brown took her in his arms and kissed her. He then took his suit off and made her get into it. The stretchable material fitted her perfectly as if it had been made especially for her. He felt the cold for the first time on his body, even though his other clothes were much warmer than the girl’s.

“This twilight will last for a couple of more hours,” Brown said as they started moving again through a lightly wooded area. “As I see it, we are about six or seven miles from the farm. We can’t go back the way we came, they’ll be looking for us. We must go another way.”

“You’re mad to go back there,” the girl clung to him as they walked.

“We have got to find another way,” he said. “If I remember correctly, there should be a path over that hill in front of us. I saw it when I flew over the farm. It goes past the farm on the other side and should lead us behind it. I don’t think they’ll be looking for us there. They won’t expect us to go back to the farm.”

As he spoke there was a sound of hooves behind them. A man came around the bend riding fast on a moshe, a small, fast Pirrusian horse-like animal.

A tongue of lightning shot past Brown, searing his arm. He pushed the girl into the ditch by the path and jumped in after her, drawing his own gun.

The man was a difficult target as he came towards them. Brown did not want to injure the animal as he needed transport, so he turned his gun down to stun. He also wanted the man’s clothes.

The man was firing at him as he came towards them and he was getting very close. Brown could not get a clear view of him because of the animal’s head and neck which the man was using as a shield.

Gina was clinging to Brown’s left arm in fear. All her calm and composure had gone, she looked dazed from her fall into the ditch.

Brown raised his gun and shot the animal. The animal bucked and he shot it again. He did not have much choice in the matter, the man was getting too close.

The second charge made the animal rear and throw the man on his back. Brown caught the man with another burst of fire as he was falling before he even reached the ground.

He was jubilant at his victory and whooped in delight like a little boy. However, he quietened as he saw the animal crash into the ground as well. He hoped against hope that it would still be okay.

He pulled Gina up the path and they walked up to the man lying prone on the ground. The animal was dead, the second shot had killed it.

Brown went up to the man and kicked him savagely in the ribs to make sure he wasn’t faking. But the Pirrusian made no sound and Brown knew he was out cold.

He saw Gina wince when he kicked the man and laughed.

“Just precautions,” he said. “We don’t want him faking unconsciousness.”

He searched the man straightaway for any weapons and documents but there were none, other than the large gun he had been carrying and two spare

charge cartridges in his pocket.

Brown stripped the man of his furry coat and his warm trousers and put them on himself, taking the cartridges and the other gun.

“He’ll die if you leave him like that,” the girl protested.

“It’s either him or me,” Brown said quietly. “You know who I like better. Anyway he’ll have as much chance as we had to making it to shelter, probably better, because he knows the country and the farm is close by.”

Brown was lying; he had no intention of letting the man reach anywhere.

“Help me push this animal into the ditch,” he asked the girl again. The animal was heavy but he did not want to leave it lying around where it would be noticeable straightaway. He knew there would be other men around looking for him.

He shouldered the man’s gun and asked the girl to start moving up the path. When she was moving, he dragged the man into the ditch and let him tumble in. Brown jumped down after him, and with a sharp twist broke the man’s neck. The man choked momentarily in his unconscious breathing and died.

Brown pulled himself up on the path and joined Gina and they walked quietly on.

She was quiet for a long while after that, but then she spoke.

“You killed that man, didn’t you?”

He looked at her in mild surprise, then smiled grimly

“I thought I would be able to spare you that,” he said. “There was no choice really. I couldn’t let him warn anybody where we are. In this light they won’t find him until tomorrow hopefully. We won’t be around here then. Pity about that animal, we could have used it.”

“You are a ruthless man,” she said.

“We’re not playing games,” he said.

“No?” She looked at him questioningly.

“Does it show?” he asked surprised. “I suppose I still enjoy action even now.”

They had found some food in the saddle bag, but not very much, which they shared.

The man’s clothes were a bit tight. He was of a shorter build than Brown, as all Southern Pirrusian were. Brown was just thankful for the clothes, which had increased their chances of survival greatly.

“Which way shall we go now?” the girl asked him. “Shall we try to get

away towards the city now, as you have warm clothes?"

"We won't make it that way," he shook his head as if to emphasise it. "We have no maps, so we'll lose our way. They must have other riders on moshes looking for us. They'll soon catch up with us. We could have tried it if that moshe had lived."

"Yes, we could have ridden it to the city," she said wistfully.

"Well, we would have had a chance then, but I think we will have to stick to the original plan now and see what comes up. At least we are better prepared now."

* * *

They hurried on up the path, keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings for any movement in the area. They were now walking up quite a steep incline, which was rather bare. Brown was glad it was getting darker for it would be difficult for anybody to make them out on the slope.

Light snow began to fall and Brown was indeed thankful for the clothes. They were not electrically heated like his suit but were still very comfortable and warm.

They located the other path soon afterwards as Brown had figured and made their way towards the farm. Soon they found another path that branched right from the main path and moved away to the right of the farm instead of going towards it like the other one did.

The going was a lot slower now for even with the moonlight it was darker and also because of the bad weather conditions. Brown felt very tired, he was worried his body might fail him, but they kept going. They were, however, thankful that the darkness and weather made the search for them more difficult as the sprinkling of snow also covered their tracks.

Brown was sure nobody would look for them in the area they were in, but all the same, they kept a good look out. They walked on supporting each other towards the back of the farm.

They estimated the distance to the farm now to be about two to three miles. The path ran more or less parallel to the road in which he had ambushed the car and gradually sloped upwards and it was impossible for a car to travel on it, even a hover car. The trees and the sheer gradients one had to negotiate made it impossible. Only the light and nimble moshe could travel on it.

In contrast to the first path they had followed across the country, this path was not so well travelled and, therefore, went up by sharper broken gradients, which were sometimes difficult to negotiate without using hands.

Brown had seen the path clearly on his flight over the area and now recognised it by the gorge through which he passed. After the gorge there was a slight dip in the countryside which looked like a very large shallow basin. The farm buildings were in the middle of the basin. Once over the gorge, the farm would then be visible from the top of the gently sloping hills.

Brown climbed slowly followed by the girl. There was no hurry. They had not talked too much after they had left the main path. He had been trying desperately to think of a plan, but to his annoyance, could think of nothing. He was not even sure why he was going there. His original intention of going there had been to get hold of some clothes and food. But why was he still going there? What did he hope to achieve?

He was hopelessly outnumbered for any sort of action. He had been right in his assumption that they could have made a run for it, but he had been convinced they would be caught. They were a long way away from the city and they needed transport and a map.

They were almost on the uppermost part of the gorge now. He had underestimated the distance, for they had to travel almost two miles to get there since they had left the main path. Altogether they had already walked seven miles by his calculation and the girl was looking tired.

Then they saw it, the lights from the farmhouse. Lights blazing as if the occupiers had no worry of EPA attack. It was a point that particularly struck Brown. It was as if somebody had assured them no EPA attack would come. Or was it they were trying to fool the EPA by behaving like a normal farmhouse.

He wished he had a pair of binoculars to have a look at the farmhouse, but he had left them in the car when he had ejected. The gun on his shoulders did not have a telescope either.

They could just make out parts of the buildings, as trees dotted the view. The farm buildings were about two miles away from where they were standing. As they started descending towards the farm, Brown was still trying to figure out a plan.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Tired,” she said. “Is that the place then?”

“Yes, that’s where they were taking you.”

“Mmm, I could do with some hot soup and a bed right now.”

“Yes,” Brown smiled. “Let’s look for some shelter. I think I saw some formations which looked like caves around here.”

They went on for another half a mile until they found what they were looking for. It was a small cave.

They explored it in the light of a small pencil torch which came attached to his suit. They hadn’t used it so far in the fear of being seen. However, it was safe enough inside the cave.

The cave went around in a slight bend and stopped. It was just a hole on the belly of the mountain with jagged rock formations inside it. But it felt much warmer than outside.

“I think we can light a fire,” Brown said for the benefit of the girl. “I don’t think it can be seen from outside if we light it around this bend. If we can find some branches, I will light one for you.”

They went out again to look for some firewood by the trees.

In a few minutes they had a small fire going, lit using his gun. It was enough to warm themselves by. They sat down and ate some of the dead man’s rations in silence and then had a sip of water each from the tube in his jacket.

“I’ll have to go down,” he said, “to have a look at the place.”

They were looking at each other. He wondered then whether he could trust her with a gun. She had tried to shoot him once. Would she try it again when his back was turned?

“I wish you didn’t have to go,” she whispered. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Desire had been stirring in him for a while. The cave was warm enough for her to take off the suit and she had been walking about in the thin sensuous garment she wore in the city. The material stuck to her body like a second skin and did not leave much to the imagination. What he could not understand is how he had the energy to even think about it, given the condition of his health. Maybe the doctor’s treatment was working better than he had hoped.

He moved over to her and in a moment she was in his arms. The fur coat provided an excellent surface to lie on and within a few moments they were testing it to the full. The doubts melted away from his mind like the dispersing of grey clouds as their bodies came together. If he could not trust

her then he could never trust anybody in the world, he thought. He saw her eyes in the firelight, they were filled with love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Brown made his way down towards the farm in the moonlight. He was amazed by his sudden burst of energy, maybe it was the fresh air that was helping him. He had changed the colour of his suit to white to blend with the background. It had three basic colour patterns, black, white and a mixture of green and brown patches. This ability to change colours gave the man wearing it a chameleon-type advantage.

The plan had not formed in his mind yet. He had a basic idea of what was needed, but as to how he was going to achieve this Herculean task, he had not the slightest idea. He knew he had to find a way to steal a couple of moshes to help him travel to the city, but how he was to manage snatching two such creatures from under the noses of rebels and make his way up the hill was beyond imagination.

He had left the girl up in the cave with the larger gun and come down by himself. This would give her some chance of an escape if something happened to him. But he knew that she would not get very far by herself and her survival was keyed to his own. Therefore, he had to survive.

Determination filled him with hope and he slithered down the snowy slope like a mountain cat. He was suddenly bursting with energy at the thought of the survival with the girl and had shaken off his early tiredness. He attributed this to his desire to succeed but in the back of his mind he was not sure. He wondered about the last dream: did his body really change? How had he survived a drug habit for so long that was induced to kill him, against all the odds? There were a lot of unanswered questions. What was different about him?

He followed the path down because he did not expect anybody to be watching it. The farmhouse gradually grew bigger as he descended further towards it. It was quite well lit up.

The surroundings became a bit brighter as the second moon of Pirrus came into view. The moon was not actually a second moon but a satellite of the moon and went up around it as the moon went around Pirrus, most of the time being visible from the ground.

It did not take Brown very long to travel his estimated two miles and he halted a little distance away from the farm buildings to have a good look at them as he lay flat on the snow. In his suit he was almost invisible to the naked eye.

The buildings were mainly made of wood as was usual in these parts. There were several of them in the perimeter surrounded by a fence, which was not really designed to keep intruders out. He decided that it wouldn't be too difficult to get through it.

What he was more interested in was where the guards were, but Brown did not see any. There didn't seem to be much movement at all down there. It seemed funny that such a place should be left completely unguarded but he was not complaining, obviously they weren't expecting visitors.

He looked at the buildings more carefully to memorise their positions. The main building was a two-storey structure with corrugated synthetic roofing which kept the heat in and let the light filter through. Wood was still used as a building material even though alternative artificial materials other than brick and stone had been available a century and a half since EPA had come to the planet. It was cheap.

A few small buildings surrounded the main building, one or two of them built of stones but with similar roofs. Brown discerned these to be garages and sheds for the animals and some were living quarters, bunk-houses for the hands when this place had been used as a proper farm. He doubted very much that this place still functioned as such.

It was probably more like a processing centre for rebels. A place where they came to before they were assessed and channelled to the many training camps in the great forests, which were almost impossible to locate even with the most sophisticated equipment available to the EPA.

As for him, he had not even bothered to locate the new camps. He had destroyed most of the old camps during the actual uprising by finding their location from interrogating prisoners. It was fairly simple: he just carried out a total blitz on the places from the air. The craters were still visible to this day as plant life had been slow to grow back on the barren rock surfaces, usually left in the crater after the bomb blasts.

He had not bothered with the new camps because he knew that they presented very little threat by themselves. Most of the population did not even support them. They were wary even before the last revolution and had

already had enough.

But the whole situation had taken on a new twist recently with the involvement of the outside powers. They had been involved only in a limited way during the last revolution, mainly as suppliers of arms and technical help to the rebels. Of course they denied any involvement and in Levita's case, there were genuine doubts.

What Brown could not work out was why these governments were suddenly so interested in such a backward planet. Was he missing something? He remembered how close they had been to being invaded by Baccra, when Zedan had almost succeeded in blowing up the festival hall. They were still poised for the invasion. Why was it worth all the trouble to take over the planet with only a few million primitive people? As far as he was aware neither of Baccra nor Levita had a population problem.

The arrival of a car drew his attention. It came down the road on which he had ambushed the other car. Three people got out. They were all Pirrusian and all were carrying guns.

Brown put them down as a search party. Two other people on moshes also arrived at the farm. That was probably all the search party, except for the one he had disposed of, returning for the night.

Again the thought struck Brown. They seemed to be going around very boldly without any worry of EPA patrols. People were forbidden to carry guns in Pirrus without special authorisation. Anybody with guns would be engaged by EPA patrols straight away and if they failed to satisfy this criteria, could be shot immediately.

It did not take a fool, he thought, to deduce that the EPA already knew about their position because of Brown and could drop in at any moment. No, something was wrong. Either these men were complete fools or utterly confident that there was going to be no EPA raid.

There was at least one guard watching the arrivals from one of the shed's doors. The man came out for a cigarette and a chat both times when the car and the riders turned up. Brown made a mental note that the shed was next to the one where they had taken the moshes.

That was going to be the problem later. He would have to deal with the guard or guards if he wanted to steal the animals. He thought of taking the car which was parked in front of the main wooden building, but discounted the idea. He would be an easy target on the main road if they had more men

watching it further up on the road. And if he did take the car the girl would have to come down to the farm, which he did not want. After that, as soon as he tried to start it, he would wake everybody up. No, he would have to go for the moshes instead. They stood a better chance riding them to the city. These horse-type creatures could keep going for a very long distance at high speeds and would be more valuable in this sort of mountainous country. But if he waited until early morning, most of the men would go out again to search for them; at least he hoped they would.

He based this assumption on the fact that the weather had been quite abominable and they did not expect him to go very far in it. Also, they would know by morning that one of their number was missing. They would inevitably go looking for him.

So he calculated that if he came down early and hid near the farm till they were gone, he would have a chance to steal the animals. He would have to deal with the guards, but at least their number would be manageable. He just hoped that they would leave a few animals behind when they went out again.

Well, that was the plan then, he made up his mind. He was just about to turn to go back when he saw a figure being brought out of the main building and taken to a small shed on one side.

He could see the man's hands were tied behind his back and he was held on both sides by two other men who dumped him in the shed and locked the door behind them.

Brown just made out the man's face. It was Zalamus, Gina's father. On the way back to the cave, he wondered whether he should tell the girl about him.

It took Brown another hour to walk up the hill, which was very good going. Normally he would have prided himself on being in superb condition and think nothing of it, but at present his health was far from perfect so he was pleasantly surprised.

It would be another eight hours to dawn so he had a lot of time to kill. The girl was waiting for him and very glad to see him back. She had been very worried about him and had been keeping a sharp lookout for him. They had some more food and drink and then Brown told her about the situation below.

"I think we have a good chance," he said optimistically. "A very good chance of making it back."

He was not sure whether she believed him, but she seemed to agree with him on the plan.

“I will come down with you,” she said.

“That’s not necessary.”

“I am quite a good shot, you know. I trained in a camp before the revolution.”

“No, you will stay up here,” he said firmly. “Don’t worry, you’ll see plenty of the action once they chase me up the hill.”

“But you will be all by yourself. You will need help,” she protested.

“You will only hinder me down there,” he said rather harshly and realised that it hurt her. “But you can be of help from up here by providing covering fire when I come up the hill,” he added.

“If you come back up again,” she said angrily.

“Don’t worry, I will,” he said as he pulled her towards him and kissed her. “You make sure you are here. You’re not getting rid of me so easily.”

She seemed to have done her housework while he had been away. There was now a bed of twigs and leaves. They placed the fur coat on it and lay on it.

“I see you’ve been very busy here,” he said.

“I had to do something to keep my mind off worrying about you,” she said and hugged him tighter.

Brown was wondering whether to bring up the subject of her father or not when she asked Brown about him.

“I did see him,” he admitted. “They are keeping him locked up. What do you want to do about it?”

“Can’t we free him, please?”

“It’s risky. I can’t trust him. He might try to kill me if I free him.”

“Tell him I’m up here, he might listen.”

“He may or may not.”

“Ask him for his word,” she said. “Ask him to swear by the sword of Durkali. He is a religious man; he’ll keep his word if he does that.”

“Or I could knock him out and bring him up here.”

“No need for that, he’ll keep his word if he swears.”

Brown shook his head. “Are you a religious type yourself?”

“I was,” she said with dignity. “Until I met you.”

“Yeah I know, I have heard that before somewhere. I am the one who goes around corrupting everybody. Come on, let’s turn in. We have a hard day’s work ahead of us tomorrow.” They lay down together on the makeshift bed.

Brown was feeling mild withdrawal symptoms but he didn't have a supply of drugs with him.

He set the alarm and went to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Brown woke with a start. The girl was already awake. She lay there cradling his head in her bosom. He had been dreaming violently and talking in his sleep.

In his dream, he had been caught by Kirkan and Zedan. They were torturing him and he was screaming. There had been no hope for him, no escape. They did not want to kill him but keep him alive in constant pain, to be tortured.

They were in the middle of a particularly fiendish piece of torture when he woke up. He looked at his feet straightaway but they felt alright. They had been roasting the soles of his feet on a bright charcoal fire in his dream.

“You have been talking and shouting in your dream,” Gina said.

“I suppose I must have,” Brown smiled. “It was a rather nasty nightmare.”

“You shouted the names of Kirkan and Zedan.”

“Yes, that’s possible. I was dreaming that when I had gone down to the farm, they had captured me and were torturing me.”

“That is a bad omen,” she said and looked frightened. “Don’t go down.”

“Don’t worry so much, they won’t capture me, now that I have been warned,” he laughed heartily at her sudden nervousness.

“But they will torture you if they catch you,” she said seriously.

“I am sure they will,” he stopped laughing. “But let’s hope they won’t get me, it won’t be pleasant.”

“You have tortured a lot of people,” she said gravely.

He looked at her intent eyes but did not deny it. “Maybe a few,” he said. “It’s necessary in my job. I’ve done it when I’ve needed information, but it’s not as bad as you think.” Suddenly he felt guilty.

“It must be your conscience troubling you then. It’s good to see you have one at least. I didn’t use to think you humans had any.” She was laughing again.

“Very funny,” he said and laughed with her.

“It is true, thinking back,” he said gravely. “I never felt any qualms over torturing anybody or had any bad dreams over it before. Possibly my training

prevented it.”

“Then you are beginning to question your training.”

* * *

Brown felt the words to be truly wise, even though they had come from such a young girl.

They had another hour to kill before Brown went down the slope again. They breakfasted using his emergency rations.

The fire was still burning. The girl must have kept it going during the night, he thought. He went up to the mouth of the cave to have a look down at the farm below.

He could make out the shapes of the building in the lights burning in the yard. He thought of cutting their supply lines and plunging the place into darkness but he did not see any external supply lines and surmised that they were probably using an independent source such as a plasma power pack. He did not know where it was kept and would waste valuable time looking for it.

He therefore decided he would have to forget about it and carry on in the light.

Standing at the cave entrance, Brown felt a bit cold, for he was not wearing his suit. But for the first time he felt fear as well. Instead of brimming confidence and a feeling of elation, which was usual for him before action, he felt the fear of loss, but it was difficult for him to pin it down to anything.

He shrugged the thought off his mind and went back into the cave to the girl who was sitting on the bed of twigs.

He sat himself down clumsily next to her and put an arm around her.

“It will be time to go soon,” he said. “I don’t know what advice to give you in case I don’t succeed.”

“Don’t talk like that, you will succeed.”

“Don’t fool yourself, the chances are very high against it.”

“You’re a very capable man. I will be depending on you, so don’t you dare fail me.”

He wanted to make love to her, it was as if he felt he could not have enough of her. However, he could not afford the distraction at present, so he just lay there. People had found everything they needed for peace and prosperity, but there was always strife.

He came to the conclusion that strife must be in built in people's natures. For it seemed that without any aggression people would just stagnate. With aggression they would always fight each other and peace could only be temporary, a stalemate. Things were always inherently unstable and any equilibrium only lasted temporarily. When it was time he gave the girl instructions on what to do and left. He walked down slowly to the spot where he had been previously and looked around.

There were no signs of life anywhere on the farm, the lights were burning still as they had all through the night, but there was no movement of any kind at all.

Brown checked his small hand gun and decided to move in closer to the farm. He was now about twenty yards from the perimeter fence.

He was about to move again when he heard some voices. Some people were coming out of the main house. He could not see them from where he was. Then the car started up and they moved up to the road in it.

A few minutes later two more people left on two of the moshes along the path and a little later a third person following the same path out of the valley, instead of the road taken by the cars.

Brown waited patiently for another half hour, to make sure that the men who left would be several miles away and then moved towards the buildings. He got over the fence with ease behind one of the sheds, hidden from view of the main building. He kept in the shadows away from the artificial light, after changing the colour of his suit to black.

He made the guard house without any problems and then paused for a while. He was not sure how many guards there were. His first plan had been to rush the guard house but he decided against it. Instead he decided on a diversion to get the guards out.

He looked for a spot where he could watch both the main building and guard shed and settled in. He then adjusted his gun for maximum charge and fired several blasts at the main building. This had the only possible effect of setting the wooden structure on fire in several places.

Two guards came out of the shed as soon as a couple of explosions happened at the main building. Brown held his fire when the first one came out and looked around cautiously. He was soon joined by a very alert second guard and they both moved towards the fire with guns ready to in their hands. Brown let them relax a bit from their watchfulness so that they just watched

the fire as they ran towards it. He held his fire till they had gone just past him and then opened up on both of them.

The first guard slumped to the ground immediately. The other managed to turn half way around and get a wide shot off, before Brown hit him again with a full charge. He was dead before he touched the ground.

Brown moved cautiously towards the shed where Zalamus was. The main building had now turned into a roaring inferno and flames leapt up high into the sky. Two other figures ran out of the house as it crumbled. Brown fired at them and missed. He cursed and changed position, as one of them fired back.

Brown assumed that they must have been asleep and had run out after being woken by the fire. It was probable one did not have the chance to get hold of a gun.

Brown shot out the lights and went after them. The men were moving towards the gate. Brown moved cautiously in an arc to cut them off.

Dawn had properly broken now, and the sky was becoming lighter.

As he came around a corner suddenly he came face to face with one of them. Brown dived to the floor and shot at the man, who fired back. The man's shot singed the ground next to Brown's head. For a moment the man looked triumphant as he tried to fire again, but he had been hit and was already falling, Brown fired again to finish him off. The second man was going over the fence and Brown raised his gun to shoot him in the back but decided to let him go. Instead he ran towards the shed to find Zalamus.

When he reached it, he shot off the lock and called Zalamus to come out. A tall gaunt-looking elderly man came out. It was difficult to tell his age. Brown recognised him from his time in custody.

He was a bit hesitant at first, but came out with his head high, fully expecting to be shot. He was dressed in a Pirrusian type coat with a poncho on top. He looked like a farm hand.

Brown told him to stand still while he searched him. He did not expect to find anything, but he wanted to make sure.

"Come on," he said. "We had better get going."

"I am not going anywhere with you," the man said.

"Don't be a fool," Brown said. "They will kill you if they find you here now. Your daughter is waiting for you up there."

"You are lying," he said simply.

"No, I'm not," Brown said angrily. "As for me I'd rather leave you here

any day. Listen, what reason would I have to free you and take you with me?"

"To get information," the older man said stubbornly, without moving.

"I could kill you now," Brown said raising his gun.

"Yes, but you won't get any information."

"I doubt if you have anything useful to tell me, old man. They can't think too much of you, if they locked you in there."

"They are wrong but they will change their minds," he said sadly.

"They will shoot you," Brown emphasised. "Well, it's your life. Stay if you want to die. I have to go."

"Wait. You said my daughter is up there. She's with you?"

"Yes, they kidnapped her as well and were bringing her here. After they shot my car down, I managed to rescue her by ambushing the vehicle she was in. We need transport to get away. That's why I'm here."

"I didn't think Zedan would try to kill her," he said disbelievingly.

"He is probably under Kirkan's influence."

"I am afraid that is so," the man shook his head sadly again.

"Are you coming?"

"Yes, alright then," he agreed, much to the relief of Brown, who was by now getting impatient to leave. He was even considering taking the man by force but had decided against it at the last moment. Three animals would be too much to manage up the hill.

"Come on," gestured Brown. "To the animal shed. Let's get the moshes."

"What about the guards?" the man asked.

"I've taken care of them," Brown raised his gun. "Move in front of me where I can keep an eye on you."

They made it to the shed in a few minutes. There were five moshes there; they took four of them. As they were leading them out, Brown remembered about extracting a promise from him.

"Swear by the sword of Durkali," said Brown. "You won't try anything against me."

"I can't agree to that," the man had the gall to refuse, which surprised Brown very much.

"Alright," Brown said, trying to be agreeable much to his own surprise again. "Just for this trip, that's all. Until we get back to the city."

"Alright, I swear," the man said grudgingly.

On the way Brown popped into the guard shed and came out with some packets of food and a water canteen, which he put into the pouch of the saddle of the moshe he was going to ride. He also collected one of the guns from the guard, as his own gun was nearly empty and he did not have any replacement cartridge left. Thus equipped, they made their way up the hill after blasting a hole in the wooden fence.

“I couldn’t find any maps,” Brown said to the old man. “We will just have to guess on the direction.”

“I think I roughly know the way to the city,” the old man said. “Ha, I am going to be more useful to you than you thought, eh?”

“We will see,” Brown said tersely.

He was thinking at that moment whether he could trust the old man or not.

They made it to the top of the hill without too much trouble, each riding one of the Pirrusian horses and leading another one behind.

There was no further opposition from the farm where the fire was still raging, with black smoke pouring out and rising high into the sky like a thick cloud.

Brown was glad of the smoke and the explosions. This meant that the other men would soon be coming back to the farm, abandoning their search once they saw the smoke.

This would give them more time to get ahead without the risk of interception further on.

Gina was waiting for them further ahead near the cave. She greeted them enthusiastically, smothering Brown with kisses and then running to her father, who greeted her quite amicably with a sardonic expression on his face.

“Ah, my dear daughter,” he said. “I see you have joined up with the enemy.”

“He is not the enemy,” she said angrily. “Kirkan is the enemy father. You and Zedan have joined the wrong side.”

“Maybe,” he said with an amused expression. “I am not sure. I am very mixed up at the moment.”

Brown cut them short. “Let’s get moving, they will be here shortly and then they will be after us.”

Brown helped Gina on one of the moshes after sharing the food out. He then remounted and led the way.

They followed the path they had come by the previous night, only in the

opposite direction. The air was thicker now and Brown felt warmer even though his suit had adjusted automatically to the outside temperature. Brown noticed the sun was up and the snow was melting slowly already.

Gina was wearing the fur coat and the dead man's trousers, both one size too big for her. The trousers were held in place by the man's belt and were turned up, the same as the sleeves of the coat.

"He has agreed not to try anything till we reach the city," Brown told Gina. "Do you think we can trust him?"

"Did he swear?"

"Yes."

"Then he should keep his word."

"Ask him for direction then. We haven't got a map."

"Father, tell us which way to go and don't forget your promise. You have sworn a sacred oath."

"I haven't forgotten," the old man said. "Ask him what will happen when we reach the city."

"If we reach the city," Brown said. "You can go free, if you give me your word not to take part in any illegal activity."

"That's fair," he nodded his head. "I am getting too old for this sort of thing, it seems. We follow this road further down till we reach a pass and there we branch off to the left."

"But that's taking us further away from the main road which is on the right."

"That's correct. We go around in a semi-circle till we join up with the main road just outside the city. I am afraid the going won't be very easy. It is mostly uninhabited country but I take it you will prefer that."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Brown.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The old man was right, the going was not very easy. They were travelling much faster than on foot, but their pace was slow as far as riding went. The girl was not a very adept rider and they had to keep on slowing down so she could keep up with them.

Brown kept a sharp eye behind them and hoped that the melting snow would hide their tracks. He was sure that they would follow and most likely catch up with them sooner or later, unless they managed to lose them somehow.

They made it to the pass without too much trouble, where the road split in two directions. Brown remembered it vaguely from the night before. They had come up the path on the right, which later joined up with the main path cutting across from the road.

Brown had an idea.

“Do both these forks join up with the path coming across from the road?”

“Yes, as far as I can remember. Why?” the old man asked him.

“Well, if I carry on down the right path and then turn left at the main path and join up with you later, then if I leave some signs for them to follow me the long way, it will give you more time.”

“But if they don’t follow you then there will be only two of us with one gun facing all of them. I think I know what you want to do. You want to leave us and get away on your own,” the old man gave a dirty laugh.

Nothing had been further from Brown’s mind at that moment.

“If you are not careful I will leave you here,” Brown said grimly. “I am only trying to improve your chances. Maybe I should just shoot you and leave you here.” Brown smiled.

“You won’t find your way back without me, ha, ha,” the man threatened. “Go on, shoot me, if you have the guts.”

Brown raised his gun in indignation much to the alarm of Gina, who quickly gripped his arm.

“Stop it, you two,” she shouted. “Father behave yourself.”

Brown came to his senses and holstered his gun but the old man ranted on.

“You wouldn’t dare if I had a gun,” he muttered. “My own daughter turning against me.”

“Stop it, father.”

“Yeah, remember your promise,” Brown taunted and then said, “Well, that settles that, I’ll go along with you. Let’s hope they will miss our tracks in the melting snow.”

They all turned left and rode on. *What a crazy man*, Brown thought half amused; he could now see the humour of the situation but he wondered whether he had made a mistake in bringing the old man along, but there was nothing much he could do about that now.

They were on a different kind of track now, very rocky and a hard climb, for they had started going up again. The going was slow, and Brown wondered whether or not it would have been better for all of them to go the other way. The sure-footed animals were starting to stumble on the ice-glazed rocks.

Brown decided, for the girl’s safety, to rope her to the animal and then to his own animal. Zalamus, however, preferred to ride by himself.

The first accident happened soon afterwards. They passed a spot that was particularly narrow with a section of the path having a sheer drop on one side. Brown and Gina crossed over without too much trouble, but when Zalamus, who had been bringing up the rear, came to the spot the hind legs of his horse slipped. Fortunately for Zalamus, the ditch on the side was only a few feet deep. It broke the animal’s forelegs but the rider was nothing more than badly jarred.

Brown cursed and dragged Zalamus out of the hole and shot the animal. Zalamus was a bit bruised but not too worse for wear. He mounted the spare moshe. This time he agreed to be tied to the other animals by rope, before they carried on.

As near as they could make out they were going west, but with insufficient altitude and surrounded on all sides by formations of tiny hills, it was difficult to get their bearings. The old man thought from time to time that he identified places, but his memory was vague, not having travelled this way for a long time.

Brown weighed their chances when they stopped to eat on a broader stretch of land and to rest the native horses. They were far away from any inhabited sites and had yet to come across any people. They were better off that way,

but by the same token, if the old man was not sure where they were then they were in trouble.

Later that afternoon they headed into what appeared to be flat land, but within an hour the true nature of the land became apparent. It was covered without break by a weathered series of hillocks of sandy rock packed close together. A wind came up as they started moving; a cold dust-laden wind, so harsh, it seemed more like a sandstorm. They had to take shelter in a formation of boulders and wait for it to die down. They managed to have a bit more food and a little water they had brought from the farm but all the time Brown was conscious they were losing time.

They had only covered about twenty-five miles according to Brown's estimation and the day was nearly over. As soon as the wind stopped, he made them move again.

There was some cheerful news though, the old man said he recognised the place and soon they would be coming on to a river which they must cross. Whatever cheerfulness Brown felt at the thought that they were not lost disappeared at the thought of crossing the river. But he decided that to be safe from the pursuit they must cross the river before nightfall. With that thought in mind he drove them hard towards the river.

The going was a lot easier now. The land had flattened out and the snow had disappeared, so they covered more ground. But Brown was sure that if anybody was following they could not be very far behind.

The wind had now dropped completely and in the vast uncanny stillness under the afternoon sun the barren wilderness was suddenly alive.

They heard the rush of water not very far in front of them. The sound of hissing and the rushing of the water reached them from quite a distance in fact, for the river was swollen with melted snow.

The old man said that it was apparently quite a common phenomenon for the river to be a quiet rolling stream one-hour and then change into a high-velocity gusher the very next because of rains further up in the mountains or because of melting snow. It should go down in a few hours he said, but then again it might not.

Brown knew that they did not have the luxury to wait for it to go down. It was still daylight but they had to cross before nightfall or they were dead.

The hissing of the river swelled to a deep roar as they came up to it. It was very high, though through the spray Brown could see large rocks, which were

left uncovered.

He could see immediately that they were not going to swim across; the far bank was quite a way away and the spray which lashed dangerously back from the rocks gave a not too encouraging indication of the current.

“Let’s go a bit further down the river,” the old man said. “Maybe we’ll find a better place to cross.”

Brown decided that there was no other alternative and, therefore, followed the old man with the girl following behind. The three rode down the river looking for a likely place to cross over.

It was half an hour later before they found a negotiable stretch of river; though the banks widened here, the beach became broader and the river was shallower. But it was still very deep and very fast. Massive rocks stood out from the bed and the spray danced round them.

“It is so beautiful here,” remarked the girl, much to Brown’s annoyance but he had to agree it was very serene.

“We will have to try and get across together, or we may not make it,” Brown offered. Nobody answered. He un-slung the ropes and started tying his moshe to the one Gina was sitting on so she was side by side to his right, and motioned Zalamus to move his horse to his left and asked him to tie up as well. Then he outlined his plan to the others.

“These moshes are good swimmers. If we tie ourselves to them and hold on tight we should get across,” he said, trying to sound positive.

“What about our clothes? If we get them wet, we’ll have problems in the water and we’ll be very cold on the other side.”

“I think I have a solution,” he started taking his air suit off. “This is waterproof, if we all take off as much as we can and put it all inside this and seal it up tight, the clothes should stay dry.”

They dismounted from their horses and disrobed to their undergarments. There was no time for modesty and though it was going to be cold they had no other choice. Brown tied the old man and the girl securely to their horses and told them to hang on tight. After tying the baggage to the middle horse, Brown got on it and tied himself to the saddle.

“Hold on,” he said

“Let’s wish us luck,” the old man said.

Brown kicked his moshe and the others followed. They rode three abreast straight into the river. They went quickly before the animals could change

their minds, Brown leading the pack. Soon they were in the water and hung on for dear life to the animals.

Now came the most difficult part of the operation, as the horses almost disappeared a couple of times under the water and Brown thought that they would drown. But as they held their breath the moshes heads appeared above the spray again and they continued to push to the other side.

The river was on the whole fairly shallow around this part, but still pretty swift. When they were about three quarters of the way across, they suddenly hit a deeper section of the river where they were hit by a sudden rush of water and Gina was swept sideways off her saddle and went underneath the water.

Brown tried to pull her up unsuccessfully, but the rope she was tied to the horse with was tangled and Brown had no choice but to untie his own rope and jump into the water, holding on to the rope Gina was tied to. With a superhuman effort he managed to free Gina and push her back up on the horse. As he did so his hands turned very cold and he found he was losing his grip on the rope he was holding on to.

He tried to cling on desperately but he was being swept away. He tried to swim and get his head above the water, but the current was too swift. No sooner did he come up to the surface than he was dragged down again by the current. He was drowning.

As good a swimmer as he was, he was being dragged under. This is the end, he thought. For the second time in his life he was drowning and for the second time in his life he did not drown. He was changing.

Something was growing on his back, and his hands and feet were elongating. Suddenly he was breathing underwater. He was gliding through the water effortlessly, he could even swim against the current. He turned around and broke surface to see how the others were doing. He could see they were in real trouble as he swam up to them underwater and dragged the horses by their bridles towards the shore, trying his best not to show himself, but he could not hide his webbed hands.

As they came up to a shallower part of the river, he was exposed. He let go and went deeper into the water. They were safe but he was not sure how much of him they had seen. Once he was sure that they would make it by themselves, he decided to head down river.

Once he was out of their view, he waded ashore on all fours. He was an amphibian, he could breathe air, but there were also some strange openings

behind his ears as if he had gills as well. He felt his back, there was a fin like structure on it and his head felt elongated.

As he lay on the riverbank, he felt his body shrink, his webbed hands and feet were shrinking to normal size, so was his head and the structure on his back. So the first time had not been a dream after all, he could change shape.

Brown lay back to take it all in. He hoped they hadn't seen his other shape. He didn't have long to himself. Very soon he heard horses approaching. It was Gina and Zalamus. They came up to him and dismounted.

"You're alive. We had given up hope." She came and hugged him.

"Must've been washed up by the current," he lied.

"A very strange thing happened to us," said Gina. "A strange creature emerged out of the water and helped us."

"Are you sure?" asked Brown.

"We saw it clearly," Zalamus said. "It had webbed hands and an elongated head and a fin on its back."

"And it looked like you," said Gina.

"Maybe the same creature rescued me then," said Brown, trying not to smile.

"We've never heard of such a creature in these waters before," said Zalamus, looking very suspicious.

"Don't look at me," Brown protested. "It wasn't me."

"Well it really looked like you, even with its elongated head," said Zalamus.

"We better get going," said Brown recovering slowly. He felt great, like a new man recovering from a bout of serious illness. His body felt different, that old tiredness was gone, but he was still weak somehow, as if the process would take some time. He did not know what was going on with his body, but it felt a lot like the first time he went through the renewal process.

Soon it was quite dark and it was impossible to travel any further. They moved away from the path and found a sheltered cave and settled there for the night. Brown was hopeful that the others had not managed to cross the river so that they would be safe during the night. He would worry about things tomorrow, but after his ordeal in the river he really needed a rest even though his body felt great.

He did not permit a fire, however, and the three of them went to sleep huddled together in the cave after finishing off the rest of the food. They still

had nearly seventy miles to cover to the city.

* * *

In the morning Brown went to reconnoitre before starting out.

When he was on his way back to the cave and almost about to enter it, he heard Gina shout and then he heard Zedan's voice telling them to be quiet.

Brown moved hurriedly out of the cave as quietly as possible, looking around to see if there was anybody else. But he could not see anyone. Lying on his belly behind a mound he could hear Zedan questioning the girl.

"Where is he?" he asked the girl, but she kept quiet. "Tell me where he is," he shouted shaking her.

"I don't know," she started crying, but before she finished he slapped her hard across the face.

"Where is he? Tell me or I'll shoot your father."

From the place Brown was lying he could shoot but he risked hitting the girl. All he could do was wait. Frustrated, with his gun ready in his hand, he watched the back of the shorter muscular man.

"He's gone out to have a look around," she said slowly.

"He will be back soon and when he does, I will give him a warm welcome," Zedan gestured with his gun and laughed. "So warm a welcome that it will burn a hole in him." His ordinarily handsome blue face was distorted by a cruel smile.

As Brown waited patiently outside Zedan seemed to become impatient.

"What's keeping him?" Zedan asked Gina.

"How should I know?" said Gina.

"Alright, we'd better move out. We'd better go and meet Kirkan, further up-river."

Zedan came out of the cave behind them and Brown seized his chance. He jumped and knocked Zedan over, sending the girl sprawling as well. When Zedan came up Brown kicked him and then drove hard into his stomach, followed by an elbow to his face in a neat karate movement. It was all over in a second and Brown was standing over Zedan with a gun in his hand.

"Say your prayers," Brown said. "I have let you go once too often and made a big mistake but I will soon rectify that."

Zedan stared at him hatefully.

“Don’t shoot him,” screamed Gina suddenly. Brown was taken aback.

“He was going to kill you,” he said.

“Maybe,” she cried. “But I can’t let you kill him. You will have to let him go.”

Brown had never heard a more preposterous suggestion in all his life but he held his fire.

“Please let him go,” she begged him. “For my sake. You promised me one favour.”

Brown felt highly amused by the situation. There he was standing quite in the open listening to the mad suggestion of a hysterical girl while who knew how many men were creeping up behind him.

“The lady says I must let you go,” Brown said presently. “Where’s the rest of your men?”

“They wouldn’t cross the river last night,” Zedan said vehemently. “The dogs stayed behind. Kirkan and I have been looking for you all night.”

Brown did not know whether to believe him, but told him to get up.

“Into the cave,” he said. “Bring me some rope, Gina.”

He told Zedan to lie on his belly and then tied up his hands and feet together behind his back and left him there.

“Your men should find you,” he said before he left. “Or you should free yourself in time. But don’t cross my path again. Next time it will be once too many.”

“Thanks,” the girl whispered to him as he helped her on her horse. He did not say anything. Throughout all this time Zalamus had not spoken at all.

They made their way again down the path as fast as they could, keeping a sharp eye open for Zedan’s followers and Kirkan. Once it was in Brown’s mind to ambush them, but he decided the odds were too high against him. Kirkan was an unknown quantity.

He was still trying to work out why he had let Zedan go. It was against all reason, the man was dangerous and probably a killer, but then so was he. There was not much difference between either of them, except they were on opposite sides, but he still regretted letting him live.

While he was thinking this way the old man came up to him.

“That was a very generous thing you did,” he said. “I didn’t think you were capable of it. I didn’t think you would let him go again.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get him yet,” Brown said good-humouredly. “And you’d

better watch out too.”

“I don’t think you’re all bad,” the man said again and Brown kept quiet. From that moment on the old man was as friendly to him as he possibly could be.

“Tell me something?” Brown asked him, taking advantage of his friendliness. “Do you know why the other planets are interested in this place so much?”

“You have to pay for that sort of information.”

“We’ll pay you a lot of money.”

“It’s not money I want, but independence. If you will give me your word to help our cause, peacefully of course, then I am ready to answer all your questions.”

“You will accept my word!”

“Yes, I think you will keep it. I sense a change in you. My daughter is right, Baccra and Levita are our enemies. Our hope lies in peaceful negotiations.”

“I will try,” Brown said presently after thinking about it for a while. “But I don’t guarantee success.”

“That’s all I ask,” the old man said.

“Tell me why are Levita and Baccra interested so much in this planet? Enough to be ready to invade it?”

“I would have thought that you would have known that,” he laughed. “There is mito-carbonium here, huge quantities of it.”

The news made Brown almost fall off his saddle. All this time on the planet and he and the EPA had known nothing of this discovery.

But why? Somebody must have known, there was something very wrong.

“Are you sure Levita is involved?” he asked.

“Of course, I am sure,” he said.

So Lanzy was a trained agent, and all this time they had been putting her through second-stage interrogation. No wonder they had been getting no information out of her. He would soon put that right once he got back. But he had to get back and quickly.

They continued on their way through what turned out to be a rather uneventful day. They came across two small villages which they bypassed; they didn’t want to slow down in case Kirkan and Zedan were still behind them. Their food had run out now and they were travelling on empty

stomachs. But the animals were having no problem, they fed themselves on the shrubs and plants they came upon.

About the midday the road forked and this time the old man made them take the left fork and they carried on towards the city for the rest of the afternoon. By evening Brown had the feeling that they had got away with it as Zedan had not been sighted.

The going had been very good for the most of the day and they had covered almost fifty miles. But it was still another twenty or thirty miles to the city.

Snow was falling again, so they decided to call a halt while there was still some light left. They found a sheltered spot and then lit a fire. Brown decided that Zedan must have given up by now. It was immensely cold and the other two began shivering badly and their teeth started chattering, so he had to relent in the end and let them light the fire. He himself moved some distance away to keep watch.

But the night passed without any incident and they started out again in the morning. They were very hungry but nobody complained.

It was here all their troubles began. The old man suddenly decided that they had come the wrong way. They must have branched off somewhere from the main path. It was difficult to tell the proper path sometimes because of the snow, but Brown knew the man must have mistaken another hill or landmark for one he knew.

He did not show his displeasure and Zalamus was grateful, but they had to turn back and retrace their tracks along the way they had come. It took them nearly two hours to get back to the right path and tired and hungry they made their way down it. The path was now sloping down towards flatter land.

They had nearly travelled a mile or so when they noticed the hoof marks on the road in front of them. This worried Brown immensely as he could not tell how many men were travelling in front of them. While they could be just travellers from the villages they had passed, they could be Kirkan and Zedan who had overtaken them while they had been lost. The snow had stopped falling and was now melting again.

Brown decided that it would be best if he went ahead, with the others following a little way behind. In that way, he might be able to see what lay ahead first. He reasoned that if he was ambushed, the others would have some time to save themselves. He also fancied his own chances better travelling by himself.

The other two slowed down and Brown went ahead about half a mile in front and then they continued in that pattern. Brown kept a sharp lookout for any movement in the rocks in front of him, but saw nothing.

They continued this way for nearly two hours longer, without any incident occurring and Brown began to relax a little. There was a slight bend on the path but it didn't unduly worry him. He carried on in the same way.

Somebody blasted the road in front of him and he pulled up sharp and reached for his gun.

"Halt!" The order was sharp: Kirkan's voice. "One move and I'll blast you right out of the saddle."

Brown turned his head to the right, very slowly taking no chances. Kirkan came out from behind a rock, holding his gun at him.

"Take your own gun out with your left hand and throw it into the gully on your left."

Brown did as he was told. He knew there was nothing else he could do other than wait. This was probably the end of the line for him, but he needed to try find a way out.

Zedan came out from behind the rocks further up.

"Well, the tables are turned," he said smiling.

"We thought we must have passed you when we didn't sight you earlier," Kirkan said. "Got a little lost, did you?"

"Maybe," said Brown. "Only two of you here?"

"That's all we need," said Zedan. "The others took the other road in the fork further back; we weren't taking any chances with you."

"What do you propose to do now?" Brown asked.

"Kill him?" Kirkan said and looked at Zedan.

"No, we hold him prisoner," replied Zedan.

"Until when?"

"Till they meet our demands."

"They won't meet your demands," Kirkan said angrily. "We don't need him. When my troops land we can take the EPA anyway. I say kill him and the other two."

"No," said Zedan, he seemed determined to keep Brown alive, maybe he as returning the earlier favour. He pointed his gun at Kirkan. "Put your gun away. I'm in charge here. We'll do as I say."

Kirkan looked at Zedan grimly and then slowly lowered his gun. Zedan

moved his gun to cover Brown. As soon as he did, Kirkan brought up his gun again and shot Zedan.

“Watch out,” shouted Brown, but it was too late. Zedan was already falling, mortally wounded. Brown kicked his moshe forward and kicked the gun from Kirkan’s hand as he was raising it at him and then dived at him bowling him over.

The gun went sliding into the gully and they both sprawled on the ground away from Zedan, who lay dying and still clutching his own gun.

They both sprang up at the same time. Brown went in with a kick to Kirkan’s face, springing from a side stance. But Kirkan avoided it and came back with a sidekick to Brown’s loins. Brown parried the kick with a downward left arm block and sprang back. He saw with what ease Kirkan handled himself. Martial arts held a long tradition in the Berkai Empire.

Kirkan sprang to the attack with a double kick beginning with a feint to the stomach and ending at the left side of Brown’s face. Brown dodged the kick and got ready for the charge, which followed. As Kirkan followed up his kick with a right and then left punch, Brown blocked the right punch with a left fore-arm side block, stepped back sideways on his right foot, half turned and blocked Kirkan’s left with a forearm inside block with his own right hand, thus deflecting it. Continuing the motion he brought the back of his right fist up from the elbow to connect with Kirkan’s face as he came forward. Then, pivoting on his left foot, he did a back kick to Kirkan’s stomach, which sent him flying backwards.

But, to Brown’s surprise, the man sprang straight back to his feet after doing a back flip, while falling backwards. He had taken a very hard knuckle punch and a kick that would have knocked out most men, without even flinching. Brown knew he was in trouble, being weak from hunger and still undergoing inner change, there was no way he could match a man who was ordinarily more than twice as strong as he was.

“Very good, Arbitrator,” the man from Berkai smiled, showing blood from a broken tooth and approaching more cautiously.

“I underestimated you. But I will kill you yet with my bare hands.” He flexed his arms. “You know my tooth will grow back.”

“Not if I can help it,” Brown put on a brave face, hoping the girl and her father would come around the corner any moment.

He classed Kirkan’s style to be a mixture of old Earth fighting techniques

and fell back into a more defensive stance himself. He knew he could not match Kirkan blow for blow or his strength.

All he could do was to use Kirkan's own strength against him and just hold on defending himself as best as possible. He fell back into a softer more recent adaptation of old Kung-Fu techniques. How little these had changed.

Kirkan came on again and Brown fell back. But this time the approach was more cautious and did not leave himself exposed. Brown dodged his blows and deflected them. The man seemed unstoppable.

But then the worst happened, starting from an innocent-looking kick and several punches in rapid succession which Brown dodged and parried successfully, came a chop to the left of his neck. Brown did a side arm block to stop the blow and felt the bone in his forearm give just above the wrist. He kicked back as hard as he could with a side kick while falling back, which sent Kirkan staggering backwards.

Brown felt the sharp pain in his left arm but he had hurt Kirkan also, who held back momentarily. Brown knew he was finished as soon as Kirkan attacked again, he would find out that Brown's left arm was useless, but he forced himself not to show anything on his face. Then he heard the welcoming sound of hooves coming around the corner.

Kirkan looked around and then back at him again and smiled.

"You win this time, Arbitrator," he said, as he came at him with a flying kick. Brown fell to his right and rolled over but Kirkan did not stop. He continued his run and jumped on Brown's moshe and rode off.

Gina and her father came around the corner. Brown was still lying on the ground as they approached. The girl dismounted quickly and ran straightway over to him, looking very worried.

"Am I glad to see you," said Brown.

"Are you all right?" Her face was full of concern.

"Left arm broken and my ego is bruised," he gestured painfully. "Otherwise okay. It was Kirkan, I came off second best I'm afraid. He shot Zedan over there."

"Yes, I've seen him," she said matter-of-factly.

"He's dead," shouted her father.

"Poor boy," she said. "I'm glad that at least you're safe. Let's have a look at the arm."

"We should go after Kirkan," protested Brown. "He's unarmed. We can

catch him.”

“I doubt it,” said Zalamus. “There are a lot of paths leaving this track, he can disappear down any of those. He must be a long way off by now. Anyway you are in no condition to chase him. I’m too old for it and Gina isn’t trained to anywhere near the right standard.”

That settled it for Brown. They buried Zedan as best as they could and continued towards the city. He rode double with the girl. They knew that Zedan and Kirkan’s steeds were around somewhere nearby, but they were too tired to look. With his left arm hanging from his neck in a makeshift sling, Brown had an uneventful journey into the next village.

From there they travelled by mechanised transport to the city and were then picked up by an EPA car. He invited the girl and her father to come back with him and they gladly accepted. But for Brown his ordeal was far from over. Invasion forces were gathering and he did not have time to lose.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Before Brown went to see the medics he sent a top-priority message to Earth headquarters. He knew the invasion would take place soon and his tiny forces would stand no chance against the full onslaught of the Berkai Empire. Kirkan had mentioned that he expected his troops to land pretty soon.

With his message acknowledged Brown went to see the doctor. He came out half an hour later with his arm as good as new. The doctor did some additional tests on him while he was there, to check his health after his ordeal.

“I don’t really understand what is happening,” said the doctor.

“I feel fine,” protested Brown.

“That’s what I don’t understand,” said the doctor. “The last time I saw you, you were dying. But now the traces of the drug have almost completely disappeared. Even your arm did not really need the instant healing process. It was healing rather well by itself.”

“Well I haven’t used it for the last day,” said Brown.

“You don’t understand, your body seemed to be healing itself at a phenomenal rate.”

Brown did understand, but said nothing. He had a good idea of what was taking place.

“So I’m back to normal?”

“Better than normal,” said the doctor, “If I didn’t know better, I could almost swear your body is regenerating, but that’s impossible without going through the renewal process.”

“I feel a lot better,” said Brown. “Maybe all the treatment you gave me has had a better effect than you thought possible.”

“It was only supposed to slow down your demise, not cure you.” The doctor was still perplexed.

“Maybe you’re a better doctor than you think,” Brown lied. He of course now knew what was taking place. It seemed the stories of shape-shifting aliens on Earth were true after all.

* * *

Brown next he went to see Benson to find out why no EPA rescue vehicle had gone to rendezvous with him near the farm. The report Benson gave him disturbed him even further.

“We never received your order,” Benson said. He flicked on a recording. A body was slumped over a desk. “The communications officer was killed just after you sent in the coordinates.”

“This is bad,” said Brown.

“It gets worse. The assassin instructed our guard mandroids to kill some of the remaining prisoners, and then gave them a self-destruct command.”

“Have we caught the assassin?”

Benson shook his head. “Nobody knows his or her identity. When you didn’t return we sent out search parties, but you were much further out than we expected.”

“Who has the mandroid self-destruct codes?” Brown asked.

There were several people in the staff who knew the self-destruct code, the dead communications officer being one. Security was trying to work at it but they had no clues yet. They were sure, however, that it was somebody the dead man knew quite well. The camera footage showed the man looking round at someone entering the secure room, but then turning back to his station, having obviously recognised the person who’d entered. The footage cut out for a few seconds. When it came back on, the officer was dead.

Only Brown could change the self-destruct code, so he decided to change it immediately, making sure he alone and nobody else knew the new code. He could not take a chance with anybody now, he thought to himself.

Next he went back to his quarters and called a mandroid to give him some special instructions. Then he lay down to rest for a while.

He had asked Benson for a report on Lanzy and the other people he had been interrogating. He wanted to see if he had come up with anything but he doubted it very much.

Brown awoke later and went to visit Gina and her father in the quarters that had been allocated to them. He had thought it best that for their own safety that they remain in the EPA headquarters for a few days. He had been observing protocol for the girl’s sake by letting her stay with Zalamus instead of in his own quarters.

After having some refreshment with them he extracted a promise from the girl to visit him later in his own quarters and then left. He went to his office in the second level above the ground to have a look through Benson's report. But as anticipated it disappointed him, it did not contain anything he did not know already. The rest of the day would be taken up in routine matters and duties he had neglected earlier. The starship would arrive early next day and he gave orders to make preparations to receive the ship's captain and his officers as guests and offer them entertainment. He called Benson.

"I am sure now Levita's involved with the Berkai Empire in a plot to invade this planet, so I think Lanzy must be a trained spy," he said to Benson.

"I have already received a complaint from the government of Levita about holding her," Benson said.

"Deny we are holding her. Put her on third stage."

"But she has already confessed to being an agent," Benson stammered. "She wants to co-operate with us voluntarily."

"That's interesting. Why the change all of a sudden?" Brown was perplexed.

"Probably she realised she cannot get away. She knows we'll get the information out of her in the end," offered Benson.

"Maybe," Brown was not too sure. "The timing is very important I think."

"Why is that?" Benson asked.

Brown disregarded the question. "What information has she volunteered?" he asked.

"Berkai and Levita are interested in this planet because we are sitting on vast quantities of mito-carbonium," Benson said excitedly, trying to convey the importance of the information.

"Really?" asked Brown. "How did she get that information?"

"There's a lot of independent prospecting going on. Mito-carbonium is very rare and much in demand. We could fuel all the hyper-drives in the sector."

"I already know all that," said Brown, who knew that this rare crystal had the ability to multiply very rapidly when superheated and then produce fusion to release truly immense amounts of energy.

"I have already asked Earth to send a super-class starship to patrol Pirrusian space," said Brown again. "The Berkai Empire won't dare invade with a starship guarding the planet."

“Were they going to invade?” Benson asked, showing disbelief.

“They are making preparations now,” Brown said. “That is why she has confessed. She thinks we are too late to do anything but she and the rest of them are in for a big surprise.”

Benson did not say anything but just looked at him, his piggish eyes stared from the round plump face.

“I want the full report immediately and the location of the deposits,” Brown said again. “Has she told you the location of the mito-carbonium deposits?”

“No, she doesn’t know,” Benson said in a strange voice.

“Then there can be hardly anything in the report which I don’t know already. You’re slipping Mark. It’s lucky I found all these things out. She should have been put on a third stage earlier.”

“I was only following procedure,” stammered Benson. The look of calmness temporarily left him.

“Damn procedure, I want that location or I’ll put her on third stage myself,” Brown said angrily. “She must know the location of the deposits. If we don’t get the information voluntarily, put her on the third stage immediately. I must know that by today. My source couldn’t give me the location.”

“Who is your source?” Benson asked, He sounded a bit irritated to Brown, but it was understandable he thought.

“The girl’s father.”

“Why don’t we put him on third stage? He may be holding something back,” Benson sounded desperate.

“Have you gone mad?” Brown said furiously. “He volunteered the information without asking. I’m sure that’s all he knows and I believe him. You just make sure that Lanzy tells you where the deposits are or put her in third stage straight away. That’s an order, and I don’t want any false info as it will be checked out immediately by us to verify the truth.”

Brown left Benson then. He was angry at the way Benson had bungled things by his reluctance to put Lanzy through third stage. *What is the matter with him?* Brown thought. The man had always been the most efficient information officer he ever worked with up to now. Brown had personally asked for Benson to be his second-in-command when he had been sent to Pirrus. *Perhaps he is in love with Agent Lanzy?* Thought Brown.

The assistant security officer made a report on the murder of the communications officer. They still had no clue as to the identity of the

murderer. Brown ordered him to take precautions to stop the murderer if he tried to strike again and was assured that they were doing everything that was possible; Brown turned down the idea of a body guard for himself, for he had already put another idea in place.

He spent the rest of the time filling in reports and then went back to his quarters tired and exhausted. A few minutes later Gina came to see him as promised. They made leisurely love and though she could not stay for long, it was a much needed break.

Brown's tension ebbed away and he felt refreshed. He talked to the girl freely about things to come and his hope to see the planet peaceful again.

"You've changed," she said in the end. "I used to think at one time all you enjoyed was killing people."

He laughed at this but did not say anything. She went back to her quarters and Brown fell asleep. It was going to be a long day tomorrow.

When he awoke the next morning, the super-class starship had arrived. It was orbiting the planet already and the ship's captain was making preparations to land a small shuttle, while the ship stayed in orbit. Apparently the ship was in a nearby solar system when the call came, so it was able to arrive quickly.

Benson's also reported that Miss Lanzy had confessed the location of the deposits. Brown arranged to have it checked out immediately. He had thought that Benson had seemed a little tense when he asked about the report but dismissed it from his mind.

Brown got up hastily and made ready to receive the ship's captain. He put on his full uniform and regalia and went to the spaceport's arrivals lounge next to the landing site in the EPA complex.

Within an hour the shuttle came in and the captain emerged with his officers and a member of the EPA council chamber. Earth had pulled out all stops to send in the super-class starship when the news of the mito-carbonium deposits had reached them. The EPA had sent one of its highest ranking members to take charge of things. Unfortunately the find was too important for Brown to remain in charge.

The ship's Captain was called Ivan Kalawaski, who seemed a good-natured man, full of humour and cracking jokes all the time. But Brown had no illusions about his ability. He was a comparatively young man to hold such a post.

The EPA man was, however, a quite different kettle of fish. Rear Admiral George Adamson was rather cool and aloof in a superior sort of way, and did not get on very well with Captain Kalawaski. He had the authority to override the captain on his own ship. George Adamson was here to take over.

Over drinks after dinner, Adamson spoke to Brown. "Well old boy," he said. "Well done. You know this means a promotion for you. You go straight back to Earth for a holiday, while I handle things here." The tall thin man fidgeted with his uniform.

Brown disliked the man straight away but he was in no position to argue.

"When am I likely to go?"

"As soon as I have become familiarised with things here. I expect you will be glad to get away from things here, eh? Can't say I cherish the thought of staying here too much myself. But duty first eh, old boy?"

"Of course, sir."

"No need for that formality, just call me George. By the way, there was some confusion over the location of the deposits. Has that been cleared up?" His nervous fingers twitched again.

"Yes. We know the location now."

Brown had got confirmation that morning that the coordinates supplied by Benson had been correct, as they waited for the ship. So Miss Lanzy had come up with the goods after all under the threat of third stage.

"I've already given orders for a site to be cleared in the area and the place occupied. Work is in progress now. Pre-fab buildings are being erected and the area is being fenced off as we speak."

"Excellent!" said George.

Brown thought of the promise he had made to Zalamus. "I have a request, sir," he ventured.

"Yes, anything you want, old boy."

Brown felt encouraged. Nothing was too good for him.

"I was thinking of giving them independence."

"Come on, old boy," the man guffawed. "Such things are not for you to decide. If I were you I would forget it. Never heard such a preposterous idea. Independence for a bunch of savages, even though they might be of Earth origin! I find this difficult to accept."

"What was that, sir? What did you say?" Brown became excited.

"I expect you don't know," the Rear Admiral laughed. "This planet was

settled by a migrant ship that left Earth in 2290 after travelling 190 years in space. Only one message from them reached back to Earth. The planet was uninhabited, old boy, when the ship reached here. The Pirussians are the original Earth settlers. It's classified information of which only a few of us in the council are aware. I can tell you as you're on your way back to Earth, but it can't be proved without DNA testing. Which as you know is banned under Earth regulations."

"But that is ridiculous," Brown protested.

"We need those deposits and we are going to get them. The information about the colonists was lost in the archives. We came across it by chance. We have taken measures so no one will find it without the retrieval code."

Brown was completely astounded. "So you're saying we lost touch with them during the centuries of war from 2300 AD onward? And they were beyond normal space travel before proper hyper-drive was invented around 2500?"

"Exactly," said the Rear Admiral. "For some reason they regressed into primitives. But the question of independence is out of the question, with all the mito-carbonium here. My recommendation would be against it. Don't worry about it," the man smiled. "But I can grant you a lot of other favours."

But Brown was not listening. His mind was in turmoil at this piece of information. It was highly explosive. No wonder they wanted it kept secret.

The next few days flew by really fast. Brown was busy with the rear admiral and hardly had any time to spend with Gina and her father. Finally he got an evening alone with her. Brown decided to come clean with the bad news.

"I'm being sent back to Earth," he confessed.

"When," Gina was surprised.

"In the next few weeks, once the emergency is over," said Brown.

"You want to go?" she asked.

"I don't want to, but I'm not being given a choice. Adamson doesn't want me here."

"What about your promise to my father?"

"I already tried, but he rejected it flatly. Unfortunately he has the final say. I wasn't expecting somebody of his rank to be sent here to replace me so soon," Brown was under strict orders not to divulge what he had found out about the origins of the Pirussians.

“I knew we would be disappointed,” Gina looked sad.

“I did say that I couldn’t guarantee anything.”

“I’m not blaming you,” she said. “If there’s one thing that I’ve learnt, it is that you’re a good man and you try to keep your promises.”

“You could come with me.”

Gina shook her head. “You’d soon get tired of me.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself. You can come as my wife.”

“I doubt if I would fit in with Earth society and my father would be heart broken.”

“He could come too. They owe me a lot of favours.”

“He’d never leave his beloved Pirrus. So I can’t come with you.”

“I thought you loved me,” Brown felt disappointed.

“I do, but this is much more than just about us. I’m sorry.”

“Then I’ll have to come back after my regeneration. But that’ll take time.”

“You’ll come back for me?” she was surprised.

“If I possibly can.” He left it like that. He couldn’t promise anymore.

Brown knew he had to go back for regeneration, even though he didn’t really need it. Awkward questions would be asked. Why was his ability to change, such a big secret that he did not know it himself and what would happen if people found out about him? No he couldn’t take the chance. There had to be other people like him and he needed to find out more. The answers were back on Earth.

The next day when he was back with Adamson, Benson interrupted them. He had news of Mrs Davis, the reporter from Earth. An informer had phoned in with the information of her whereabouts.

“We know where she is being held,” said Benson. “It’s in the city.”

“Let’s go and get her,” said Adamson.

“I have already given orders for the place to be surrounded,” said Benson smiling.

“Good work,” said Brown.

Adamson accompanied them to the city to see the action. They went to the part of the city where the informer had directed them. It was in the slummiest of suburbs.

EPA personnel were in position already with the mandroids out in front. The residents of the adjacent buildings had been cleared already.

“Shall we send the mandroids in?” asked Benson.

“Give them a chance to surrender. Call them over the loudhailer,” said Brown. He did not want any more of them killed, after what he knew now.

But their request to surrender was greeted with several blasts of gunfire and the mandroids were sent in. Brown was worried about the possibility of the hostage being killed but Benson seemed eager to send the mandroids in and Adamson positively encouraged it.

The rebels were armed with rocket launchers and made a good fight of it. They managed to wreck one of the mandroids and kill one of the EPA personnel, damaging several buildings.

There were three of them and they all died fighting. None of them surrendered. When Brown entered the building they found the three blue men lying dead, still clutching their weapons. Strangely, Brown felt sorry for them: they had fought on knowing that the odds were hopelessly against them. They found Mrs Davis sitting in the cellar. She was unharmed and Brown did not understand that at all. Why had they let her stay alive? But he did not say anything to ruin the situation, as Adamson revelled in it.

They brought Mrs Davis back to the base and then the celebrations started. Everybody was congratulating her lucky escape. Captain Kalawaski and Rear Admiral Adamson never left her side.

Brown hardly got a chance to speak to her all through the proceedings. Mrs Davis was a person everybody wanted to meet. To be mentioned in her column meant immortality. She, however, looked pale and distraught. There was a vacant expression in her eyes which Brown put down to shock. She had been through an awful ordeal. He mentioned once that the doctors should have a look at her, but the captain said that they should do it in his ship which was far better equipped. Adamson agreed with him.

“I’d like to see the ship,” she said. “I’ve never seen a super-class starship.”

“I’d be most happy to show you around,” the captain said cheerfully, with an eager smile on his face.

“I’ll be most happy to accompany you,” Adamson joined in. “I think I’ll stay in the ship, until they find the killer who’s loose in the base.”

Brown smiled to himself as he thought they deserved each other. He was happy that Adamson would be out of his hair for a while.

Within a short time they had all left for the starship in the shuttle. The captain was busy explaining to Mrs Davies the capabilities of the starship while Adamson was full of his own importance. Brown watched them go

with a sigh of relief as he went back to his own office.

He did not feel like facing Gina and her father that day for he had failed to achieve anything for them. He wanted to let them know of their lost origins, especially Gina, but he could not even do that. Nobody would believe him without proof.

He went to check up on how work was progressing on the mining site. The report was good. They had not come up against any resistance from rebels. It was a very remote location and the EPA had already cleared the place, partially managing to set up the buildings. The scientists had already brought up samples and the initial report indicated that the find was as good as had been promised.

Well I tried, thought Brown to himself. He had done what he had promised, though without achieving any success and that seemed very important to him suddenly. He thought of Earth and invariably of his ex-wives, cool, sophisticated women, known for their beauty and of Narissa, the most beautiful woman he had ever known. Gina was nothing like them, but she was more beautiful than them in her own special way.

Maybe I can force her to come back with me, he thought. But he rejected the thought. She would never fit into Earth society but more likely she would never leave her native Pirrus. However, there was some hope, if he could only tell her what he knew.

The sky had grown darker outside and the artificial lights came on automatically, while Brown was immersed in his thoughts. He would have to go see Gina and her father and try again, he decided. As he got up from his desk, a thought suddenly struck him. He ran to the intercom and hailed the communications room.

“Connect me to the ship immediately,” he said. “Ask for Captain Kalawaski.”

“Yes, sir,” the new communications officer obeyed at once. “Trying to raise them now, sir.”

“Hello, this is Earth starship Galaxy III,” a voice came through the intercom. Brown knew it was already too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Crimson lights flooded through the window. He switched off the intercom and looked out. The darkness had suddenly changed into daylight and there was a new sun in the sky.

The inside of the sun seemed to be erupting in bursts of more and more energy and the light grew more and more intense. Shock waves shook the building. Brown just stood and watched, shaking his head in the reflection in the window. The light-sensitive windowpane darkened with the intensity of the light to protect Brown's eyes.

A few moments later he slowly turned away and sat down. *What a day* he thought; the whole situation had changed again. He was in charge once more.

As he was thinking about things that had just passed, Benson entered the room. He had a gun in his hand. Brown looked up and smiled.

"I've been waiting for this for some time. Why did it have to be you, Mark?"

"It's the end of the line for you, Arbitrator," Benson smiled almost apologetically.

"You've been very clever. I knew it had to be one of a handful but I didn't want it to be you. My chief intelligence officer. No wonder I never got any information on time. That was a very nice trick to send Mrs Davis up as a human bomb."

"Simple but effective, wouldn't you say?" A malevolent smile lit up on his face, a feature Brown had never noticed before.

Brown asked him why after twenty-five years of faithful service in the EPA he was turning traitor and was also betraying him, his old friend. Benson told him he didn't want it to be like this, but his attempts to get Brown to leave Pirrus had failed. He was genuinely sorry, as he did like Brown as a friend.

"But you worked with me loyally for six years, before my retirement. Why now? What is the connection?"

"You don't understand, do you?" Benson smiled. There was sweat on his plump face. "I'm a sleeper from Levita."

Brown nearly fell off his seat. That was why he was so reluctant to use the

third stage on Lanzy. He asked Benson that and he confirmed that Lanzy was his handler. Brown was surprised, he wasn't expecting this. He just couldn't believe it.

"She's also Narissa's step-sister. So she has a special grudge against you, when you refused her offer to go back to Levita. You've always been in their sights, since your flight from Levita. It was just a matter of time."

"Great! It gets worse by the minute. Where is Lara?" If Brown was surprised before, this flabbergasted him completely.

"I've let her go, she doesn't know the location you asked for."

"So that's why didn't you give me the information about the mitocarbonium site before? But we've got the right location now."

"So let them do work on it, I'll take it over later."

"You've got it all planned."

They had landed him on Earth secretly years ago with papers to infiltrate the EPA. As long as Earth's and Levita's interests did not clash he had served Earth faithfully.

"That's why they sent Lara here, to make sure you remembered your original purpose," said Brown.

"I'm afraid so."

And all this time he had been thinking he was fighting Zedan and Kirkan. Ingenious!

"I expect you got Zedan out after the attempt to blow up the hall. Tell me, how did you manage your last move?"

"That was Kirkan. He has a certain power over women. Doesn't work on Pirussian girls, but Earth women are very susceptible to it. He hypnotised Mrs Davis to do his bidding, albeit with the help of some drugs."

"I must take off my hat to you, Mark. You had me fooled completely."

"Well that's how it goes. You win and you lose." His face convulsed with laughter.

"So you're going to kill me in cold blood? Your friend for so many years. You killed all those people in the ship."

"Come now, Jim. You are just as much a killer as I am. In fact, you have probably killed more people than I have for Earth's cause. My cause is just as good. This is the end of the line for you."

"I'm afraid this is the end of the line for you, Mark, if you try raise your gun. Look behind. You're covered."

“That’s an old trick and it won’t work,” his plump face creased with laughter again and his old body rolled with it. *He is certainly enjoying himself*, thought Brown.

“It’s true”, Brown said. “I told you I was expecting you, well somebody. You have been my friend, so I’ll give you a chance. Throw down your gun and I’ll see you get a fair trial.”

“I’m afraid you are not in a position to do anything,” Benson said without looking around. “All the people are still watching the ship. I’ll kill you and they’ll blame the unknown killer. When our troops land a few days’ time, they’ll take over without resistance and I will lead them. You should’ve taken the vacation. I’m sorry, this is goodbye.”

Benson raised his gun to take deliberate aim and died that instant from a blast from a mandroid standing behind him. His fat body crumpled and his face showed the surprise and pain he felt.

“I’m sorry too,” said Brown. His special instructions to the mandroid to keep watch on him at all times had paid off.

Brown did not have a moment to lose. Already a very desperate plan was forming in his mind. He went to consult the scientists straight away after calling in the security to take charge of Benson’s body.

He then sent word to Major Rogan of the Pirrusian Police Force to come and see him at once. There was a general panic in the EPA quarters once they had recovered from the weird sight of the starship blowing up in the sky above them. There was still light in the sky, but eventually it would fizzle out like a flare and it would be dark again. Most of the ship would burn out with some of the debris coming down to the planet with the rest orbiting for eternity.

Almost everybody knew of the invasion threat by now, which had been made public with the arrival of the starship. They had all been very pleased and had breathed a sigh of relief as the ship would have stopped the invasion. However, now that the ship was no longer there with its vast array of weapons systems things were different. The EPA forces had no special protection any more, now they would be annihilated.

The discovery that Benson was the unknown killer relieved people a little but the thoughts of thousands of Berkai and Levitan troops landing on the planet was enough to frighten the bravest.

Brown was now sure that by now the enemy had more details about the

mandroids from Benson and would have better weapons to cope with them. He was in deep trouble unless he had help. Earth would no doubt send help but it would be useless unless they could hold on. Earth had no other super-class ship in the vicinity and the small EPA fleet which patrolled Pirussian space would be no match for the combined Levitan and the Berkai Empire fleets. However, Brown wanted to warn them what to expect.

Unfortunately for the fleet, Brown's staff had been trying to get in touch with them for the last hour without any success whatsoever so Brown feared the worst. It was possible that the ships had already dispersed with the arrival of the super-class ship, or that they had already been engaged and destroyed by the enemy.

Messages had been sent to Earth, but it would take a few days to reach Earth through a relay system and if all went well several more days after that for Earth forces to arrive. At the least Brown estimated that he would have to hold out for several weeks, before he had any help from Earth.

While he was thinking of the steps he could follow, the intercom buzzed. It was the new communications officer who had taken over from Benson. He sounded terribly agitated. A message had come in from the fleet commander Captain Peterson. He had been attacked by Levitan ships and his fleet had been destroyed. He was the sole survivor.

"Put him on," Brown said impatiently.

A screen materialised on one of the room's walls and a man with a calm but tense voice appeared.

"This is Captain Peterson, commander of the fifth fleet. Repeat, fleet destroyed by Levitan warships. Sole survivor as far as I can tell. Heading back to Pirrus space, ships in pursuit."

"What happened?" said Brown.

"Taken by surprise," said the man. "Levitan fleet approached and attacked suddenly after our departure from Pirrus space, after the arrival of the starship Galaxy III. We were on friendly terms with Levita so did not expect an attack."

"Are you damaged?" asked Brown.

"Only superficially," said the Captain.

"Then don't come here. That's a negative. The Baccran Fleet is manoeuvring around here. Try to escape and contact Earth and get help if you can."

“I will try. I don’t know how fast their ships are. We’ll make a hyperspace jump. Good luck and goodbye for now.” With that the captain disappeared from view.

Brown cursed himself for not warning them about Levita’s involvement. Firstly he had not expected any attacks for a few days and secondly he had not expected any attacks at all after the arrival of the super-class ship. Also not until Benson had shown his hand had he been completely sure of Levita’s involvement.

Ten years ago when Brown had been on that planet, Levita did not even have ships that could make a hyperspace jump but obviously once they had acquired the technology, they had progressed rapidly and were no competing with Earth for control of the planet Pirrus.

Now, Brown thought, he was on his own. With Captain Peterson went his last hope for whatever little protection there may have been. They were completely alone on the hostile planet, cut off from Earth’s long arm of protection. They would have to fend for themselves or perish. Brown began to sketch out the details of his very desperate plan in his head; the less detail others had at this stage the better.

The screen disappeared from the wall and Brown stood in silence for a while. He needed help and he could only get it from the natives, whatever limited help they could offer. However, first he had to persuade them that it would be in their interest to help him. That was why he had sent for Major Rogan.

Brown knew that after Zedan’s death, Kirkan would now control his followers completely. No doubt he would blame Zedan’s death on Brown. They would be watching his every move and as soon as enemy forces landed, they would join them and attack him.

Brown needed to evacuate the base, for he knew that he would have no chance there of surviving aerial attacks which were bound to come. Although the base was in a superb position to defend against ground attack, it was located in a relatively open position and would be very vulnerable to air attacks.

He had the flying cars, of course, and some drones at his disposal, but these would be hardly be a match for the proper airships which were bound to come with the invading force.

Although the EPA headquarters in Pirrus had a secret weapon they had not

yet used, it would be effective only with the right energy source. The force-field generator had been brought in from Earth with Brown to protect against air attacks. Normally it could only be used as a contingency measure for a short while, as it required a colossal amount of energy supply. Unfortunately no mito-carbonium had been supplied by Earth to the base for the purpose of long term use, as they had not seen the necessity for it. Now they would be completely vulnerable to air attacks, which would overwhelm them.

The one escape that Brown could envisage was to evacuate to the far side of the mountains, deep inside the forests which lay some distance from the city on one side. Only there they could hope to survive for a limited period.

Though once they left the base, they would be open to attacks from the rebels, Brown argued with himself that they would stand a better chance there against these forces. If they stayed behind in the base the rebels wouldn't attack them but they would just become sitting ducks once the Baccran and the Levitan invading forces arrived.

If Brown could get a section of the local forces under Major Rogan, who was opposed to the invasion, to join up with him, they would stand a very good chance indeed against the rebels. They could get away even if Kirkan was leading them.

With this thought in mind, Brown went to see Zalamus. Brown wanted his help in the matter, so he had to convince the old man that it was in their interest to help him. Then he would also have to convince Major Rogan who would be coming around soon, to join him.

Zalamus was sitting comfortably and watching the sky outside, through a large window in his room and Gina, who stood nearby, was doing the same. The room was lit up in a strange reddish glow by the light emanating from outside as it filtered through the window. The intensity of the light had dimmed somewhat as it was quite a while after the event, but it was still strong enough to lighten up the area inside.

Zalamus probably knew what had happened to the ship, as Brown had made no secret of it being there in the Pirrus space.

“Well, Arbitrator, to what do we owe this pleasure?” asked Zalamus in a cultivated, soft voice, in quite a contrast to his old animated self when he was rescued by Brown. He was an old charmer when he wanted to be. “Are you in trouble?”

“More than you can imagine,” Brown said in a matter-of-fact voice. “That

was our super-class ship you've been watching blow up."

"I gathered it was a ship but did not know it was yours. I thought maybe the invasion had already started."

"So you know about the invasion?"

"I've heard the rumours."

"But this is not it. It is scheduled for later and that ship was here to stop it, but without it we have little or no chance. "

"It was a beautiful sight, like a giant new sun," said Gina. "It is strange that disaster can be so beautiful."

"Unfortunately it also condemned the three thousand people on the ship."

"Didn't anybody survive?"

"Only the ones on the ground."

"That must have been a very powerful bomb," said Zalamus.

"It was like a micro-nuclear device," said Brown.

"We don't have anything like that," Zalamus said.

"We think it's either Baccran or Levitan," said Brown. "We're still trying to find out how it got through the ship's security system."

"What are you going to do?" asked Zalamus. "Is there any way you can leave the planet?"

"No. That is impossible. Even if I had the means, I cannot leave without specific orders. The current orders are to hold the planet at all costs. Earth needs the mito-carbonium."

"But how? Surely your small armed forces are no match for an invading force?" cried Gina.

"You're right, we'll be crushed like ants if we stay here," said Brown. There had been no ants on the planet, before people from Earth arrived, but they were now here and thriving, as were cockroaches.

"What are you going to do?" asked Zalamus.

"We must evacuate the base. I have a plan. We must hold on until another starship can arrive to help us."

"How long will that take?" asked Zalamus.

"Not long," said Brown. He did not want to give Zalamus the exact information.

"How did they blow up the ship?" asked Gina.

"They had somebody in my staff working for them. He helped them to send up a human bomb to the ship. It was one of our reporters who had been

kidnapped earlier. Kirkan used his power on the reporter Mrs Davis. He turned her into a bomb.”

“Those eyes of his, how I hate them,” said Gina. “They stare right through you.”

“You’re lucky you can resist them. Unfortunately, Mrs Davis could not, otherwise we would not be in such a mess.”

Zalamus asked him what his plans were and Brown told him that they were going to move out of the base the next morning to the mountains. They would then try to hold out there until help arrived from Earth. Zalamus thought they were safer in the base as the rebels wouldn’t attack them there, but they would attack them once they left the base.

“You’re quite correct but we’ll have to take our chances with them. If we stay here, we’ll get wiped out as soon as the invasion forces arrive, for they will definitely have air superiority.”

“Why have you come to see me?” Zalamus smiled. “How can I be of any help?”

“We need men to fight with us against the rebels until we can establish a new base. As a lot of my troops were getting entertained on the ship our numbers are depleted. We never brought many troops in the first place as we misjudged the situation, so we will be outnumbered and very vulnerable when we leave the camp.”

“Why should we help you?” asked Zalamus.

“It’s in your own interest to help me,” Brown lied. “I can promise you independence. You won’t get that if Berkai and Levitan forces invade.”

“How can we be sure that you will keep your word, if we help you? After all you are the one who put down the revolution. You’re even against any negotiated settlement leading to independence.”

“Well things have changed. Originally my remit only extended to putting down the revolution and getting the planet ready for full colonisation and settlement. I was being practical, as independence was not for me to grant. However, because of what I’ve learnt, I did put your case to the higher authorities and their reaction was quite favourable,” lied Brown.

“What have you learnt?” asked Zalamus.

“That you are descended from Earth.”

“When was it you learnt that?” asked Gina.

“Just before the ship got blown up. Unfortunately the man from the high

council got blown up with it, so I can't substantiate my story."

"That's very convenient," smiled Zalamus.

"Well look at it another way then," said Brown angrily. "You know there's going to be an invasion. If that takes place and we're wiped out, you can be damned sure that you won't get any independence. In fact you and your daughter will be the first people Kirkan will dispose of."

"He is right father," Gina interjected.

"You know their reputation." Brown seized the opportunity to push the point home. "They're much worse than us, so you've nothing to lose by helping me."

"I suppose you're right," admitted Zalamus. "You do seem to keep your word. Will Earth grant us independence?"

Brown told them that the reaction had been very favourable, he disliked lying but he had no choice, he thought. If they helped him now, he could not see how Earth could refuse. Their origin was another factor in their favour. Brown knew why the origin of the Pirussian was being kept secret. There was money to be made by people who controlled the planet, but once the secret was out Earth's own laws would force them to grant the planet independent status.

"How can I help?" Zalamus asked at last.

"You have influence and respect. If you will help me convince Major Rogan, then he will be able to help us. That is our only hope of survival."

"I suppose I can try," said Zalamus, much to Brown's relief.

"He will be here shortly," said Brown. "I will send for you when he comes."

"I'll be waiting. I hope you've made the right decision."

"I'll keep my word," said Brown and he meant it. He did not know how but he would give it a try. First there was the issue at hand, the one of survival. He had to survive the invasion before he could even think of anything else. Of course, Brown had a plan and it was the most desperate of gambles but it was the only plan he could think of. There were no alternatives.

"Maybe you can help us further," Brown spoke again. "You know the surrounding area well, don't you?"

"Yes, quite well."

"We need a good guide to help us. Of course we have our own maps, but we don't really know the lay of the land. All our knowledge is based on aerial

reconnaissance. We will move out tomorrow during the day.”

“Why do you want to move out during the day?”

“They won’t be expecting us to move out tomorrow and also our flying vehicles will have a better chance of spotting rebel positions along the route and wiping them out during daylight. I think they’re less likely to attack us during the day because of our superior weaponry. The first attack will happen tomorrow night.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Brown told him that he would better be right or they were all dead and left the room. He had work to do. He had already given orders to prepare for evacuation and things were almost ready. They just had to set the booby traps first. He asked all his senior security staff to come in for the briefing.

On his way to his quarters, Brown began to think of the possibilities that had opened up by the information the rear admiral had given him about the Pirussians. He ordered all the rear admiral’s possessions that were planet-side to be brought to his quarters. The code to access the knowledge of the Pirussians’ heritage was probably there and would certainly help to obtain justice for the Pirussians.

Once the Pirussians gained the same status as Earth humans, they would be entitled to all the same benefits. He would not have to watch Gina grow old and die in a few years’ time.

But first they would have to survive the invasion.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They left the base early in the morning while it was still dark. The plan was to reach the edge of the forest just before daylight broke.

They travelled in a direction away from the main route, down an unused road. The contingent was made up of about 150 men and women and forty mandroids. The EPA base had twenty land vehicles and seven flying ones. Four of these were left at the base with the personnel that stayed behind.

All essential equipment that could be carried had been dismantled and taken, but some of the men left behind were under orders to destroy the rest and booby-trap the place carefully, for anybody that came there later, so that they received a welcome they would never forget. To top all the other booby traps that were being set, Brown's men were to leave behind a small nuclear device hidden away from the main building to detonate on receiving a signal from outside. The majority of the booby-traps were there to be found and dismantled, hopefully lulling the invasion force into a false sense of security. After completing their tasks the men would join them later with their flying crafts. Hopefully the plan would work.

Brown had worked out the route with Zalamus. When Major Rogan had turned up at the last meeting, they had set about trying to persuade him to join up with them. Eventually he had agreed. He was to meet Brown the next day along the route with a unit of 200 or so men who were loyal to him. They were to follow another way and meet him a little further up the trail where the two routes intersected.

Brown was glad to have him. Together with 350 men and the mandroids, he had a better chance of getting through to his destination. Brown knew the spot he wanted to reach, for he had flown over the area a few times to get an idea of what lay ahead.

All through the night an airlift had been going on from the base to the area and as much equipment as could be carried had been sent over in the flying vehicles. He had also sent the other half of his force and twenty mandroids to defend the position.

However, the flying vehicles were not made for the purpose of carrying

heavy loads but were essentially reconnaissance aircrafts. All the heavy weaponry and machinery had to travel over-ground. This machinery contained things which were vital to the success of his plan.

Brown reached the edge of the forest without any incidents and at daylight the column started to make its way through the forest. They were following a rough dirt track, which often had to be flattened and widened to allow his land vehicles to get through. Though this was easy enough to do, it took up valuable time.

They were to rendezvous with Major Rogan just after midday further along the track. As the major and his unit would be following another road out of the city, it would cut across their track further ahead.

The country was becoming more mountainous the further they went into the forest and the going became more difficult and slow. However, Brown was determined to push on as fast as he could and wanted to arrive at his new base by the end of the next day.

As the column pushed on, guided by Zalamus, they came to a narrow pass which they had to go through. Brown had been warned about this place, but was hoping to avoid trouble. This was a place where a large force could be held off by a small group of men.

Brown sent two flying vehicles to investigate the terrain and photograph the area for rebel activity and hoped the rebels would still be unaware of their approach. As the craft went up to the top of the pass, they came under fire. Brown could see the whole thing from where he was. The rebel forces were entrenched on high ground on both sides of the pass. Brown monitored the area intently on the screen in the vehicle he was in as the craft zoomed over the area sending back images.

From what Brown could make out there were only a handful of men guarding the pass. Obviously they had not been expecting Brown's forces but they had a small contingent there just in case anybody showed up. However, they seemed to have anti-aircraft missile launchers, targeting the craft, which were taking evasive manoeuvres and deploying counter measures.

Brown ordered the positions to be wiped out and the two vehicles swooped down firing their particle beams at the rebel positions. The cars were equipped with electronic jamming devices which deflected most of the missiles coming towards them. But Brown knew they could only deal with a certain number and eventually some would get through if they got down

close enough, unless they managed to wipe them out first.

Meanwhile the column had ground to a halt and were watching the proceedings up ahead. Loud explosions were being heard and one of the pilots reported that most of the gun positions had been blown up and the images proved it. But there were still some men left up there who would make life difficult for the column.

Brown decided he would send the third craft with some men and mandroids to land beyond the rebel positions, to mop up any remaining rebel survivors.

“There used to be a rebel base not far from here, during the revolution,” said Zalamus. “It was abandoned after the revolution failed and the rebels melted away.”

“They must have moved back because of the impending invasion,” cursed Brown. “That’s why they were guarding the pass.”

“They must know about us by now, in which case they will be sending reinforcements.”

“How far away is the base?”

“A few hours away by road,” said Zalamus. “If they’re back in their original position.”

“Then we must get moving,” said Brown. “We don’t have a choice, if we don’t get through the pass before they arrive, we’re finished.”

“I hope your men manage to clear the pass, before we enter it.”

As they moved up the track to the pass, the track twisted and turned. They had some cover from the trees until they entered the pass. Brown hoped that by the time they came out into the open, his men would have finished the job they had been sent to do up front.

They heard the shooting start up again as they neared the end of the sheltered part of the track. From then on it was mainly bare rock, providing little cover to the column, but they need not have worried. As they entered the open area, the firing died down and his own men came out to greet the column.

Brown’s plan had worked. They had cleared the pass but at a cost. They had lost three men and two mandroids in the battle, which had been short and vicious. There had been no prisoners taken.

Brown ordered the bodies of the men and the two wrecked mandroids to be collected and then carried on. By the time he reached the end of the pass a plan was already forming in Brown’s mind.

* * *

They had another hundred and fifty miles to cover and Brown expected more trouble before that. According to Zalamus, the rebel camp would be about thirty miles to the right of the track they were moving on. This meant sooner or later they could expect a major attack from the rebels, for they must by now know the direction in which the column was moving.

It was another ten miles before they would meet up with Major Rogan and his men at the pre-arranged rendezvous point. Brown wondered if they would survive the ten miles. He was carrying some equipment which was essential to the survival plan and he could not afford to have this damaged in any way.

“Are we going to make a dash for it?” asked Zalamus.

“I thought of that but I don’t think we will make it,” Brown did not want to tell Zalamus about the equipment.

“What are you going to do?”

“Prepare a trap for the rebels,” Brown asked the column to come to a halt.

On the way through the pass, he had seen an outcrop of rocks, behind which some of his men and armoured cars could shelter. He outlined his plans to his men.

Most of his men and vehicles took up defensive positions on the left of the track after coming through the pass, under the cover of a wooded area hidden from view from the track. He sent four armoured vehicles and a flier to move on up the track slowly. The flying craft was to keep a look-out for the rebels and attack them immediately when sighted. The armoured cars were under orders to fall back rapidly at the first sign of trouble and head back to the pass.

Brown hoped that the rebels would follow them into the pass, thinking they were running away. There was a catch, however; Brown did not know the size of the rebel group. There was only so much his handful of men could cope with, even with all their superior firepower. Brown’s other hope was that hearing the firefight, Major Rogan and his men would join the fray behind the rebels.

Brown gave the orders and the four armoured cars took off down the track followed by the flying craft, while one armoured car and some men made their way back down the pass to take up a position behind the rocky outcrop.

All they could now do was wait and hope the rebels did not know what was Brown's real strength and how many men were hiding to ambush them. Brown took up his own position outside the pass with Zalamus and waited.

They did not have to wait too long. After about half an hour the flying craft signalled that they had sighted the rebels and were going on the attack.

As the gunfire erupted, the armoured cars started falling back slowly at first and then more rapidly as the rebels started following. Brown ordered the flyer to break off from the attack, but as it turned to fly away, it took a direct hit and blew up. The losses were beginning to mount but it had the desired effect on the rebels. Encouraged by their success they rushed after the armoured car in their own vehicles as fast as possible.

The armoured cars retreated rapidly and made their way into the pass and then to the rocky outcrop where some of Brown's men were already waiting. The cars took up positions behind the rocks and waited to commence firing at Brown's signal.

When enough rebels had passed in front of them and into the pass Brown gave the signal. His men opened fire from the left of the track, on the flank of the rebels, killing many and forcing even more to rush into the pass for cover. Brown sent a signal to his men positioned in the pass to open up, catching the majority of the rebels in a trap.

The rebels had already suffered heavy casualties in their initial rush and most of them were bottlenecked in the pass, but there were still quite a few left outside. They became more cautious in their approach and now took up positions on the other side of the track, exchanging fire with Brown's forces outside the pass.

It was a sort of a stalemate. Brown estimated that the rebel force was about three to four hundred strong, of which less than a hundred was left outside the pass, but there was still enough of them to stop Brown from continuing his onward journey.

There was still no news of Major Rogan and his men, who was supposed to meet them a few miles further up the track. Brown was still not sure if he would actually turn up, in which case he was in a big jam. Before he took any further action Brown decided to send one of his flying vehicles to look for him.

Brown felt very worried that once it got dark, the other rebels would break out and attack his contingent outside the pass. The rebels would still have

superiority in numbers, even after their big losses. Brown desperately needed to resolve the situation before this happened.

For his plan to have any chance he needed desperately to get to the camp his men had set up ahead, with his equipment intact. He did not therefore intend to risk a full-scale skirmish with the rebels, in which he might not only damage his equipment but also lose most of his men and even his own life.

Brown had been in some tight spots before and survived. He decided that he would have to break out soon if no contact could be made with Major Rogan and his men, in which case the fate of Brown's men inside the pass would be sealed. Few of them would make it out, but maybe he could still escape with a handful of men and vehicles. He needed to wait for dark to make his move.

Zalamus came up to him, crouching to stay under cover; a small scale sniping war had broken out.

"What are you doing here?" asked Brown, irritated. "I told you to stay at the back under cover."

"I see you're in a spot of bother," said Zalamus. "I was wondering if there was something I could do to help."

"The situation is under control," said Brown. "In any case what can you do to help?"

"You seem to be pinned down just as the rebels are, as far as I can see," said Zalamus. "Maybe I could negotiate with the rebels for a way out."

"Why would they let us go?"

"I could try to persuade them that joining the invasion would doom them to a servitude even worse than now," said Zalamus.

"Why would they listen to you?" asked an exasperated Brown, who didn't have the time to listen to good-intentioned but crazy suggestions from the old man.

"I'm sure I know a few of their present leaders. I got on quite well with some of them in the past."

"Maybe so, but we've just killed a great many of them," said Brown. "Under the circumstances they are more likely to shoot you on sight than talk to you."

"I'm still willing to try," said Zalamus.

"Thanks, but I can't risk it. Just go back and stay down." He needed to concentrate on the situation.

Zalamus did as he was told and went back. Just as Brown was about to give fresh instructions to his men he heard from the vehicle he had sent out. They had sighted Major Rogan and were about to make contact with him.

Brown asked the pilot to follow the instructions he had given him, to the letter, and switched off. He told his men to get ready.

Brown waited patiently for the next hour. His men were beginning to get a bit restless. One had just been shot by a sniper while he was on a lookout position. It was a hot even in the shade. On Brown's side of the track the tree cover was a lot better than the other side, which was more sparsely covered and rocky.

It had been a fairly hot day and more so in the forest, which lay in the opposite direction to the farm where Brown had rescued Zalamus. Brown's men were clothed in temperature-controlled clothing, which made the heat bearable. The rebels, however, had no such clothing and would be suffering. But then they were more acclimatised to local conditions and would probably take it in their stride.

Brown looked at his watch and gave the order to open up, so his men duly complied with some mortar fire. Brown told his men to keep up the barrage, to make the rebels think they were on the verge of being attacked. Brown had no such intention; it was a ruse.

When the attack came, it was from behind the rebels, by Major Rogan's men, who had circled around behind the rebels further up the track. Major Rogan's voice came through the communicator.

"We're in position. What do you want me to do?"

"Try to push them our way and block any retreat down the track," said Brown.

"Will do," said the major. Then the firing started again.

At that moment Brown was joined by three of the four flying vehicles he had left behind. He gave them instructions to drop some incendiary devices on the rebel positions.

As Brown's men waited, the rebels came streaming out from cover and made a dash towards the pass. They had only one way to go, through the pass, but had to run the gauntlet of Brown's men positioned there. Panic ensued as the rebels took headlong flight through the pass, back towards the city.

It was slaughter, but there was little option. Oddly Brown felt sorry for

them but there was no quarter being asked for or given or any prisoners taken. By the time Major Rogan and his men appeared at the track it was all over. The rebels had been completely routed. A few lucky ones had managed to escape, but they had left behind nearly three hundred bodies and their weapons.

Brown greeted Major Rogan and thanked him.

“I see you’ve been busy,” he smiled but he was shocked by the carnage. Brown could see it in his face. After all they were killing Pirussians.

“With your help, major,” said Brown. “Believe me, I take no joy in it. But we could not let them escape so that we could be attacked again.”

“My men are quite tired. Are we camping here tonight?”

“No, we push on through the night.”

Brown’s men and Major Rogan’s forces had suffered minimal casualties. Brown ordered his own dead and injured to be gathered along with the rebel’s weapons and their injured. After the injured on both sides had been given preliminary treatment, he ordered the rebels to be left with some provisions and the column started forward again. There was no time to bury the dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Brown was in a hurry, he needed to reach the camp before the Baccran invasion fleet arrived on Pirrus. If they were not ready by then, all would be lost, but Brown was worried about Major Rogan's men. Could he really depend on them, after the slaughter they had just witnessed of their own people at the hands of Brown's forces. He was sure Major Rogan would stay loyal, but would all his men?

It was decided that most of the Major's men would spearhead the push towards the new camp. The rest would bring up the rear and guard the main column from any attacks from behind them. Brown wanted his valuable equipment shielded from any attack as these were vital to their survival.

They moved slowly forward. There was a track of sorts which would get them most of the way there, but the last few dozen miles would be through un-cleared forest. Before they could get to that point, they had to cross another main track, which came from the city and also skirted the rebel camp to their right, from which the original attack had come. Brown hoped that they wouldn't encounter any further rebels at the junction of the two tracks.

Brown decided to go see Gina and her father Zalamus. He wanted his opinion about the route, but mostly he wanted to see Gina. They had been separated from him since Major Rogan had joined up, as Brown had been quite busy discussing tactics with him.

Gina greeted him with open arms and kissed him despite a disapproving look from her father. Zalamus greeted Brown cordially enough, though he had an amused look on his face. Brown wondered what his position would be if their roles had been reversed. Could former enemies really get along well?

"I see my daughter has abandoned all protocols of decent behaviour according to our society," quipped Zalamus.

"These are extraordinary circumstances and very abnormal times, so you must excuse us," remarked Brown. "I did come to see you as well as a matter of fact, I need some advice regarding our route."

"I see this old fool still has some uses left," laughed Zalamus.

"You under-estimate your worth sir," said Brown.

It was a strange situation. Obviously Brown was much older than Zalamus in age, as the number of years went, but physically and mentally he was a lot younger. Zalamus was the senior person in this relationship, and he was Gina's father. This placed him in an awkward position. It was better to be deferential. It was quite likely Gina hadn't told her father about his age, she only half believed it herself.

"I believe there is a junction coming up, where the track we're following will cut across another track that skirts the area where the rebel camp is situated. Do you think they will have enough manpower left to mount another attack us at the cross-section?" asked Brown.

"Quite possibly," answered Zalamus. "At the height of the revolution we had over two thousand men there. I'm surprised you didn't know about this place."

"Oh we knew about it alright," said Brown, "but our strategy was to draw you into the city and crush the revolution there, which I think we did quite well."

"Well you certainly managed to get the upper hand. You were lucky."

"There's certainly an element of luck in everything, but our strategy was to capture or kill the leaders, after lulling them into a false sense of confidence. I didn't want to take out the whole rebel base with a large bomb. That would have defeated our objective of pacifying the population," smiled Brown.

"Maybe now you wish you had followed the alternative course," laughed Zalamus.

"Well our information was that the rebel base had been abandoned after your capture, but I suppose it's been revived because of the pending invasion," shrugged Brown. "So what information do you have?"

"Sorry, but I've been kept out of the loop, in the last few weeks, because of my daughter's involvement with you," sighed Zalamus.

"It wasn't her fault," protested Brown.

"She seems to be rather taken by you, all the same."

"Can we not go into that now father," Gina cut in. "He's a good man, can you please help him."

"The area where the rebels are supposed to be situated is very well camouflaged, so it's difficult for us to gauge their strength from the air," said Brown.

"You'll have to send somebody on the ground to find out what's going on."

I can certainly point out on the map where they are located, but I wouldn't engage them there or you'll be overwhelmed. The place is filled with caves and natural defensive barriers which frankly even a very large bomb would not be able to take out."

"Great!" Brown cursed silently. "We need an alternative strategy to stop the column being targeted again."

"Unfortunately I cannot help you there," said Zalamus. "Let me show you, where they are likely to be located and then you will have to decide what you can do."

After Brown left Zalamus, he went back into his own armoured transport. Gina accompanied him as he thought it would be safer for her, than in the transport she had been in with Zalamus, which was not armoured. Her father refused to take up Brown's offer and join them for some reason.

Brown asked the column to slow down. He had decided on what action he was going to take. There was still thirty miles to go before they hit the junction. The rebel stronghold was roughly fifty miles from the junction, the track having veered to the left. Brown was not sure there would be any rebels to confront them, but he could take no chances with the machinery.

He decided to send a contingent of men and mandroids to the other side of the junction by air. They would be dropped off about two miles further up the track they were on. They would then sweep down the right side of the track in an arc to engage any enemy they found and clear and hold a triangular section on the right hand side of the junction, on the other side of the crossing track.

Meanwhile an advance section of armoured vehicles would do the same on this side of the crossing track. Some of these vehicles would also cross the track and join up with the men on the other side. In this way Brown hoped to secure the junction for a safe crossing. The flying cars were also instructed to bomb any vehicles which came up the track on either side.

After the men had left, the column started moving more rapidly towards the junction. Brown and Gina tried to relax, all they could do was wait.

"Well it certainly has been an eventful time since I met you," said Gina. "I presume you have a plan for our survival, wherever we are going."

"We have a chance," Brown tried to reassure her, "if we make it there."

"What will happen if we survive? To us I mean?"

"What would you like to happen? We could be together."

“But then you would go back to Earth. As you say, you have long life spans, if you are telling me the truth.”

“You could have it too, if things work out and you come to Earth with me.”

“I couldn’t leave father alone here.”

“He could come as well,” smiled Brown. “I’ve kind of grown attached to him.”

“And he to you, but he would never leave his beloved Pirrus. In any case I thought it was only Earthmen who could have the regeneration.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear,” smiled Brown.

Brown drew Gina to him and kissed her passionately and she kissed him back. He wanted desperately to make love to her, but it was neither the time nor the place for such foolish thoughts. Everybody’s survival was at stake and it depended upon him keeping a cool head.

A call came through, Zalamus wanted to see him. He had just remembered some details about the rebel base that would be of interest to Brown. Brown thought there was an unusual tension in his voice as he prepared to go and meet him.

They were coming up for a short stop, a few miles before the crossing. They would then make a dash to get across, once he had received word that the junction was secure, from his advance guard, he had sent out.

When the column came to a halt, Brown decided to walk back to the vehicle that Zalamus was in as he didn’t want turn his armoured car around. His sixth sense had kicked in. He told Gina to stay in the armoured vehicle and asked a mandroid to follow him.

“Anything the matter?” asked Gina.

“I have a funny feeling about this, so stay here.”

“Be careful.”

As he approached the vehicle Brown could see that there was no driver at the front of the vehicle. Zalamus would be at the back of the vehicle, so the driver could have gone to see him, when they had stopped.

Brown instructed the mandroid to look inside the cab of the vehicle, but nobody was in there. Brown prepared himself for the worst, he asked the mandroid to check the back of the vehicle, but nobody was there either. How had Zalamus managed to contact Brown if he was being held hostage. Had he managed to escape, if so where?

Brown went down to the next vehicle which had stopped a little distance

behind the vehicle they had been investigating, but they had seen nothing. As they had come around a bend, they had seen the first vehicle parked there. They hadn't witnessed any unusual activity.

The mandroid came to Brown and said that there some footprints leading away from the vehicle into the forest. Brown gave orders that all vehicles should move on according to his pre-arranged plan and make a dash for the other side of the track, when they received the signal from the advanced party he had sent. Only the vehicle that Zalamus had been in was to remain behind, with a mandroid manning it.

Dusk was falling, so Brown put on a helmet with night vision and synced it to the mandroid he was with, so he could also see what the mandroid would be seeing. He then donned a light armoured jacket for additional protection and gave orders for the mandroid to proceed into the forest in front of him. They had to act fast, if they were going to find Zalamus and his perceived abductor, if that was indeed the case.

As they made their way through the forest, Brown was acutely aware of the danger he had placed himself in. It was an unwarranted risk to go after Zalamus, It would have been better for him to leave Zalamus to his fate and move on with his column. They would stand a better chance of survival with him present, but he would not be able to look Gina in the eye again.

After more than an hour later, Brown decided that he would give it twenty minutes more and then return to the column, or to the transport they had left behind for him if they had already left. He was jeopardising the whole mission because personal obligations. It was utterly unprofessional and went against his whole training.

Another five minutes went by, they were following a narrow path, which led towards the rebel's supposed camp. They were proceeding pretty fast. Brown was quite sure that the kidnapper would not be able to proceed that fast with his prisoner. A warning came suddenly from the mandroid that he was detecting a heat signature not that far away.

Brown dived for cover, but a bullet caught him high on his chest and bowled him over. He was in pain but was really glad that he had taken the trouble to don the armoured jacket. He was also lucky that the native police were only armed with old fashioned projectile weapons and not laser weapons. His armoured jacket may not have saved him from such a weapon. Still he was badly bruised.

Brown was not entirely sure what was going on. It was as if the man was waiting to ambush him. In which case was he expecting further reinforcements? Maybe this was a ploy to stop the column from leaving the area and the rebels were going to attack it here, rather than at the crossroads. But where was Zalamus?

Brown ordered the mandroid to move up and approach the man from the side, rather than charging at him head on, while he tried to keep the person pinned down.

Brown wanted the man alive and told the mandroid so, he needed to find out what happened to Zalamus. It was a race against time, if as he feared the rebels were headed this way. A few minutes later the mandroid signalled that he had their prey, he was badly wounded but alive. Brown moved up to interrogate him.

“What have you done with Zalamus,” Brown asked him.

“I thought I shot you,” the Pirussian was surprised, at seeing him.

“You did, it was a good shot, but my jacket protected me; unfortunately for you. You’d better tell me where he is, or I’ll kill you.”

“Do what you have to do, but you’ll never find him,” retorted the man. “You’re going to get a surprise soon.”

“You mean your friends are coming, I suppose,” smiled Brown.

The mandroid was already looking for Zalamus and he had located another heat signature nearby. It was Zalamus, he had been tied up and dumped in a ditch for retrieval later. The kidnapper had obviously realised that his pursuers were catching up, as he knew they would.

“Sorry,” he told the prisoner, “We’ve already found him. The mandroid can pick up body heat.”

“You haven’t got away yet, my friends will be here soon,” the man laughed. “I’m just sorry I didn’t manage to kill you, but the plan did work, you did come after us for Zalamus.”

“But you won’t be telling them anything,” Brown shot the man, there was no other choice.. He ordered the mandroid to carry Zalamus and start moving. They didn’t have time to get back to the waiting half track. So he sent a message to the mandroid in it to move to the crossing and wait for him there. It informed him that the column had already left.

Brown decided their best bet was to cut across diagonally to the crossing. Hopefully some of his forces would still be there to help him.

“He made me call you,” said Zalamus. “I was sure you wouldn’t come. It was silly of you to risk yourself for me. His whole purpose for this was to kill you.”

“Things are not always as straightforward as people think they are,” said Brown.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

They made good progress, with the mandroid carrying Zalamus. He was too old to keep up on his own, but nevertheless protested against it. Brown hoped the rebels wouldn't have night vision equipment, at least not many of them. Though such equipment was common, their supplies would hopefully be limited.

Brown knew the rebels couldn't be far behind, the Pirussian paramilitary deserter who had ambushed him had more or less said so. That is why he had he had set his ambush to kill Brown, where he had. He hadn't obviously bargained on how quickly the mandroid would overpower him. But it was just a question of time before his friends would be swarming the place.

He hoped that they would just carry on straight down to the road, where they thought the column would be. Brown hoped that they would not realise the path he had taken and cut across to follow him and his party.

They mainly carried on in silence as Brown wanted to concentrate on his surroundings rather than engage in an unnecessary, fruitless conversation about the current situation of the planet. Neither did Brown want to tell the old man about what his plan of survival was.

Luckily also for Brown his regeneration was working well and any initial tiredness he had felt after his transformation in the river earlier had all but disappeared. He was beginning to feel more and more energetic with each day that passed. The process seemed more gradual and natural, compared to the artificial regeneration he had been through the first time.

Brown's thought pattern was suddenly disrupted when Zalamus suddenly let off a volley of shots from the weapon he was carrying. He had taken it from his dead ex-captor. The mandroid was carrying him over his shoulder so he had a view of what was behind them.

"What was that? What are you firing at?" asked Brown startled. The mandroid turned around, but couldn't detect any body heat signatures.

"I thought I detected some movement there," said Zalamus with conviction.

"There is nothing there," retorted Brown, "but now they will be all coming this way." He took the gun away from Zalamus and after destroying the firing

mechanism, with a blast from his own gun he threw it away. He couldn't trust him anymore with the gun. He wasn't sure which side he was on.

"What did you do that for?" asked Zalamus. "I made a honest mistake."

"That might cost us our lives," Brown was angry. "I feel a lot safer if you don't have a gun. You probably wouldn't be able to hit anything anyway at a distance."

A thought crossed his mind about leaving Zalamus there, but he had gone through too much trouble already and didn't want to disappoint Gina. They hurried on hoping they would reach their forces, before any rebels caught up with them. It was going to be a close call now.

As they hurried through the forest, Brown sent a coded message to the unit that had been deployed to the first corner of the crossing, to let them know that he would be coming through. They still had a couple of miles to cover before they got to the lines where they would be safe.

They were coming on to a hilly area, where there was no tree cover they had been enjoying until now. However, they had little option but to make a dash for it. Once on the other side they would be a lot safer. Brown was thankful that it was getting quite dark, so when they were in the more open area, to cross that stretch of ground, it would not be so easy to make them out.

With their night vision they could see quite well in the dark, so they decided to speed up as much as they could, so they could put some distance between themselves and any people looking for them. He desperately hoped that these pursuers hadn't caught up with them yet. He was quite sure they would be coming after hearing the shots fired by Zalamus.

Half an hour went by as they neared the brow of the hill, when suddenly the firing started. They had been spotted. They dived for shelter behind a crop of rocks. Brown looked for an escape route, but it was still quite a way up the hill, before they could be safe on the other side.

They were pinned down. There were quite a few people firing at them. Brown realised it would be foolish to make a dash up the hill as they could be picked off. Obviously these people had the equipment necessary to spot them. An alternative strategy was needed. Brown decided to call for an air strike as the rebels started making their way up the hill towards them. They would have to wait until the bombs started falling, before they moved on.

Minutes ticked by and they could see that a number of figures were moving

up closer to them. Brown opened fire on the nearest ones and the mandroid followed suit. They hit a couple of the rebels and their advance slowed. Brown ordered the mandroid not to fire on anybody not in the immediate vicinity as he wanted more of them to come out into the open ground where there was less tree cover.

When they heard the roar of the flying cars above, they pinpointed the intended area with the laser target markers of their guns for the vehicles above to fire their missiles in that direction.

It was having the desired effect; there was chaos amongst the rebels now. Brown let off a few more shots and ordered the mandroid to pick up Zalamus and start moving towards the top. The mandroid did what he was asked and picked up Zalamus again under protest.

“If you hadn’t thrown my gun away I could have helped you against the enemy,” said Zalamus.

“Or shot us in the back,” said Brown cuttingly. “I don’t know whose side you’re on.”

“It was a simple mistake,” protested Zalamus.

“Which is going to cost a lot of people their lives,” retorted Brown. He didn’t like to suffer fools gladly, “hopefully, not ours. They’ll kill you now if they catch you.

They wouldn’t be here now if hadn’t fired your weapon.”

Zalamus kept quiet and the mandroid moved off with him. As Brown was turning to go, two Pirussians came at him over the top of the rocky outcrop that had been shielding them so far. They had managed to crawl up to it unnoticed. Brown managed to shoot the first man with the gun, who also let off a shot which hit Brown on the chest, like a hammer blow.

The other man landed on him, sending his gun flying. The man plunged the knife he was holding into Brown’s chest. Again he felt a sharp pain, but both times his jacket had saved him from proper injury. He shrugged off the man and punched him. Even though Brown was winded from the attack, the man was no match for him.

In one swift movement, Brown disabled him with a kick and then knocked him out, breaking his arm in the process. He almost broke his neck as well, but thought better of it. He collected his weapon and made off after the mandroid as swiftly as he could.

They made it over the hill without any further incident and started their

descent toward what he hoped would be their lines of defence. They had managed to disrupt the pursuit and if they managed to reach the tree cover on the other side they would probably be safe, unless they got shot by their own side by mistake.

It was quite a surprise to him that the hill had been so bare, but then he noticed some structures on this side of the hill, which he concluded were possibly old mining settlements. The trees were missing for a reason. The forest around the hill had been stripped of trees to supply the mine.

Brown felt bruised, his chest was hurting from the blows he had received earlier, but he carried on cautiously. Finally they reached the tree cover and relaxed. He received communication that the column was already on the other side of the crossroads and the troops, who had been guarding the two corners of the crossroads were about to pull out.

Brown asked them to delay their pull out by twenty minutes and then start pulling out slowly, while the column continued onwards down the chosen track. He asked the mandroid to make its way towards the crossroads where he hoped the half-track would still be waiting for them.

As they moved further down, they heard some firing going on to their right, so the enemy was engaging his forces already. He decided to skirt around a little to the left it and make for the road, which was probably now less than a mile away. They were almost there, but the mandroid had stopped.

“I can see three figures up ahead” said the mandroid in a matter of fact tone. “I can’t make out if they are ours or theirs.”

“In which case we’ll have to sneak up to them,” replied Brown. “If you make any sound at all, we’ll have to kill you,” he warned Zalamus, who looked at him with incredulity.

Brown was not kidding, he was in an ultra serious mood. He didn’t really think that Zalamus was still supporting the rebels, but wasn’t completely sure of him. He needed to be sure that Zalamus was not going to try anything.

The mandroid put Zalamus down and they fanned out a bit. This time Zalamus stayed with Brown and a few steps behind the mandroid. As they neared the three Pirussians, Brown noticed their backs were turned towards them and they were concentrating their firepower and attention towards their front. They were engaging his lines.

As the mandroid got within reach of the three men, Brown shot the one furthest away from him. His shot didn’t make much of a sound and the man’s

body crumpled to the floor. The other two started turning but didn't make it, the mandroid was already upon them. He banged their heads together so hard that they would probably never wake up from it. If they survived they would have one severe headache for days to come.

"You're such an efficient killer, are you sure you're not part robot yourself," said Zalamus. "I hope you didn't mean anything by that statement you made about killing me."

"I meant every word of it," smiled Brown, though he knew he wouldn't have. "You would've found out if you had tried it."

"We never had much chance of our revolution succeeding against you, did we?" said Zalamus ruefully.

"Less than zero," said Brown, "which is about the same chance you have, of becoming independent, if the Baccrans and the Levitians win."

"But you are still going to help us if we help you."

"I will try my best," shrugged Brown. "A promise is a promise."

As they came up to the bodies Brown noticed that the man he had shot was a Baccran, but it was not Kirkan. Shame he thought, they could've questioned him if he was alive. It was doubtful if the others would provide any useful information.

"Well, this seems like confirmation that the Baccrans are coming," said Zalamus.

"I'm afraid so," said Brown.

They carried on in silence after that, when Brown could see the road, further down, Brown gave orders to his unit to disengage and retreat slowly. When they were on the road they saw the half-track was waiting for them. They hurried up to it and drove off. There was no sign of the enemy behind them.

When they crossed to the other side they saw the armoured vehicles come out of the forest behind them. As they crossed the road more of his men came out on foot and were picked up by them and the armoured cars. They had also been in a fire-fight, but not a very serious one. The main thrust of the rebels had been concentrated on the other side. There had been casualties, but only a couple of fatalities. On the whole it had been a very successful operation and his column was still intact.

They raced ahead now to catch up with his column, which they did in another couple of hours and Brown took Zalamus to see Gina as they

transferred to his personal armoured car.

Gina greeted them both with a huge sigh of relief and effusive hugs, which Brown knew was all he was going to get that night.

“Your boyfriend threatened to shoot me earlier,” said Zalamus.

“I’m sure he had a good reason,” laughed Gina.

“I really did,” said Brown. “For a while I couldn’t be sure, if he was with us or the enemy.”

“He killed a Baccran who was with the rebels, so it’s official. They are coming,” said Zalamus.

Major Rogan was trying to contact him. Brown excused himself from the others to talk to him. He let Zalamus talk about his experience of the whole incident to Gina. No doubt he would have to recount his version of the events too, later.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The rest of the way to their new camp was incident free. Brown had his own reasons for believing that the rebels would not know where their next camp was and Kirkan would have no indication of it. Yet he knew that when the invasion fleet arrived, it would not take them long to discover the whereabouts of the new base. The rebels could also track it down, but it would be at least a couple of days before they turned up after the mauling they had received. It would take them a while to regroup.

They reached the place in the forest at mid-afternoon the next day, clearing a path through dense jungle with the help of laser cutters. The place was a hive of activity with all the building and installation that was going on. Several well camouflaged pre-fabricated buildings had been erected already and inflatable tents had been made ready in the woods, for the force that accompanied Brown.

“Where is this place?” Zalamus asked. He was travelling in the same vehicle with Brown along with Gina. Major Rogan joined them.

“Yes. Why did you decide to come here?” asked Gina.

“Don’t you think we would have been better off at your base in the city?” asked Major Rogan.

“No, we couldn’t defend that place from an attack from the air,” said Brown.

“But you can’t defend this place either,” said Rogan.

“It’s better camouflaged than the base, they have to find it first.”

“But the perimeter defences are non-existent,” said Major Rogan. He looked disappointed.

“I have a plan,” said Brown.

“But he’s right,” said Zalamus, “Even I can see that. Once they find us, the surrounding forest will offer excellent cover to the enemy.”

“We’ll be annihilated,” Major Rogan cried. “Your plan had better be good.”

“I told you I had a reason to come here,” Brown smiled. “The area of land you see in front of you is the richest five square miles in the whole solar

system, and we are going to hold on to it.”

“What’s so important about this place?” Major Rogan looked at Brown as if he had gone completely insane.

“Yes, I can’t see anything different about this place,” Zalamus joined in.

“Mito-carbonium,” said Brown. “The whole area is filled with it.”

“How did you find out?” asked Gina.

He told them that Benson had given him the coordinates when he had threatened to torture Benson’s handler. Brown saw the surprise on their faces and laughed. “That’s right,” he said again. “Benson was a Levitan spy and Miss Lanzy was his handler. I sent the scientists here to test the ground and set up an extraction plant.”

“But Kirkan will bring them here, when they land,” said a worried Zalamus.

“Kirkan doesn’t know about this place. Benson obviously wanted it for Levita; he didn’t trust anybody else, not even his handler.”

“So why did he tell you?” asked Major Rogan.

“He knew I’d find out if he gave me the wrong coordinates. As he already had plans to dispose of me, he would’ve then been in a position to take it over once the Levitan fleet arrived.”

“Did Benson tell you all this?” asked Rogan.

“Some of it, before he died. You see, a freelance miner from Earth originally discovered it. Benson had him killed and kept the information to himself. Of course he must’ve notified Levita about the find, but I doubt he gave them the exact location. I don’t think he trusted any couriers to pass on the exact information, not even his handler. He knew we were watching her. This is the biggest find in history.”

“But we won’t see any benefits from it,” said Zalamus. “Why should we defend it?”

“Don’t be so pessimistic. As I told you already, your ancestors are from Earth and you will get the same rights as Earth citizens, including independence.” Brown lied about the last bit about independence but they could always hope.

“Are you telling us the truth?” asked a doubtful Major Rogan. The others also looked at him questioningly.

“Of course,” said Brown. “I’ve had your DNA analysed and your language has a lot of similarities with Earth languages.”

“I used to think it was just a coincidence,” said Zalamus.

“That’s the official line.”

“But how are you going to hold on?” asked Gina when she recovered a little. “They will find us sooner or later and our force is not big enough.”

“I agree,” said Major Rogan.

“That’s true,” said Brown. “But I told you I had a plan. I’m hoping they will take at least two to three days to find us. That will give us enough time to set up the force-field generator. I had it dismantled and flown over. Once we get that up and running we can hold out indefinitely.”

A delegation had already come out of the main building to meet them. After an exchange of preliminary greetings Brown was given a report of the current situation on the base. Everything was proceeding according to plan. They had already started extracting the mito-carbonium and were in the process of re-assembling the force-field generator.

This was the part that worried Brown. The machine was immensely complex and had taken them nearly a day to dismantle and would take them at least as long to reassemble. They had already been working a day on it, but it would take them at least another day and then even more time to get it working and tested. They would be lost if they were discovered before that time.

Brown employed his men as well as he could to protect the area. He had information the landings were to take place that night. He hoped that at least part of the invasion force would set down at their old EPA base, once they had the all clear that the base was empty and there was no opposition there. Most of the booby-traps had been left by design to be found, except the bomb. The booby-traps had taken a long time to set.

The countdown on the ultimate booby-trap, the small nuclear device, would be automatically triggered when large ships started landing on the spaceport of the EPA and would detonate a few hours later, hopefully causing maximum damage. On the other hand a signal could also be sent to detonate it sooner if required. It was a clean bomb and the blast would be contained within the perimeter of the base. They hoped that it would be almost impossible to detect the whereabouts of the bomb without prior knowledge and if all went according to plan the invasion force was in for a nasty surprise.

* * *

The whole night was one of intense activity. Brown snatched some sleep for a few hours when he could manage it. He was slightly tired, but felt a new vigour in his body as if he was getting younger. It had been amazing since the swim in the river and his transformation. Now it wasn't a dream anymore, it was not something he had imagined, but something that had actually happened. He had witnesses to confirm it though they did not comprehend what had actually happened. Unlike the time before in Levita, this time Brown was sure of what had taken place.

Brown's thoughts came back to the present. There had been no chance to spend any time alone with Gina. She was housed separately with Zalamus, and Brown knew that there would be little chance of remedying the situation. He was busy with survival, each decision was critical. One wrong step would undermine the whole effort.

The entire area had been camouflaged further to avoid detection from the air. This was just to buy them extra time, but he knew that detection would come sooner or later.

The work on the force-field generator went on around the clock and it looked like it would be ready on time, but now they were experiencing some difficulty with refining the mito-carbonium. One of the vehicles carrying the filters had been hit in the last battle and some of them had been damaged. It would take time to repair them.

The next morning went by without any incident but they still had to get the filter system ready and Brown began to expect the worst. He wondered how soon it would be before enemy aircraft was flying overhead although preparations were still underway. Suddenly Brown felt it: a slight tremor and then stronger vibrations. Everything was shaking and then it subsided, the device they had left behind had gone off. Then came reports from the news stations in the city of a huge explosion in the EPA headquarters, which had blown out windows for miles around and caused a lot of minor injuries but not much damage. The main damage had been in the complex, which had been completely flattened.

As more reports began to filter through, Brown heard what he most wanted to hear. More than a dozen ships had been caught in the blast, amongst them several troop carriers. This would buy them more time to prepare and he

hoped Kirkan was amongst the people who had been killed.

Brown had already sent out scouts to keep a lookout for any rebel or invading forces approaching. Only short-range laser communication was being used as it would be difficult to pick up by detectors operated by the enemy.

According to Major Rogan's sources there had been no landing by the Levitan Fleet ships so far. Brown decided that was probably because they had no communication with Benson, and even Lanzy would most likely have not been aware that he was dead until the base got blown up. They were probably playing it safe and assessing the situation on the ground.

However, sooner or later they would arrive and all hell would break loose, unless Brown's team managed to get the force-field generator working. Meanwhile any attack would most likely come on the ground as there had only been one sighting of an aircraft flying over the area so far. It was the Baccran Fleet that had suffered the losses.

Late that afternoon a report came that an enemy force had been sighted about eighty miles away moving towards the new camp, following the track they had used to get there. Kirkan had been sighted leading them.

Brown surmised that the remnants of the invading forces had joined up with the rebels and were searching for them. The aircraft that had flown over must have failed to locate them. The electronic scramblers and screens, which Brown had set up in the area to distort heat emissions and give pictures of a land that was unoccupied, must have worked. Similar reflections would also be obtained by any visual scanners looking at the buildings hidden by the trees and light beam deflectors. It would take hours of patient analysis to find the location, if they found it at all.

The surest way of finding them, therefore, was to follow the direction they had taken on the ground, from the area of the battle with the rebel forces. At the speed they were approaching, they would be at the base in another five or so hours.

Though the mito-carbonium refining plant was finally working, it would be another twelve hours at least before they had a steady supply to start the force field generator and keep it going.

The only option left to him was to halt the enemy from reaching the camp before Brown's men were ready to set the force field up. He had a quick conference with Major Rogan and they decided to ambush the enemy twenty

miles away from the camp. After leaving a skeleton force and half of his armoured vehicles to guard the base, which included the ones Major Rogan had come with, they went to engage the enemy. Brown left with Major Rogan and about three hundred men and half of his mandroids to set up the ambush. He left all the flying vehicles behind to defend the base; he would call them later if required.

* * *

It took them about an hour and a half to reach the area where they decided it would be suitable to set up the ambush. Brown had noted the area previously when he had passed it on his way to the new base.

It was in an area of high ground overlooking an approach to yet another pass away from the one they had set up their initial trap. The idea was to engage the enemy as they approached and then fall back behind a second front and take up positions again behind them, while the other half engaged the enemy and then fell back behind the new position. It would therefore be one continuous retreat slowing the enemy down, so that they reached camp, just when they were ready to set up the force field.

All the time Brown was acutely aware of falling into the same trap he had earlier lured the rebel forces into. They would have to also watch out for the enemy dropping troops behind them to cut them off from the base. Had Brown calculated correctly that the enemy was short on airpower after their landing debacle at the old base? The crucial factor was the timing of the arrival of the Levitan forces.

They had marked out positions all the way along from the camp where they would set up defensive positions and left a handful of men and two mandroids to prepare each position. This gave him the ability to engage any enemy force if they decided to land behind their front line and give them time to retreat.

At the last defence line, about two miles from the base, he left twenty men with five mandroids and two armoured vehicles. The rest of his men and mandroids with about eight armoured vehicles he deployed along the front line to wait for the enemy. They mined the road about five hundred yards in front of the pass and then waited. Four of the armoured vehicles were deployed in the area in front of the pass hidden from view and four stayed

behind the pass, with the second line of defence.

They did not have to wait too long. Within one hour a column of troops came into view. They also had armoured vehicles.

“It looks like some of the native forces have joined up with the invading forces and the rebels,” said Major Rogan, looking through his binoculars.

“Yes,” said Brown. “But I’m glad you’re on my side.”

“I know this unit personally, therefore they are loyal to me. I’ve also told them about our Earth origins, which should help,” said Major Rogan. “I think we’re doing the right thing though we constitute a small part of the total native force.”

“Hopefully not all will join the invasion.”

“Some, I’m sure, will resist. They distrust the Baccran people more than they do Earth.”

“I’m confident we will prevail,” said Brown grimly. “They won’t be expecting too much resistance at this stage, so they are in for a surprise.”

When the enemy was close, Brown gave the order to detonate the mines on the road and open fire simultaneously. This had the effect of taking out the first two enemy armoured vehicles instantly as the mines blew up underneath them.

The whole area suddenly erupted in violence as a whole section of the road blew up and the surprised enemy was caught in a salvo of murderous cross fire. Brown watched the proceedings from a high vantage point on one side of the pass, as they picked off any exposed enemy troops at random. It was a short, sharp engagement with hardly any casualties on Brown’s side.

There was panic amongst the enemy as they ran for cover and the rest of their armoured vehicles retreated under shell fire from the EPA armoured vehicles. While the confusion reigned, Brown gave the order to retreat to the other side of the pass.

The men fell back while the mandroids still engaged the enemy. Brown lost one armoured vehicle in the process. Once the other armoured cars cleared the pass, the mandroids also fell back. Brown’s men raced back behind the second line of defence as the enemy forces regrouped and tried to force their way through. The other half of Brown’s party began to engage the enemy and as soon as Brown and the first batch of men with him cleared the pass they blew it up, trapping most of the enemy on the other side. It would take them several hours to clear the way.

Brown gave the order for a rapid fall back as he was afraid an air attack would happen sooner or later, most likely once the Levitan force landed. They needed to get back behind his last line of defence, which would be covered by the base air defence systems. It was now dark and while it afforded them some cover it also hampered their retreat.

Brown and his men withdrew continuously through the night, until at day break they were nearly at their last defence line. The message came at last that they were ready to set up the force field. Once they were inside the last defence line they would be safe as this fell inside the parameters of the field.

As they started crossing the defensive positions they heard the aircraft coming over and several salvos of missiles and bursts of laser fire started engaging them. As they completed their withdrawal, some enemy ships went past over them and the sky filled with troops dropping behind their position, in between the base and themselves. Brown gave the order to erect the force field immediately, as they raced towards the base to engage the enemy.

But a large number of the enemy managed to get through before the force field became active, the rest bounced off as they came in contact with it. Several of the enemy ships crashed as they came into contact with the force field and the bombs started bouncing off and exploding harmlessly outside. Only one ship had managed to get through, but that was blown up by a missile from the base.

Brown's men raced forward to cut off the enemy troops from reaching the base and at the same time men and machines raced forward from the base towards them. What ensued was brutal hand-to-hand combat with high casualties on both sides. However Brown had the mandroids: even the lizard men from Baccra were no match for them.

In the end, Brown's forces prevailed and the few opponents that were left alive surrendered. He found Kirkan amongst the dying, there was not much that could be done for him.

"You're full of surprises, Arbitrator," he hissed with almost his last breath.

"We've been lucky," said Brown.

"You make your own luck. A force field, we didn't bargain for that. I should've finished you when I had the chance."

"You were unlucky, but I enjoyed our little contest greatly. You fight a very good fight," said Brown and he genuinely meant it.

"So did you, but there is something different about you that gave you the

edge. You survived all our efforts to kill you.”

As Kirkan took his last breath, Brown almost felt sad. The loss of a great adversary somehow always diminished the victor as well.

Brown also knew that he was different. He was regenerating since his changing shape, without the help of the renewal process. His drug habit had already disappeared and so had the effects of the drug. But he knew he would have to go through the renewal process just to keep up appearances. It was not in his interest for other people to find out that he was different, but he needed to find out why. There had to be others like him; he had surmised that the renewal process must have been invented so that ordinary humans would get longevity and people like him would not stand out from the rest.

“Is there any way they can break through the force field?” Major Rogan’s question brought him back to the present.

“No, they can’t do anything. It would take a huge power output over a very long time to dissolve a very small section of the field. Even if they managed to get such a machine, we would be able to contain them. But I doubt very much if they would be able to find enough mito-carbonium to sustain such a huge charge for the period required.”

“So all we have to do is sit and wait?”

“That’s right. The forces from Earth should be here within another week or so. We have got them then.”

A man ran out of the main building: it was the new chief communication officer himself.

“A message from Earth Council, sir,” the man said panting. “It came just before the force field went up. I had taken the liberty of communicating our situation to them on your behalf, sir, as you seemed to be awfully busy.”

“I suppose you could say that,” said Brown.

“There have also been reports of widespread resistance to the invasion.”

“There’s hope for this place yet,” Brown took the message and opened it, as only his personal touch would open the sealed container. The container in which the message became automatically sealed, when it was received.

“Congratulations,” it read. “Because of the particular circumstances pertaining to your situation, we’ve allowed your request to stand. Pirrus is to be granted semi-autonomous status to begin with, but with special right for Earth to mine the mito-carbonium. We expect to see you soon.”

“Rogan, Zalamus. This is a message from the Earth Council. It’s about

independence. It's not exactly what you're expecting."

"You tricked us into helping you, didn't you?" said Major Rogan.

"You haven't changed," said Zalamus, picking up on Major Rogan's suspicion. "We trusted you."

"Hold on," said Brown. "I told them the price of your help was independence. They're not all as short-sighted as the rear admiral. It's true, they haven't offered everything I asked for, but it's pretty close. Here read it yourself."

Brown passed them the document and turned towards the quarters where Gina was. The shrieks of joy from Rogan and Zalamus made him look back momentarily and smile. Brown smiled wryly, for he had at last really fulfilled the role of his title 'The Arbitrator'.

He wanted to give Gina the good news himself. He left the men and headed for her quarters.

Yes they were all entering a new age, he thought to himself. There was a lot to be done, but he could see where things were going now. Soon everybody in Pirrus would know what their true origins were. There were new challenges he himself would need to face. He didn't want to leave Gina but he was also looking forward to meeting his son sometime soon.

But, before all that he knew there was going to be war.