

Chapter One

The raid on the Fyfield Plantation

When the survivor tower appeared on the horizon, Wren said, "So this is where you've been hiding your droid."

"Droids," Mick Tarmy corrected. He'd barely spoken the word before two of the A10s emerged from the top of the tower and moved on an intercept course. As the A10's moved in and boxed his air-car, Tarmy added, "As well as Alex, the TK5, we also have four A10s designed for police enforcement duties."

Glancing out at the A10s, Wren said, "You never said you had other droids."

"You never asked," Tarmy replied nonchalantly.

"You just thought you'd keep it up your sleeve."

"If I told you everything I know, you'd be as wise as I am," Tarmy countered. "I've learned that trusting people can be a perilous fault."

"Life can be hard and difficult if you don't trust anyone," Wren observed. He glanced out at the A10s again. "So what's the story? Where did they come from?"

"Let's just call them spoils of war," Tarmy replied. "We captured them."

"Let me guess; from Stert Oryx?"

"Correct," Tarmy said. "Oryx tried to jump us when we were with the convoy on the Fyfield River. Alex has an enhanced interconnectivity system. When Oryx tried to use the A10's against us, Alex seduced them; they've been working for us ever since."

"Seduced them?"

"Took them over and made them work for us," Tarmy replied. "Alex has all sorts of special gismos incorporated into his systems."

"You do realise Arcadia has been declared a droid-free planet," Wren said.

Tarmy grinned, "Is that so? Who enforces it?"

Wren shot him a hard look, "The Interplanetary authorities might seem to be toothless bulldogs, but every time a new illegal colony pops up, they make a point of launching a new intervention satellite equipped with a downward Mannheims designed to incapacitate droids," Wren replied. "If you blunder into one of the droid destroying Mannheims, your droids will become useless."

"Thanks for the warning," Tarmy replied. "But I've been told we will be heading for a Mannheim free zone."

"If you're not careful, you could still run into trouble. If you parade these droids around too much, someone will probably report you to the authorities, and then interplanetary enforcement officers might come after you. They carry modern anti-droid weapons; you might end up having no droids and wind up in prison to boot."

"Once again, I'll bear that in mind," Tarmy replied. "I'll make sure we keep them hidden unless we need to use them."

Wren went quiet for a while and then said, "Presumably the A10s are useful; otherwise you would have kept them, would you?"

“The A10s don’t have the punch Alex does, but they’re interesting machines. They also make up for the TK5’s only design flaw.”

“Which is?”

“Alex, our TK5 doesn’t have any secondary armament. With only a phaser, he has to avoid firing if he is likely to cause injury to his side. In contrast, the A10s have long-distance stun guns and various crowd dispersal devices. They can take down individuals at five hundred metres without killing them; which can be a handy attribute, in some cases.”

“A handy attribute in some cases,” Wren echoed. “What cases have you got in mind?”

Tarmy shrugged, “As I said before, I’ve learned that trusting people can be a perilous fault.”

After a long silence, Wren said, “Why is it I get the impression you’re sending me a message?”

“If I am, I hope you’ve received it loud and clear,” Tarmy responded.

“The question is, why are you sending me the message?”

“It had occurred to me that Alton Mygael might have instructed you to force me to hand over Alex once the mission was complete,” Tarmy replied. “If you try that one, the A10s will deal with you. One other point: if Alton Mygael tries to keep the others hostage in Awis Oasis I am willing to take the risk and send my droids into the Awis Mannheim. If Alex is right, droids can survive inside the Mannheim as long as they don’t remain for more than two hours. If Alton Mygael tries to keep my friends as hostages, I’ll use my droids against him. Understood?”

“I can assure you he’s given me no instruction to force you into parting with Alex,” Wren replied. “In any case, Alton Mygael knows enough about military droids to realise they form a bond with their controller. If we attempted to take Alex, it’s highly unlikely he’d obey our orders unless we knew how to reprogram him; which we don’t.”

When Tarmy remained silent, Wren added, “As far as I am concerned, once you’ve destroyed the Fyfield Plantation and hopefully rescued Anto Jaks, you’re free to go wherever you want to go and so are the rest of your friends.”

“I’m glad we understand one another,” Tarmy replied. “But it might be prudent to let Alton Mygael know the situation. I don’t want any misunderstandings at a later date.”

Wren nodded, “I’ll make sure Alton Mygael gets your message loud and clear, and I’ll make sure he heeds it.”

“I also expect him to make sure that Walter Verex keeps his promises regarding my daughter and my former colleagues,” Tarmy growled.

“I’m sure Verex is on the level,” Wren replied. “He genuinely wants to destroy the Fyfield Plantation. He wants to make sure other people aren’t affected like his commune grandson. It’s become a personal vendetta. If you destroy the Fyfield Plantation, Verex will play ball.”

“Glad to hear it,” Tarmy said. “One more message for Alton Mygael. Once we’ve destroyed the plantation and hopefully brought Anto Jaks out alive, Claire, Nonie and everyone else will be flown out to the tower. I expect them to be here when we return, understood?”

Wren nodded and said, “Understood”; he put a call into Alton Mygael.

Listening in to the conversation, Tarmy realised Mygael had agreed to everything he wanted.

Once his air-car was hovering alongside the tower, Chou Lan appeared at an opening and gave Tarmy a wave.

After manoeuvring, Tarmy landed the machine; glancing at Wren and Philips, he said, “You two stay in the air-car until I’ve talked things over with my people.”

As Tarmy climbed out, both Chou Lin and Bryn Rosslyn came over and gave him a combined hug. “You’re back.”

Chou glanced into the air-car and saw Wren and Philips. “Where are the others?”

“Don’t worry, I promise you they’re all safe,” he said. “Where’s Alex?”

He barely asked the question before he felt Alex’s invisible presence directly above him.

Glancing at Chou and Bryn, Tarmy said, “We all need to talk in private, including you Alex,” and then began walking towards the opening in the cross wall.

Once they were all hidden behind the cross wall, Tarmy swiftly explained how he’d managed to organise his daughter’s escape from Arden, what had happened while he’d been away, how her escape now looked to be in danger and that he needed to return to the Fyfield Valley.

When he’d finished, Chou Lin said, “It’s madness for you to go back into the Fyfield Valley.”

“As I just explained,” Tarmy said. “My daughter and my friends could be in serious trouble if I don’t.”

“Blackmail is a nasty crime. The victim keeps on paying,” Chou lectured. “You’re a case in point. You’ve already been black-mailed. Now you’re being blackmailed again.”

The comment brought a wry smile to Tarmy’s lips; as an ex-police officer, he was only too well aware that blackmailers kept turning the screw if they thought they could. Despite that knowledge, he said, “This will be the last time it will happen.”

“So you’re determined to go back?” Rosslyn said.

“I don’t want to go back,” Tarmy replied. “I have to go back.”

“Then I’m going with you,” Rosslyn said. “I know that place. I know the best places to attack.”

When Tarmy hesitated, Rosslyn said, “Anto Jaks isn’t the only person being held prisoner up there. There are more people.”

“How many?”

Rosslyn shrugged, “Three or four. I only saw them occasionally. I’m sure some will have died; food was always in short supply. You can’t leave any survivors behind. If you do, the Great Ones will have them fed to the wolf larvae as a reprisal.”

The comment made Tarmy shiver inside because he’d come to realise the Great Ones did still use this form of capital punishment. Glancing back at the air-car, Tarmy began working out if it could accommodate ten people. Did he need to take a second air-car? Satisfied he didn’t, he nodded at Rosslyn. “Okay.”

When Rosslyn visibly paled, Tarmy said, “Are you sure you’re up to it?”

“Of course I am,” the other man replied. “I’ll help you.”

Rosslyn half-turned ready to walk toward the air-car, but Chou checked him by giving him a swift hug. While she had hold of him, she whispered, “I’m proud of you, but you need your head examined for taking the risk.”

Glancing at Tarmy, she said, “I studied the hat you gave me and realised how it works.” She looked at Bryn Rosslyn. “I have made some more hats.”

Running off, she opened the boot of the second air-car and ran back. After giving Rosslyn a hat, she glanced at Wren and Philips.

Tarmy said, "I've given them hats, but if you've made a few more, spares could be useful to give to the people we're hopefully going to rescue."

Once Chou returned with new hats, Tarmy thought about the heavy shielded helmet they'd clamped onto Ed Pushley's head after he'd attempt to kill everyone in Alton Mygael's conference room.

Sensing his unspoken thoughts, Chou said, "Is there something the matter?"

Not wishing to worry her, Tarmy shook his head. As Alton Mygael had Ed Pushley locked up in an old prison cell leftover from the occupation, Pushley's malign obsessions wouldn't cause him any more problems as long as Mygael made sure he didn't escape.

"Are you sure there's nothing the matter?"

"There's nothing the matter," Tarmy replied and then nodded towards Rosslyn, "It's time to go."

Both men walked away and climbed into the air-car. Wren immediately bent Tarmy's ear, "What's this guy here for?"

"He knows the Fyfield Plantation and the processing plant like the back of his hand," Tarmy replied. "If we're going to put the processing plant out of production, we want to cause as much damage as possible so The Great Ones can't carry out a few swift repairs and get it going again."

He told Alex to lead them back to the Fyfield Plantation.

As they moved off, Tarmy handed Rosslyn a sketching tablet and told him to draw an approximate plan of the production plant and the surrounding plantation. Once he'd finished, Tarmy told him to mark, in red, the location of all significant items of the processing plant inside the main building, the site of the fuser plant and the prison huts holding Anto Jaks and the other prisoners. Once Rosslyn had finished, Tarmy ran his eye over it. "How accurate is this?"

"It's a sketch," Rosslyn replied defensively. "But it's reasonably accurate. As I had to walk around the processing plant, growing beds and the terraces, two or three times a week, I saw a great deal."

"What about the fuser?"

"The fuser building is there," Rosslyn said, pointing at his sketch. "The supply pipes look like this; shaped like a crown. There are eight mini-fusers in the same building. Each one has its feed."

Glancing at the sketch again, Tarmy nodded, "Yeah. I see what you mean. They do look like a crown."

"They are very distinctive," Rosslyn agreed. "Find them, and you've located the fusers."

Tarmy put his notes onto the sketch and then sent the information to Alex.

Half an hour later, the Altos and Razorback mountain ranges loomed in the distance, and the Great Rock Desert began giving way to scrub grass and clumps of multi-trunked Arcadian cacti which appeared to be surviving on the annual snowmelt coming off the mountains.

Once they'd crested the Altos Mountains, Alex dropped down and began weaving his way through the tops of the forest giants growing in the valleys below. Within a matter of seconds, visibility markedly decreased because fog banks began forming.

Another ten kilometres in, Alex joined one of the tributaries of the Fyfield River. An alert appeared on the dashboard display; the four A10s moved in close to form a box around Tarmy's air-car.

Wren shot a worried glance at Tarmy. “What’s happening?”

Before Tarmy could answer, there were three explosions as Alex took out an incoming hand-launched missiles.

“What’s happening?”

Tarmy said, “You didn’t think the Great Ones would just roll over and let us attack their plantation without a fight, did you?”

“They must have known we were going to attack them,” Wren said.

“Of course they did,” Tarmy replied. “They can read our minds.”

He answered Wren’s unspoken question. “Even with hats on, we can’t prevent some stray thoughts from reaching them. My guess is they have teams of mental listeners checking out major players. For all we know, they could have been checking out Alton Mygael.”

Wren said, “I didn’t expect them to have missiles.”

“They’d made enough money from drugs sales,” Tarmy reasoned. “They can afford to buy military hardware through the black market. They don’t mind paying over the odds if it gets them what they want.”

His comment was confirmed by two more explosions. A few seconds later, two of the A10s peeled away and began blasting the surrounding forests with stun fire. Two Longjaws fell out of a high-level launching platform suspended across a small gorge and landed face down in the water.

With Alex urging them on, the A10s kept up the bombardment; Arcadian millipedes began dropping out of the trees in their hundreds. But instead of pulling back to avoid the stun-fire, more millipedes took their places and began squirming out onto overhanging branches and firing venom at the passing air-car.

Inevitably some of the venom splattered onto the air-car’s windshield. Reacting to the danger, Tarmy said, “When we arrive at the plantation, no one opens any doors unless I say so. And whatever you do, don’t touch that stuff. It’s lethal. If a large quantity of it gets on your skin, it will kill you in seconds. If you only get a small amount on your skin, it will still kill you. You’ll the best you can hope for is a slow lingering death.”

Eventually, the air-car burst out of the side valley and began flying over the fog-shrouded Fyfield River.

Lacking Alex’s radar, the A10s moved away from the banks and grouped around the air-car again. Despite the fog, from time to time Tarmy caught a glimpse of some of the landmarks he’d passed when they’d made their escape from the Fyfield Valley.

Ten minutes later, the dash screen lit up as Alex warned them the processing plant was less than five kilometres away.

The dash screen then warned of incoming air-cars. A moment later, pulse fire began flashing past, and an enemy air-car shot out of the mist. One of the A10s immediately returned fire, knocking out the machine’s computer and paralysing the enemy pilot.

The air-car plunged into the river and disappeared. Undeterred, two more enemy air-cars came at them out of the fog and a lucky pulse shot punched a hole in the windscreen of Tarmy’s vehicle. Fearing some of the venom splashes might come in, Tarmy opened the dash drawer and began searching for something to plug the hole. Finding a can of plastimetal foam filler, he

placed it against the hole and depressed the nozzle. Although most of the filler was immediately blown away by the slipstream, some of it stuck. The hole was plugged after a five-second burst,

He'd barely finished before another enemy air-car came at them, but this time two of the A10s opened fire in unison; the machine spiralled away into the river.

The processing plant loomed up; Alex set about strafing the plastimetal cladding to expose the machines inside; he then began blasting at the individual elements of the processing plant. Within seconds, the whole area surrounding the plant began swarming with millipedes and armed Longjaws.

As pulse shots began flashing past the air-car again, the A10s moved in and mowed the opposition down like scythes through grass. Alex went for the primary target, the fusers that powered the plant.

A few blasts later, all the processing plant's lights went out, but the whole area was visible because several storage tanks were on fire and flames were leaping skywards.

With the fusers destroyed, Alex set about blasting away at the terraced walls of the paddy fields closest to the processing plant. Water began cascading down, sweeping away millipedes and flooding the ground floor areas of the plant.

With the opposition mostly subdued, Tarmy turned the air-car's headlights to full beam and took it down following Rosslyn's instructions. A running figure cut through the headlight beams, but instead of stopping, the fleeing man began dodging and diving. The lights picked out other fleeing figures.

Realising the running men were in total panic, Tarmy called in an A10. The machine immediately bracketed the area with stun fire and brought the fugitives down.

Rosslyn let out a howl of horror, but Tarmy cut him off. "They've only been stunned. We haven't time to chase them. Even though we have droids to protect us, we can't hang around here for too long."

He pointed to the plugged up hole in the windscreen, "We're not pushing our luck."

As if to confirm his fears, more pulse fire began flashing through the air as the Great Ones' forces recovered from the initial assault and began fighting back. Swinging the air-car around to shield the downed men, Tarmy shouted, "Come on, let's get them into the air-car but don't touch the poison blobs."

Wren and Philips climbed out and began dragging the bodies back to the air-car and unceremoniously threw them in. They then dived back in and slammed the doors.

They'd barely closed the doors before there was a heavy thump on the side of the air-car. A cacophony swiftly followed the first thump as more and more giant Arcadian millipedes arrived and hurled themselves onto the sides and roof of the air-car.

As Tarmy had experienced a similar event in the past, he knew what was happening. The millipedes were weighing down the air-car and hoping to prevent its escape. Pulling out his stun gun, Tarmy began firing it at the sides and roof of the air-car, but it had little effect.

Re-programming the stun-gun from minimum to maximum, Tarmy began firing again, but it still appeared to have little effect on the squirming masses. He caught a glimpse of the colouration on the millipedes and realised why his gun wasn't having much effect: they were king millipedes, and he knew from experience they were far more robust than their smaller cousins.

Tarmy instructed the air-car to take off in a last-ditch attempt to dislodge them. The machine began shaking as it struggled with the combined weight of its human cargo and the mass of king millipedes on the roof.

Tarmy fired again and instructed the air-car to swing from side to side, and some of the millipedes that had been clinging to the sides of the air-car began dropping off.

As the side windows cleared, Tarmy caught a glimpse of an A10 using its stun arrays to pick off more millipedes. The air-car's engines gained strength with each millipede that dropped off.

Sensing he was winning the battle, Tarmy instructed the air-car to rock from side to side again, a mass of wriggling bodies fell off, and the air-car surged ahead. Wren shouted out, "Have we picked up Anto Jaks?"

In response, Rosslyn shone a torch on the four men's faces. "This is Anto Jaks."

Tarmy instructed the air-car to set off back to the tower by a different route. Noting the instructions, Wren queried them.

"A wise man never overflies where he's already been," Tarmy replied. "Someone on the ground might not have a chance to fire at you the first time, but he'll make sure he shoots at you if you re-trace your flight path. Make no mistake there are shed-loads of spettri down there wanting to claim our scalps."

The words had barely left Tarmy's lips before he felt something cold jar his temple. The man behind the gun gave Tarmy a yellow-toothed smile. "Cancel the last order you gave the air-car and tell it to turn around."

Knowing that going back would be a death sentence, Tarmy said, "If you kill me, it will be a quicker death than being fed to the wolf larvae."

Yellow Tooth pulled the gun off Tarmy and placed it against Rosslyn's head. "Turn back, or I'll kill him, and then I'll shoot everyone in the air-car."

When Tarmy hesitated, Yellow Tooth hit Rosslyn with the gun and then screamed, "Turn back now!"

As Tarmy did as instructed, Wren gave him a worried look. In answer to the unspoken question, Tarmy said, "It looks like we picked up a spetetro by mistake. Spettri are resistant to stun fire, that's why he's recovered so quickly. No doubt he was living with the captives and passing information back to the Great Ones."

Yellow Tooth smiled, but there was no humour in it, "You are very perceptive, Mr Tarleton. My masters will enjoy being reunited with you. Now tell the air-car to descend."

Although Tarmy gave the instruction, the air-car didn't move. All they all heard was a slight bump from underneath, and then the air-car began to rise. Although he didn't comment, Tarmy guessed Alex had seen what was happening and had ordered one of the A10s to fly underneath the air-car and stop it descending. A few seconds later the air-car returned to its original course.

"What's going on?" Yellow Tooth demanded. "I'll kill this man if this machine doesn't turn around and descend."

Guessing that Alex had taken control of the air-car, Tarmy glanced at Yellow Tooth and said, "Sorry. I can't make it respond."

A look of real fear crossed Rosslyn's face. But just before Yellow Tooth could fire, one of the A10s moved in close and fired a stun shot through one of the windows at point-blank range. A fraction of a second later, the passenger door next to Yellow Tooth opened and one of the A10's

mechanical arms pulled the spettro out. The A10 then went into a steep dive before dumping Yellow Tooth on the ground.

The door sprang back into place and the air-car increased speed and moved away on a new course.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Tarmy glanced back and was pleased to note that the production plant was still blazing. Wren also glanced back and started recording the damage. Noting Tarmy watching, Wren said, "Walter Verex is the sort of guy who will demand proof that we have damaged the plant."

"We've done more than damaged it. It will be out of action for months, maybe permanently." Tarmy replied. "Okay, now we're done our bit; I hope Alton Mygael is going to honour his pledges."

"He will," Wren promised and then tapped the send on his percom. "Once Walter Verex sees these images, he'll know we've done the job, and Alton Mygael will send your people out to the tower as promised."

"Alton Mygael better had do. He'd also need to keep Ed Pushley locked up. If he escapes, he'll cause no end of trouble."

"Don't worry, Alton Mygael will send your people out to the tower," Wren promised. "I'll also make sure he keeps Pushley locked up until we can work out what to do with him."

Glancing out at Altos and Razorback mountains on the horizon, Wren added, "So where will you go now?"

Tarmy shot Rosslyn a warning glance before saying, "Somewhere where we can't be found. What about you? Do you *really* believe that Alton Mygael can oust Samantha and regain control?"

Wren shrugged. "Only time will tell."

He felt in his pocket for the teleport boomerang device that Mih Valanson had given him and repeated, "Only time will tell."

As the air-car continued to close with the Altos Mountains, rain began hammering at the vehicle. The deluge was so massive, Tarmy was forced to turn the windscreen wipers onto full power, but he was pleased to note the black millipede venom was washing away.

After pummeling them for nearly forty minutes, the rain stopped and turned into sleet as the air-car finally crested the mountains. Within minutes, the scene below changed again and turned back into scrub grass and cacti; the cacti then gave way to real desert terrain, an extreme, rock-strewn zone where rainfall was virtually unknown.

As the tower came back into sight, Tarmy sent one of the A10s ahead to ensure there were no lurking surprises.

Once at the tower, the A10 sent back images that dispelled most of Tarmy's fears. Claire, Nonie and Red Moxstroma were clearly on view and Alton and Klaien Mygael were standing in the background.

After instructing Alex and the four A10s to deploy around the tower, Tarmy took the air-car in and landed. Claire and Nonie moved in and threw their arms around him. Although they both seemed pleased to see him, Nonie said, "Don't ever do that again."

"Do what?"

"Just fly off without telling us where you are going," she scolded.

Wren cut in. "He didn't have a lot of choice in the matter," and then pointed to the three stunned escapees in the back of the air-car. "Anto Jaks is coming with us; what about the other two?"

"I know them," Rosslyn said. "They'll come with us."

Once Wren and Philips had pulled Jaks out of the air-car and carried him over to Alton Mygael's air-car, Tarmy spoke to Alton Mygael, "Have you heard from Walter Verex?"

The other man nodded and then created a hyperlink power bubble. Amanda Tarmy's image appeared inside it with Ord Morley, Vlad Pen and Ben Lieges clustered around her. "They are granting us asylum, Dad."

While Tarmy was still talking, Wren nodded to Rosslyn, took him to one side and said, "When you leave here, where are you going?"

Glancing over at Tarmy, Rosslyn frowned, "He doesn't want me to tell you."

"If you allow him to cut you off," Wren returned, "it could rebound on you."

"In what way?"

"If you isolate yourselves," Wren replied, "if you lose all contact with friends, you could be in serious trouble if we can't tell you what's going on."

Thinking hard, Rosslyn gave Wren an address. He said, "I hope I'm not going to regret telling you."

"You won't," Wren promised.

As Wren moved away, Klaien Mygael intercepted him and gestured for him to move away from the crowd. Once well out of earshot, Klaien said, "Alton intends to return to Arden. I think he's making a big mistake."

"In what way?"

"Walter Verex has agreed to deactivate Samantha," Klaien replied. "But I'm not sure he can."

"Why not?"

"Samantha is an Ingermann-Verex R9054 humanoid, one of the most powerful and intelligent droids ever made," Klaien replied. "She must have realised that one day someone will try to deactivate her. Don't you think she's already worked out a way of avoiding deactivation?"

"That had occurred to me," Wren admitted. "But what can I do about it?"

"I have a plan," Klaien replied. "I need a favour. Can we talk privately about it later?" She nodded towards Tarmy. "Can we talk once they've seen them off and Alton can't listen in?"

"Sure."

As Klaien had already dropped one or two unobtrusive hints, Wren guessed what the favour might be and slipped his hand in his pocket and gently caressed the boomerang device Mih Valanson had given him once more. "Of course, we can talk privately."

"Did Tarmy say where they were going?"

Although Rosslyn had provided him with the information, Wren shook his head.

" ' Fraid not. Mick Tarmy told him not to. But I'm not surprised. Over the last few months, Tarmy has been badly treated. He's not very trusting anymore."

Wanting to change the subject, Wren gestured towards Tarmy's group. "Shall we see them off?"

As they moved towards the two air-cars, Nonie Tomio glanced in their direction, a worried look on her face, "Have you seen Ollie?"

Klaaien frowned and whispered, “Who’s Ollie?”

“Her pet Arcadian, pterodactyl,” Wren whispered back, “Ollie’s been a bloody nuisance. He’s got a nose like a bloodhound. Once he smelt the kitchen, he was around there, scrounging from your chefs.”

“Ah!”

In a louder voice, Wren called back, “Why don’t you ask Alex to find him?”

“Good thinking,” Nonie shouted and then gave instructions to Alex.

A few moments later, Ollie came flapping into view squawking loudly. As the animal kept glancing back at some unseen presence, it was obvious Alex had located the Tomio’s pet and had rounded him up.

Once Ollie had entered one of the air-cars via a roof door, Tarmy’s people climbed in too and the air-cars left the tower and set off across the desert with the four A10s clustered around them. Although invisible to the naked eye, Wren knew Alex was also there as well, leading them towards Red Moxstroma’s nursery in New Victoria.

