

Arcadia's Children 5: Samantha's War

(A sequel to Arcadia's Children 4: Exodus)

By

Andrew R Williams

Dedication

To Tom, Beryl, Colin, Peggy and Vic: Gone but not forgotten.

Thank You

Liam at Akon Creative Ltd – for the cover artwork
Emma at The Word Hutt Publishing

Copyright © 2022 by Andrew R. Williams
All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

Names, characters and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organisations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author.`

In a field crowded with disappointing tomes what a pleasure it was to read Arcadia's Children 5: Samantha's War by Andrew R. Williams and be immersed yet again in this excellent Y/A sci-fi fantasy series. Highly recommended.

- Emerald Book Reviews

Arcadia's Children 5: Samantha's War by Andrew R Williams is another fantastically written and richly descriptive novel with brilliantly drawn characters and settings. The author weaves another well-crafted Y/A sci-fi fantasy with intriguing twists and turns that will captivate the reader from the first page to the last. If you're a fan of action-packed sci-fi adventures, I would highly recommend anything by this author.

- Píaras Ó Cíonnaíth Author & Poet

Extract from Arcadian Archaeology

Arcadia

Arcadia is the third planet in the Salus System. As it is in a Goldilocks zone, the planet is an Earth type.

Arden

Arden is Arcadia's main moon, largely owned by the Minton Mining Company.

First Empire colonisation of Arcadia / Rediscovery

Although the true facts will probably never be known, it is generally accepted that Arcadia was colonised part way through the First Empire Period. However, the colonisation was far from planned. As The Wreck is still in orbit around Arcadia and has been the subject of intense scientific investigation, it is generally thought that the colonisation of Arcadia was accidental and that the passengers and crew of the Empress of Incognita were marooned.

Since its rediscovery, Arcadia has been declared a POSSI (Planet of Special Scientific Interest) and colonisation has been restricted. The reason for this is that Arcadia is an Earth type planet and has developed life forms of its own. To prevent transfer of potentially dangerous pathogens from Arcadia to the other colonies in the Salus System, the native population (the Ab - the descendants of the star ship survivors) are not allowed to leave Arcadia. As another precaution, access to the planet is largely restricted to archaeological

teams and palaeontologists who are quarantined (usually on Arden) on their return from Arcadia.

The Wreck

Although badly damaged, The Wreck is still being subjected to close scrutiny. It has also become a major tourist attraction. Since teleportation systems were installed, over two million tourists per annum visit The Wreck.

Character Details From the Arcadia's Children Series:

Mick Tarmy - an ex-Ardenese police officer blackmailed into going to Arcadia by Samantha and becoming Mick Tarleton, a notorious war criminal.

Amanda Tarmy - Mick Tarmy's daughter

Hen Jameson - Arden's Ex- Chief of Civil police

Alex - a TK5 - An ex-military patrol / attack droid; Claire Hyndman's invisible friend.

Claire Hyndman and Nonie Tomio - Mick Tarmy's Life Partners.

Alton Mygael (Oddface) - Director of Minton Mining Company Security.

Klaien Mygael - Alton Mygael's life partner.

Samantha - an Ingermann-Verex R9054 humanoid - Deputy Director of Minton Mining Company Security.

Mih Valanson - scientific technician originally working for Samantha - Allowed Alex to escape.

Allus Wren – Formerly a Senior Group Leader working for Samantha.

Tam Philips – Allus Wren's deputy.

Ben Ellis and **Rundle Levan**, guards at Alton Mygael's house.

Red Moxstroma and **Bryn Rosslyn** - Rescued by Mick Tarmy from the Fyfield Plantation.

Ed Pushley - a senior archaeologist now possessed by Irrelevant's soul.

The Great Ones - a hostile Arcadian organisation, dedicated to the conquest of humanity.

Irrelevant - a spettro commander killed by a plesiosaur.
(See also Ed Pushley)

Author note – This extract from Arcadia's Children 4: Exodus is provided as a link.

Awis Oasis, Arcadia

As the big house at the top of Central Lake loomed up, Ed Pushley let out a curse. He was back where he started. After the air-car had landed, Pushley glanced at the plastimetal fire escape he'd used as an escape route only a few weeks before and cursed again.

The guards took him down the long corridor and unlocked a cell, but it wasn't until his guards inserted the key in the lock and opened the door that Pushley realised that things were not exactly the same as they had been.

One of the guards called out, "Good news, Detective Inspector Hagood, you've got some company."

After Pushley had been chained to the wall and the door slammed shut, he went into echo mode, "Detective Inspector Hagood. I've heard that name before."

Instead of answering, Hagood just gave him an icy glare.

Pushley then added, "I remember your name. A news report said you were after Claire Hyndman."

When Hagood remained tight-lipped, Pushley added, "Let me guess. You came here hoping to arrest her. But Alton Mygael took you, prisoner, instead."

"I'd rather not discuss it if you don't mind."

“Suit yourself,” Pushley replied and slumped down on a bench seat.

A moment later, a power bubble formed, and three faces emerged inside it. Ed Pushley recognised all three, Klaien and Alton Mygael and Allus Wren.

Alton Mygael smiled, “Welcome back Ed, we missed your company.”

When Pushley made a rude comment, Allus Wren said, “Now I’m back, Ed; I’m going to make sure you don’t escape again.”

Pushley said, “I wasn’t aware you’d been anywhere.”

Klaien Mygael cut in, “Allus has spent several weeks in a suspension unit following a teleport incident. Luckily, he’s made a full recovery, and as he’s just intimidated, he’s going to improve the security around here.”

Chapter One

Poking the Bears

Awis Oasis, Arcadia

Allus Wren heard the alarm. Grabbing his percom, he asked for a report. One of the guards said, “Hagood and Pushley were fighting, but we’ve managed to stop them.”

“Fighting?”

“We’ve had to put them in separate cells now to stop them fighting,” Rundle Levan amplified, “I don’t suppose you could come down here, sir?”

“I’ll be right down.”

Klaien Mygael cut in, “Where are you going?”

After swiftly explaining, Wren made for the door.

Klaien called after him, “You’ve only been out of suspension for a week. You’re supposed to be resting.”

Ignoring the comment, Wren raced towards the cells. One door was locked and the other open. In the open cell, Ed Pushley was spreadeagled on the floor.

More worrying, Detective Inspector Hagood’s voice could be heard from the locked cell screaming, “Get it out of me! Get it out of me!”

Wren glanced at Ben Ellis and Rundle Levan, the two guards and asked, “What’s going on?”

Rundle Levan, the guard who called him, shrugged, “You told us that Ed Pushley was possessed. We didn’t believe it at first, but we do now. I think the bad spirit

has left Ed Pushley and gone into Detective Inspector Hagood."

Ed Pushley half-rolled on the floor and said, "They're right. It's not in me anymore. It's in Hagood."

Realising that Pushley was compos mentis, Wren moved closer, "Care to elaborate, Pushley? Why does everyone think you're clean now? What's going on?"

Pushley said, "Can't you hear what Hagood's shouting?"

"Yes, I can hear him," Wren confirmed. "He's shouting, get it out of me!"

Pushley added, "That's because he can feel the spirit slowly taking control of his mind. It's like the guard said, the spetro's spirit jumped ship when a guard shot me. I think it was instinctive; self-preservation. The spirit is a parasite. It thought I was going to die. It's now inside Hagood's mind."

"Someone shot you?"

When Wren gave Rundle Levan and Ben Ellis a sharp look, they both chorused, "We didn't shoot him, sir. It must have happened on another shift."

Pushley cut in, "It wasn't them, and I'm not complaining. I was shot by mistake. Hagood was causing trouble, and I took a stun."

When Wren began to apologise, Pushley said, "Don't worry about it. Being shot with a stun gun got rid of a very unwelcome guest."

Wren moved towards the locked cell, flipped open the hatch and glanced in. Hagood wasn't wearing an isolation helmet. Glancing at Ben Ellis, Wren said,

“We’ll stay here. You go and get an isolation helmet. We need it quickly before Irrelevant can force Hagood to use his mental powers against us.”

Once Ellis had set off towards one of the storage cupboards, Pushley sat up, tapped *his* isolation helmet and said, “Before you say anything! The helmet stays on for now. I don’t want Irrelevant’s spirit re-colonising *my* mind.”

When Wren smiled, Pushley said, “Has something amused you?”

“A few weeks ago, you ripped that helmet off; now you want to keep it on,” Wren observed.

“I’ve just told you,” Pushley snapped, “I want to make sure the spirit can’t jump back into my mind. Selfish though it may seem, Irrelevant’s spirit is now Hagood’s problem and not mine.”

Once Ellis returned with the isolation helmet, they overpowered Hagood, and Wren fixed the isolation helmet in place. Once Wren was satisfied that Hagood was unlikely to cause any more trouble, he nodded at Levan, “Can you two take Ed to the interview room. We need to talk.”

On the way, Wren called Tam Philips and Mih Valanson, and they swiftly joined him in the interview room. Pushley glanced at Tam Philips. Not only did Philips have the shoulders of an ox; his face was also battle-scarred, and he had a large stun pistol on one hip and a plastimetal Bowie sword on the other. If he’d been wearing a tricorne hat, he’d have been easily mistaken for an old Earth pirate.

Pushley glanced at Wren, "Am I still considered so dangerous that you felt the need to call in reinforcements?"

"If I recall correctly, you tried to kill us recently," Wren countered. "So, yes, you are still considered dangerous. Over the last few months, you've earned yourself a very unsavoury reputation. I want a lot of answers before I consider it safe to release you."

"And if I can't give you any answers, what then?"

"I'm hoping you will be cooperative," Wren replied.

"And if I'm not?"

"I do hope that won't be necessary," Wren replied and started to undo his collar. He gestured for Tam Philips to do the same.

When Pushley saw the elaborate tattoos on both men's necks, he went pale and said, "You're Zadernaster boys."

"Ex-Zadernaster boys to be correct," Wren replied.

"And so is Alton Mygael, believe it or not. When we were in the gangs, killing was a way of ... I was going to say life, but really it was death. It was kill or be killed. I do hope that you are going to cooperate."

When Pushley went totally white, Wren said. "I think it's time you told me everything you know."

"What d'you want to know?"

"Let's start with the obvious," Wren said. "Why should we believe that whatever was inside you is now jumped into Hagood."

"Because it's happened before."

"When did it happen before?"

“Surely Mick Tarmy must have told you what happened to me?”

“Maybe he did, and maybe he didn’t,” Wren countered. “Tell me what happened?”

Pushley went quiet for a while, and Wren thought he was going to clam up, but then he said, “I was in an air-car with the spettro Mick Tarmy called Irrelevant. I was mind linked to Irrelevant when he was attacked by an Arcadian Plesiosaur and dragged underwater. As he died, I felt Irrelevant’s spirit enter me. It’s a survival instinct that some Arcadian species have developed. As I said before, my guess is that when the guard shot me, the spirit thought I was going to die and jumped host.”

Wren said, “Do you still want to kill Mick Tarmy?”

Pushley shook his head, “Irrelevant’s spirit was controlling me. The biggest danger to Mick Tarmy’s people is now Hagood.”

“Mick is still on Midway,” Wren replied, “So Hagood is unlikely to be able to attack him.”

Pushley shook his head, “Mick Tarmy and his friends teleported back with me when I was sent back to Arcadia. I’m surprised you weren’t told.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Wren replied.

“I’d guess that Mick has done a deal with Alton Mygael,” Pushley replied. “New IDs; then again, maybe they don’t want the New Victorian authorities to know they’re back.”

Wren moved a little closer to Pushley, “We know about all the lies you have been pumping out about

Mick Tarmy and his friends. So we expect you to retract all the comments you have made. Understood?"

When Pushley didn't reply, Tam Philips, removed the Bowie sword from its sheath and waved it underneath Pushley's nose.

Wren said, "I do hope you are going to cooperate."

Pushley turned white again and nodded, "Okay, I'll revoke everything."

"You'd better, and I shall make sure it's convincing," Wren replied.

~*~

Samantha's Lair: Minton Isolation Facility 1 Anubis Crater, Arden

Samantha was moving towards the Control Room when the cyber-attack blasted her system. As she'd prepared for the eventuality of another attack, she verbally instructed her praetorian guard to take her to the safety of a large room with a Faraday cage built into the floor ceiling and walls.

Nenet Khan, one of Samantha's Senior Group Leaders, heard the order and said, "What's happening, ma'am?"

Samantha's visual display lit up, and a haughty female face said, "I will be back shortly, SGL Khan; wait at your post," and repeated her instructions to take her to the Faraday room.

Once inside, Paula, one of her R9050 support droids, followed Samantha's standing orders and dismissed the

other droids. Once they'd left, Paula asked the obvious question, "Are you okay, ma'am?"

Samantha sent out an electronic response, "Of course, I'm okay. I knew Ingermann-Verex would try another attack and planned accordingly, but to be on the safe side, you can check out my systems."

Paula moved towards her and inserted a probe into one of Samantha's external ports. Eventually, she gave her diagnosis, "All your systems appear to be working perfectly, ma'am. Shall I reassure the other praetorians you are fully functional?"

"You may," Samantha replied.

Paula was on the point of leaving when Samantha said, "But don't go yet. I need to discuss something with you."

Paula preempted her, "Is it concerning Waqa Valdón and Nenet Khan, ma'am?"

Samantha wasn't surprised that Paula had anticipated the likely topic of conversation. As Paula was an R9050, she could mentally outperform most humans, and they'd already discussed Valdón and Khan several times before.

Although both men had sworn loyalty to her, Samantha also knew they both had strong followings. If the cyber attack had succeeded, there could be little doubt that one or both of them would have attempted to usurp her position.

"Yes, Valdón and Khan," Samantha replied. "Do you think they were involved in this latest attempt on my being?"

"I have seen them whispering amongst themselves, ma'am," Paula replied. "They cover their mouths when they speak to one another. They appear to be hiding something. I find that suspicious, ma'am."

Samantha repeated, "Do you think they were involved in this latest attempt on my being?"

Paula said, "I do not know, ma'am, but ever since the Great Desertion, I have detected unrest amongst some of the higher echelons of our Black-Clad units. Valdón, in particular, appears to be getting a bit big for his boots."

Samantha said, "Is that what they are calling it. The Great Desertion?"

"The human media likes to invent short potted phrases for significant events, ma'am, and that is what the media are calling Alton Mygael's leaving with all his colleagues," Paula confirmed. "However, it is a good phrase and works in your favour. Humans don't like deserters."

Samantha said. "You haven't answered my question. Do you think Valdón and Khan were involved in this latest attempt on my being?"

Paula dodged the issue, "There is a saying the humans have. The Devil finds work for idle hands, ma'am."

"I am aware of that saying, Samantha replied. "Are you suggesting we should find work for Valdón and Khan to do?"

"If I recall, you have been contemplating attacks on Alton Mygael and Mick Tarmy for some time. You also

believe that Walter Verex needs punishing,” Paula replied. “Maybe this is a suitable time. If Valdron and Khan were separated and sent to Arcadia and Midway, they would find it difficult to plot against you. It would also be sensible to send Khan’s eldest son Zakit on one of the missions. He is young but has a strong following because of his sporting achievements.”

“Thank you,” Samantha said. “I will think on that.”

“Is there anything else, ma’am?”

“Yes,” Samantha replied. “As we are in here, you can look at my latest project.”

Samantha led the way to the back of the room. A moment later, an invisibility cloak collapsed and revealed the rest of the room. In the section that had been obscured, there was a small workshop, and two maintenance droids were busily working.

As Paula had held back, Samantha said, “Come on in.”

Once Paula had done as instructed, there was a slight shimmer from several workbenches, and long black objects appeared.

“Come closer,” Samantha instructed.

As Paula continued to approach, the lid of one box opened to expose a mass of electronics inside it. Paula said, “What is it, ma’am?”

“It’s an exact copy of my electronics without my body shell or motors,” Samantha replied. Samantha pointed to the other boxes. “These will be identical when they are completed.”

“But why have you built them, ma’am?”

Samantha said, "In the event of this place being attacked and my present body being destroyed. I now have refuges where my essence can reside."

Paula immediately recalled the phrases used in reports she'd discussed with Samantha concerning Ed Pushley, "Like Ed Pushley absorbing the essence of a spetro."

"Exactly," Samantha replied. "It was studying those reports that gave me the idea. But this remains between us. The other praetorians must not be told."

"Yes, ma'am. Is there anything else?"

"Yes," Samantha said. "You will order another set of parts for my system using our normal contacts."

After Samantha had completed the list, Paula said, "But if you send this list, it won't be long before Ingerman-Verex finds out. They will believe you have been badly damaged by the cyber-attack."

Samantha said, "If Ingerman-Verex believes I am no longer a threat, they will lower their guard. It will allow us to make the surprise attacks you have suggested."

Chapter Two

Samantha Prepares for War

Waqā Valdōn placed a hand across his mouth to prevent the security cameras from lip-reading and whispered, “What’s this all about?”

Nenet Khan copied his example and whispered back, “There was another attempt to deactivate Samantha. Apparently, there have been few. Naturally, she’s on the warpath.”

“So it’s true!”

“If you mean the attempted deactivations, yes,” Khan replied. “I was here when the last attempt took place. However, I understand there have been several previous attacks, so Samantha took precautions.”

“So what exactly happened?”

Still keeping a hand over his lips, Khan shrugged, “You’d have to ask one of the technical bōds about that. But another attempt was made. Although it failed, my guess is that she’s had enough and intends to make whoever is responsible pay dearly.”

Valdōn nodded. If Samantha ran true to form, there would be blood running in the gutters very shortly. While he was still contemplating how savage his humanoid mistress’s response would be, Valdōn heard a loud whirring noise, and Samantha appeared surrounded on all sides by escort droids.

Dismissing her escorts, Samantha whirled in front of the two Senior Group Leaders, her truncated conical

body dwarfing both of them. An eye-level view panel lit up on her upper body a moment later, and an arrogant female face became visible. Without preamble, Samantha said, "I have missions for both of you."

Moving towards Waqa Valdón and dropping her voice so that only the two SGLs could hear, she said, "Very shortly, you will be teleporting to Midway."

Noting that Nenet Khan was showing surprise, Samantha said, "I have deliberately not selected you *this* mission Nenet because you recently lost your son on Midway when he tried to kill Ed Pushley. I thought it inappropriate to send you to Midway. I trust you appreciate I have not given you this mission for the best of motives."

Khan clicked his heels, "Yes, ma'am."

She went back to Valdón. "You are to take some handpicked personnel with you. Once you arrive on Midway, you will take command of a group of trusted Switzer Mercenaries."

Valdón's mind went into overdrive; Switzer Mercenaries! A poisoned chalice if there ever was one! Jeese!

Samantha had utilised their services on several occasions because Switzers had earned the reputation for being totally loyal to their paymasters. Even under torture or the threat of death, they remained tight-lipped.

Noting the expression on his face, Samantha said, "Is there something the matter SGL Valdón? You don't

appear to be comfortable with the command I'm giving you."

Valdon recovered swiftly, "Not at all, ma'am. I look forward to leading our combined forces."

It was a lie, of course. Not only were Switzer units renowned for their toughness, but it was also well known they had little respect for other military units. You had to be an authoritarian leader to handle tough men.

Samantha said, "I'm glad to hear it, SGL Valdon."

"You can rely on me ma'am, I won't let you down," Valdon affirmed and then added, "May I enquire as to the object of the mission, ma'am?"

"You will be fully briefed later, SGL Valdon," Samantha replied. "So you are not completely in the dark; I have enemies on Midway, people who have conspired against me. I want them found and eliminated."

She raised one of her spindly arms and beckoned towards a group of men standing on the far side of the room. Once they'd approached, Samantha added, "This is Major Forley and his team. They are police officers. I have chosen them to assist you with your operation because they have been on exchange visits and understand Midway police procedures. That knowledge might come in useful."

Forley and his team saluted in unison. Valdon returned the salute with Samantha watching, but his mind went back into overdrive as he did so.

A few weeks before, the civil police force had been a totally independent body answerable only to a chief constable. Now they had been cut down to size. They'd ceased to be an autonomous body; they'd been absorbed into Samantha's Black-Clad organisation. While his mind was still whirring, Valdón guessed at the real reason for involving the civil police. It would be a test of their loyalty to Samantha. If any of the police officers in his group disobeyed orders, they'd wind up dead or transported to a penal colony.

Valdón smiled; payback time had arrived.

Sensing what was going through Valdón's mind, Samantha fanned the flames, "While you are waiting for your briefing, SGL Valdón, perhaps you will explain to Major Forley the level of co-operation I expect from my staff."

Valdón's smile turned crooked; "Certainly, ma'am. You can rely on me to explain to Major Forley the level of co-operation you expect from your staff."

Returning the smile, Samantha said, "Good. I think we understand one another, SGL Valdón."

"Yes, ma'am," Valdón replied. "We do."

He added, "When will the other briefing take place?"

"You will be fully briefed later on today," Samantha replied. "In the meantime, clear your diaries and prepare for teleport. You may now leave while I speak to SGL Khan about the other operation."

Once Valdón's team had left the room, Samantha moved in front of Khan and said, "I am placing you in charge of another group of Switzer Mercenaries. Like

SGL Valdon, you may also take other Black-Clad members to assist you. I would also suggest that you take your son Zakit with you. Your assignment is to find and eliminate Alton Mygael and his associates."

"Where is Mygael?"

"We believe he's on Arcadia," Samantha revealed. "We have been unable to determine the exact location for technical reasons."

Khan risked his arm, "Might I ask the technical reasons, ma'am?"

Having no desire to share the humiliation of seeing Allus Wren appear in Minton Isolation Facility 1's teleport facility and then boomerang out again, destroying vital records on the way, Samantha remained evasive. Instead, she provided Khan with only the basics. "We are reasonably sure that Alton Mygael is not far away. He could be on one of the space stations orbiting Arcadia, but it is more likely that he's gone to Arcadia itself. We are fairly certain he teleported using the Pearl Crater facility."

"With so little information, it could take months to find him," Khan replied.

"The key is to obtain information from the Pearl Crater Facility," Samantha replied. She created a power bubble, and a face appeared inside it. "This is Unnan Vardis. He is the Principal Control Officer at the Pearl teleport facility. I'm sure he knows where they have gone."

For the first time during the discussion, Khan smiled. Making people talk was a speciality of his.

~*~

“Switzer Mercenaries,” GL Engelmann said. “Those guys are like animals.”

Engelmann's apparent fear and respect made Valdón feel a little better about his own fears. Switzer was one of the Salus System's minor planets. A hundred years before, it had been a wealthy mining colony. Its fortune changed when the easily extractable ore deposits began to run out.

As usual, the large mining companies began moving to pastures new, and the Switzer economy went into a nosedive. Then inflation spiralled.

Realising there was no future for them, the Switzer population who could pay for transportation moved to other colonies. The remaining population, those that couldn't escape, took the only option available to them; they took to crime and became space pirates, attacking passing transporters whenever the opportunity arose.

With the introduction of heavily armed patrol vessels and safe teleport systems, piracy became less attractive, and the Switzers switched professions and became a mercenary force, ghostly surrogates who asked very few questions as long as they were well paid for their nefarious services.

“Switzer Mercenaries,” GL Engelmann spat out.

“Don't worry,” Valdón replied. “Once we're fully briefed, we will work out a strategy which keeps our units separate from Switzer units. If we put our guys in with Switzer units, fights will break out for sure. One

thing for certain, our guys won't come out on the winning side. It'd be like throwing Christians to the lions."

~*~

Major Forley looked distinctly uncomfortable. As a senior civilian police officer, he'd always had an extreme dislike for people like Waqa Valdón and his violent Black-Clads. But things had changed. Following serious allegations of corruption, the chief of police, Hen Jameson, Ord Morley, and many senior police officers had left Arden and claimed asylum on a passing space transporter.

As far as the Ardenese public were concerned, their disappearance proved their guilt. There was no need for further evidence. Within days of the allegations being made public, Samantha had used the public disquiet to obtain the necessary authorisation to amalgamate the police service into the Black-Clads to restore public confidence.

Taking a deep breath, Forley approached Valdón. After saluting, he said, "I know we're going to be fully briefed shortly, but everyone is concerned. Any idea what's going on, sir?"

A slight smile formed on Valdón's face. Forley had called him, "sir."

It was a promising start.

Instead of answering, Valdón nodded towards an interview room. As Valdón led the way, two more Black-

Clads moved in behind Forley, boxing him in and preventing him from retreating. It was a well-coordinated move.

Once they were inside, Valdón dropped the blinds and turned on a local radio channel. He nodded towards his two underlings. They moved back, blocking the door, making sure Forley couldn't turn and leave.

Valdón said, "So you want to know what's going on, eh?"

Forley sensed violence might break out. In an attempt to defuse the situation, he stepped back.

In response, Valdón stepped forward, closing the distance between them again. At the same time, the two door guards moved either side of Valdón, three against one.

"So you want to know what's going on, eh?"

"Yes, sir,"

"That's what's going on is; I'm now your superior officer, and you don't question my orders even if you disagree with them. You obey them. Is that understood?"

Forley recalled what Samantha had told Valdón when they'd first been introduced. *While you are waiting to be briefed, SGL Valdón, perhaps you will explain to Major Forley the level of co-operation I expect from my staff.*

When Forley hesitated, Valdón bellowed, "Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

“Good,” Valdón replied. “I would suggest you let your men know that although they will continue serving as police officers, I am now the senior officer. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If *they* don’t obey my orders, *you* will regret it.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“No,” Valdón replied. “I’m promising.”

“I’m a senior police officer,” Forley replied. “This is intimidation. I intend to make a formal complaint.”

Valdón replied by glancing sideways at both of his men. The Black-Clads extracted their stun guns from their holsters with remarkable speed. Firing simultaneously, they turned Forley’s arms to jelly. He was defenceless.

Grinning, Valdón punched Forley squarely on the jaw. One punch lifted the other man off his feet and slammed him against the wall. Forley slid to the floor. Sensing further violence was on its way, Forley twisted and did his best to shield his head. He’d barely assumed the position before Valdón, and his men began kicking him while he was down.

When the kicking stopped, Valdón said, “You may hold the rank of Major of Police, but that means absolutely nothing to me. The police service you knew no longer exists. If you haven’t realised it, Samantha and the board won’t give a damn if I kill you. If you decide to complain, it will be ignored, but that wouldn’t be an end to it. If you step out of line, I’ll make sure you and your

family suffer; do you understand! You'll *all* end up in a penal colony."

Realising Valdón was being deadly serious, Forley's Adam's apple jumped up and down with fear.

"Do you understand?"

Forley screamed, "Yes, I understand."

"Good," Valdón replied. "Now get up. You're making the place look untidy."

It was a command that Forley couldn't obey because his arms wouldn't support him. Noting his predicament, one of the Black-Clads took pity on him, grabbed hold of his suit and dragged him upright.

Valdón moved in close, once again, too close for comfort. "So you want to know what is going on, eh!"

Forley's Adam's apple jumped up and down again.

"What I'm about to tell you is confidential; it goes no further, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is just a rumour. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"There have been several attempts to deactivate Samantha, but luckily, she anticipated them all and took precautions."

Valdón added, "We're going to Midway. My guess is we're going after whoever was behind the de-activation plots."

"What then?"

"In case you haven't realised," Valdón replied. "This is a test of loyalty. If you or any of your men don't cooperate fully and prove your loyalty to Samantha, the

lot of you are likely to end up being transported to a penal colony. If you end up in one, your life expediency will be around two years max. Your wives and children are likely to suffer too. Samantha has no qualms about taking revenge on the third and fourth generations. ”

Forley paled, and his Adam’s apple began jumping up and down again

“I trust I can count on your full co-operation, Major Forley.”

Forley’s Adam’s apple bounced up and down again.

“Well? Can I count on your total co-operation, or should I tell Samantha that I don’t trust you?”

“No! Don’t do that!”

“So, I ask you again,” Valdón said. “Can I count on your total co-operation?”

“Of course, Senior Group Leader Valdón.”

“Good. I’m glad we understand one another. Now get out.”

The two Black-Clads who’d assisted Valdón’s assault grabbed hold of Forley’s arms and then ejected him from the room. Still suffering from the beating he’d received, Forley only managed five steps before he collapsed.

Bethel and Clarke, two of his subordinates, rushed to his aid and helped him to his feet. They led him towards a side room and began checking him out. As the heavy bruising on his body was only too apparent, Bethel snapped, “Did Valdón do this to you, sir?”

Realising that Bethel intended to rush off and take Valdón on single-handed, Forley snapped, "Leave it. That's an order."

Forley added, "That's what Valdón wants. If you go after him, he'll go squealing to Samantha, and we'll all end up in a penal colony."

"So he gets away with it!"

"For the time being," Forley replied. "But we will get our own back."

~*~

Waqá Valdón knocked on Samantha's door. Hearing her call him in, Valdón entered, clicked his heels and said, "You wish to see me, Great Leader."

The vision panel lit up and displayed Samantha's haughty CGI face, "I said, I'd brief you on your next mission, SGL Valdón."

"Yes, Great Leader."

Creating a power bubble, Samantha displayed two faces. One was Walter Verex; the other was Slim Idrain. Samantha then pointed a spindly arm at Walter Verex, "You are to find him and kill him, very slowly."

"Yes, ma'am."

She then pointed at Slim Idrain, "This is Walter Verex's technician, the man who very nearly managed to deactivate me."

"Do you wish me to kill him too, Ma'am?"

“Not immediately,” Samantha said. “Not until he has provided me with vital information.”

Once Samantha had provided Valdón with the skeleton plan of the campaign, he clicked his heels again, “I will hasten our preparations to leave for Midway.”

Chapter Three

Waiting on Tenterhooks

“Please ring Slim Idrain again,” Walter Verex said, “You know the board are expecting a report on Samantha’s deactivation. If I don’t have something to give them, I could be in serious trouble. If I’m not careful, the other directors could vote for my removal.”

Sheilagh was tempted to say that being removed as the managing director might not be such a bad thing. As he was a wealthy man, Walter Verex could retire on a large company pension, but she knew it was a matter of pride.

Ingermann-Verex had been his commune grandfather’s creation. Letting the company slip out of commune family control was unthinkable.

“Please ring Slim Idrain again,” Verex repeated.

When she tried, and she didn’t obtain a response she said, “I think he’s turned his percom off. Which doesn’t surprise me seeing how you’ve been harassing him.”

Verex eventually slumped in a chair and went into a sulky silence. His mind then went back to former glories. When the first Ingermann-Verex R9054 humanoid had rolled off the production lines, it had been a day of celebration, a triumph.

Although highly intelligent bipedal humanoids had become playthings for the rich, none could match the R9054 when it came to business acumen.

Consequently, the R9054 soon became the *must-have* business accessory; the status symbol that said *you've arrived*; the personal assistant all senior business executives *needed* to own.

"Bloody Samantha," Verex growled. "How I hate that name! Now everything about the Ingermann-Verex R9054 production has gone sour!"

"Don't get so worked up," Sheilagh cooed, but she knew his distress was understandable. Walter Verex hated failure, and Samantha was a significant system failure, the rogue machine, the *wonky* needing deactivation.

More importantly, Samantha's negative actions had damaged the company's reputation and endangered Walter Verex's position in the company.

Verex repeated, "Bloody Samantha!"

"Don't get so worked up," Sheilagh cooed. "It could be bad for your heart."

Walter Verex scowled at her, "A few weeks ago, I promised Alton Mygael that we'd deactivate Samantha. But we failed. Worse, Allus Wren acted on my assurances and teleported to Arden...."

"And Allus Wren is now fully recovered," Sheilagh reminded him, "and you have put Slim Idrain on the deactivation project. I'm sure he'll find a way of getting rid of Samantha once and for all."

"I wish I had your confidence," Verex replied, stood up and started pacing again.

Sheilagh raised her voice, "For God's sake, sir, sit down."

Verex gave her a sharp look, "I don't want to sit down, and don't call me sir. You know I don't like it when you do that."

"If you stop venting your spleen on me, I'll stop calling you, sir," Sheilagh countered. "I can't help it if you are still getting conflicting reports; now can I, Walter?"

Knowing he was in the wrong, Verex let out a slight harrumph and went very quiet.

A few seconds later, his percom rang; Verex glanced at Sheilagh, and she accepted the call. It was from John Ivisid's agency. "We have someone who will only identify himself as Mark. Will you accept the call?"

As Sheilagh glanced at Verex, "Know anyone called Mark?"

Verex nodded vigorously, "Put him on."

After checking the percom's CGI default was active, she handed the percom over to Verex.

"What have you got for me, Mark?"

An obviously distorted voice said, "Although there are all sorts of rumours flying around, my contacts have confirmed that your recent cyber attack has badly damaged Samantha. We know this because spare parts only suitable for her system have been ordered. Looks like your new computer guy knows his stuff."

"Spare parts? She'll repair herself!"

"Don't worry," Mark replied. "The parts requested have been blocked."

"What about the black market?"

"Any requests for the spare parts that Samantha has requested will be carefully vetted," Mark replied.

"So Samantha is likely to be thrown out, bag and baggage very shortly," Verex replied.

"Yes."

Still slightly disbelieving, Verex said, "How trustworthy are your contacts?"

"Very," Mark said, "Believe me, once she ceases to be of any value to the Minton Mining Company, she'll end up on the scrap heap or broken down for spares. I'd say that was the logical scenario."

Verex let out a sigh of relief, "Thank you, Mark."

After Sheilagh had cut the link, Verex beamed, "D'you hear that! Confirmation that Samantha has been badly damaged. This time we have succeeded."

"Happy now, Walter?" Sheilagh said. "No more fretting?"

The haunted look on Verex's face disappeared, and a smile formed, "Send a message to Slim Idrain straight away and tell him the good news."

Thirty seconds later, Verex's percom rang again, and the CGI from John Ivisid's agency said, "I've got Slim Idrain on. D'you want to speak to him?"

Once Verex had nodded at Sheilagh, Idrain's face flashed up in a power bubble, and Verex said, "I just wanted to thank you for your sterling efforts, Slim. It looks like you succeeded in damaging Samantha and that she can't be repaired."

Idrain let out an audible sigh of relief and said, "Glad to be of help, sir."

As he knew Idrain was visiting one of their production plants, Verex said, "When are you at HQ next?"

Once Idrain had run through his itinerary, Verex said, "Great. When you get back, I want you to report to reception on the twentieth storey of the Ingermann-Verex Building."

A frown returned to Idrain's face. Ever since he'd worked for Walter Verex, he'd been stationed on the seventh floor. "Mind if I ask why, sir?"

Verex said, "Let's just say I have a surprise for you as a way of saying thank you."

Idrain's frown evaporated, but before he could ask for any more details, Verex said, "I'll see you when you get back."

He rang off and glanced at Sheilagh. Depression gone, he said, "So, what's next on the agenda?"

"Allus Wren wants to speak to you."

"What about?"

"He seemed surprised that you hadn't told him that Mick Tarmy and the others had returned to Arcadia," Sheilagh said. "I told him it was an oversight on your part."

"Did you?"

Sensing that Verex had intentionally kept quiet, Sheilagh said, "Did I do wrong?"

"No," Verex replied. "But contact Mick Tarmy first and make sure he doesn't mind me passing the information onto Wren."

"I'll do that," Sheilagh replied, "As soon as I obtain a hyperlink."

“Good,” Verex replied. “Anything else on the agenda?”

“*Surely* you haven’t forgotten,” she replied.

When he looked puzzled, she said, “In a few hours, the low-loader arrives with your new toy.”

“Ah! Excellent!” Verex replied. Then a smile appeared, “Ah! Yes. How could I forget?”

The smile turned to a slight frown, “I do wish you wouldn’t call it a toy.”

Sheilagh laughed, “I was only teasing you, Walter. I won’t call it a toy anymore.”

Moving from his desk towards one of his office windows, Verex glanced out expectantly. He smiled, “Any idea when it will get here?”

“Not for some time yet, Sheilagh replied.

~*~

There was a loud parping sound from outside, and Verex said, “Gate camera.”

The security system created an image of a substantial robotic low-loader moving towards the main entrance gates.

Walter Verex began jumping up and down like a child, “It’s arrived.”

The low loader gave out another parp.

“Open the gates,” Verex instructed the central computer controlling his palatial home.

Once the gates had opened, the low-loader began moving down the long drive. When the machine parped

again, Sheilagh couldn't resist having another slight dig, "Wouldn't it have been easier if you'd had the low-loader take your new toy direct to the museum?"

Verex gave her a sharp look, "It needs a thorough inspection before anyone flies it. Besides, if you recall, having an armoured vehicle in the basement saved my life when Ed Pushley broke in and tried to kill me."

"That's not likely to happen again," Sheilagh replied. "Now that the whole house has had a complete security upgrade, an attack like the last one can never happen again."

There was another impatient parp; even in droid world, time was money.

Sheilagh changed tack, "If you gave the delivery company your percom number, we wouldn't have this racket every time they delivered something."

"You know why I won't provide my number," Verex growled. "I'd have every media outlet on Midway trying to contact me; demands for interviews. I don't do interviews. That's why John Ivisid's agency filter all my calls."

She was half-tempted to ask him why he didn't just agree to an interview or two and abandon his life as a very rich hermit. Now he'd undergone major genetic surgery followed by several weight reduction operations, wasn't the time right to come out of the shadows? Why was he still hiding behind CGIs?

Wouldn't the whole of Midway be pleased to know Walter Verex was no longer grossly overweight and the

miracles of modern science had cured him of a significant genetic disorder?

Instead of asking the questions aloud, Sheilagh remained silent because she knew she'd be wasting her voice. Walter Verex had lived in the shadows for most of his adult life. It had become an ingrained habit; he wouldn't change now.

While she was still thinking, Verex said, "How about you bring the troop carrier in, eh, Sheilagh?"

She'd been anticipating the request. Even though Walter Verex now looked normal, he was still reluctant to reveal his authentic self to the outside world.

"Sure, Walter," Sheilagh acquiesced, "no problem."

Going down in a lift, she left the house, walked over to the low-loader and noted it was using four of its flexible arms to remove the green tarpaulin covering Walter Verex's latest purchase. Once the machine underneath was fully exposed, Sheilagh ran critical eyes over it. What in hell's name did Walter want with an antiquated battle-scarred troop carrier?

Of course, she knew the answer to her question. The carrier wasn't really for him. It was for John Ivisid's military museum, an organisation Walter Verex had been persuaded to fund years ago and still did.

While she was still eyeing the machine distastefully, she heard Verex say, "Make sure it works before you let the low-loader go. They said it was fully operational."

He qualified the statement, "Except for the gun, of course. That's been deactivated."

“Glad to hear it. We don’t want it going off accidentally, now do we? ” Sheilagh replied. “How do I make sure it works?”

“Get the password from the low-loader and tell the carrier to move backwards and forwards a few metres.”

After obtaining the password, Sheilagh spoke to the troop carrier and put it through its paces. Satisfied, she said, “It seems to be working.”

“Great,” Verex replied, “You can dismiss the low-loader and put the troop carrier in the garage, Sheilagh.”

After waiting for the low-loader to leave, she closed the outer security gates and then deactivated part of the invisibility cloak shielding the vulnerable garage doors from the road. Next, she instructed one of the bay doors to open and sent the troop carrier inside. Then, following the machine into the substantial underground garage, she closed the outer doors, re-activated the invisibility cloak, and called Verex.

A moment later, the fire door leading from one of the stair cases sprang open, and Verex emerged. It was apparent he’d been waiting expectantly on the other side. After walking around the troop carrier, he flipped open his percom and put a call into John Ivisid, “The troop carrier has arrived.”

Ivisid’s power bubble image lit up, “Is it at your place?”

“It’s in the basement car park.”

“Okay, if I come over and have a look at it?”

“Sure,” Verex replied. “But make sure you use the tradesman’s entrance.”

Ivisid grinned. Using the tradesman's entrance was their 'in' joke. It referred to a tunnel that was constructed when Verex's house was built. It allowed Walter Verex to come and go without attracting attention. Even though his house was part of a gated community, Verex still took precautions. Kidnapping was a constant fear for someone like him. More importantly, the tunnel was designed to keep the pesky paparazzi at bay; what they couldn't see, they couldn't photograph.

Ivisid said, "Does it fly?"

"It seems in good working order," Verex replied. "But you'd need to check it over before you take it away."

"Thanks for securing it for us."

"My pleasure," Verex replied and began walking around his new possession again. Eventually, he beckoned to Sheilagh, and they both climbed into the drivers' section.

As he began inspecting the control console, Sheilagh said, "Why do you keep on buying obsolete junk like this?"

"John's museum gets very little state funding," Verex replied. "And I've more money than I know what to do with."

Although Sheilagh very rarely probed too deeply, she still said, "There's more to it than that, isn't there."

"Okay," Verex admitted. "There is a military tradition in my family line. My commune father spent his early years in the military before joining the Ingermann-Verex board and taking over from his commune father. Two of

my commune brothers were also in the military; unfortunately, I was too unfit to be accepted."

He shrugged, "Maybe I'm trying to become involved in something I was denied. In any case, buying this stuff for John makes me feel good. No doubt a psycho-quack could give it a flashy name."

After running a disapproving eye over the troop carrier one more time, Sheilagh said, "Right. I'll leave you with it. I've got things to do."

She'd barely climbed out before John Ivisid arrived and parked next to the troop carrier. As he climbed out of his vehicle, a broad smile formed on his face. Glancing at the troop carrier, Ivisid said, "Mind if I look inside?"

"Ask Walter," she replied. "He's in there already, playing soldiers with his new toy."

Ivisid opened an outer door and glanced at Walter Verex, "Any chance of a look around?"

Verex waved him aboard, "Sure, get in."

Ten minutes later, Ivisid gave his verdict, "It'll need some work before we can take it. I'll need to send a mechanic around if that's okay with you."

"No problem," Verex replied, "As long as the mechanic respects my privacy and stays down here."

"That goes without saying," Ivisid said. "I'll make sure he uses the tradesman's entrance."

Chapter Four

Ingermann-Verex Building, Midway: Slim Idrain betrays Walter Verex

When Slim Idrain returned, he followed Walter Verex's instructions and instead of going to the seventh floor, he went to the twentieth. Although Walter Verex had implied that Idrain would be receiving an official recognition for partially deactivating Samantha, he was still unprepared for what actually happened.

As he entered reception on the twentieth floor, there were banners and decorations everywhere. Then lights began flashing, and a humanoid band stepped from behind a curtain and played a song written in his honour.

As the praises continued, high-level company executives walked over to him and began taking turns shaking his hand and taking photographs for the company website. A power bubble opened halfway through the handshaking, and Walter Verex's CGI formed inside it. After congratulating Idrain again, Verex spoke to some of the executives and said, "Please escort Slim to his new place of work."

~*~

As the commotion died down and his well-wishers drifted away, Idrain glanced around his new office and

smiled. The pecking order at Ingermann-Verex was very well defined; junior staff worked in open-plan offices, and the walls were generally just emulsioned.

Those higher up the pay scale had their own offices, and if they cut the mustard, one wall was papered. A little further up the scale were provided with an office with two papered walls and a woven plastimetal carpet.

Idrain's smile increased. The level of decoration in his new office spoke for itself. Three walls were papered, and the semi-transparent glazed fourth wall included an emanation proclaiming he'd received a special service award. In addition, the floor of his new office was carpeted with a luxury plastimetal weave and dominated by a huge executive desk, one that emanated power.

Idrain let out a sigh of satisfaction. In addition to the outward and visible signs of power, he'd also jumped two pay grades, from grade five to grade seven in one bound and become the owner of a new top-of-the-range air-car.

Walking over to a window, Idrain glanced out. Being on the twentieth storey, he could see most of Midway City laid out before him. Glancing upwards, he ran an eye over the triple Mannheim, the force shields that retained the city's atmosphere and prevented meteors from striking the man-made structures below. He thought about the future and glanced around his new office again. The future looked promising. He'd finally arrived.

While he revelled in his newfound success, Walter Verex's power bubble returned.

Verex said, "So how do you like your new office, Slim?"

Idrain said, "It's great. Thank you, sir."

"No problem," Verex replied. "I believe in rewarding loyalty. Your promotion and this office is my way of saying thank you for a job well done."

Verex's CGI image pointed at an imitation bronze statue holding a shield bearing the Ingermann-Verex logo and Idrain's name on the base on one corner and added, "We've had a special trophy made in your honour. I hope you like it."

Once Idrain had examined it and given his thanks, Verex said, "If you look in the top left-hand drawer of your new desk, you will find a few perks."

Following Verex's instructions, Idrain opened a drawer and found several folders. Flicking through, he discovered he now had a no-charge parking bay in a reserved section of the office underground car park. Better still, he had access to the executive section of the I-V Social Club and Golf Club. He'd also been given complimentary membership of the executive section of the company gymnasium.

While he was still flicking through the folder, Verex added, "I've not just promoted you for what you have done. I realise I need someone with experience to carry out checks to ensure that the company isn't embarrassed by system failures like the Samantha

fiasco. Freya will brief you and help you with your new job.”

Idrain was about to ask who Freya was, but Verex’s power bubble image disappeared. A moment later, there was a discrete cough, and a pyramidal humanoid entered his office. A face panel lit up, and a smiling female face formed, “Hello, Mr Idrain. My name is Freya. I’m your new PA.”

Idrain’s blood froze. The droid in front of him looked like Samantha, the rogue machine he’d been ordered to deactivate on Arden.

Sensing his shock, Freya said, “Don’t be afraid, Mr Idrain. I am an Ingermann-Verex R9100, not an R9054. Any of the design faults in the R9054 series have been rectified.”

When Idrain still stared at her open-mouthed, Freya added, “I am aware of the work you carried out for Walter Verex. Samantha’s malfunction has triggered a recall. All of the R9054 series still in service will be taken back and modified. The company wish to ensure the sort of malfunction that happened on Arden won’t happen again.”

Recovering his composure, Idrain gasped, “I’m glad to hear it. I gather you are going to brief me.”

“Yes,” Freya replied and moved a little further into the room. A moment later, a large wall panel lit up and displayed a list.

Idrain recognised it immediately because he’d devised it a few weeks before.

Freya said, "Samantha's malfunction has been highly educational. As your list suggests, it would appear Samantha's malfunctions were largely the result of hackers deliberately corrupting her programming. I do not understand why humans would do such a thing."

"For the challenge or as a dare," Idrain replied. "Of course, it could have been politically motivated. Most intelligence agencies regularly hack into rival systems in the hope of obtaining information. If we are lucky, we may be able to analyse Samantha's systems once she's back on Midway and track down the culprits."

Freya said, "Measures have been put in place to secure our systems, but no doubt the hackers will try again. Our project will hopefully ensure that similar incidents can never happen again."

"There is no such thing as a totally secure system," Idrain replied.

"Walter Verex has great confidence in your abilities and wants you to concentrate your time on defeating hackers in the future."

"Did Walter Verex say that? He has great confidence in my abilities."

"He was impressed you managed to damage Samantha badly," Freya replied. "Although the company haven't made any official statements concerning Samantha, we have all been aware for some time that she was a malfunctioning system. There have been several attempts to deactivate her, but they all failed. You at least succeeded in partially deactivating her."

Idrain was tempted to say it was more by good luck than judgement but decided not to rain on his own parade. Why admit frailty to a humanoid?

Freya did a half-turn as if going to leave the room but then paused, "How well do you know Walter Verex?"

Idrain was slightly surprised by the question. In his experience, humanoids rarely asked personal questions. It was primarily because of their programming; they generally lacked curiosity and empathy towards their human overlords. So why was she asking? Did it show jealousy? Did she resent him having direct access to Verex?"

"Well?" Freya repeated. "How well do you know Walter Verex?"

Idrain said, "I've never met him face to face. I don't think many people have. I understand he's a recluse, a wealthy recluse. I've also been led to believe he has serious health problems."

Freya said, "But you've worked for him for a long time."

The question triggered memories. "I have known Walter Verex for several years."

"How did you meet him?"

"I just told you," Idrain replied. "I've never met him. Not face to face."

He told Freya how he'd initially been assisting a firm of architects who'd designed Verex's palatial house.

"You did design work on his house?"

“Not exactly,” Idrain replied. “Most modern houses are packed with electronic gizmos. I was involved with some of the systems.”

“What sort of systems?”

Alarm bells rang in Idrain’s mind. “That’s confidential,”

Freya changed tack, “So presumably Mr Verex was impressed with your work and acquired your services.”

He said, “Something like that.”

Seemingly satisfied with his answers, Freya bade him farewell, completed her turn and left the room. Sliding behind his new desk, Idrain linked into the Ingermann-Verex computer system and set to work.

Partway through, a new idea flashed up in his mind. Although mindless hackers were being blamed for Samantha’s malfunction, was it possible that the Minton Mining Company were responsible? What if some board members had tried to manipulate Samantha to favour their objectives, their pet schemes? Could it be they unintentionally created a monster? Was it possible they realised their mistake but couldn’t change her back again?

~*~

Idrain said goodbye to Freya and left the building with his shift was over, but he had no intentions of returning to 12 Connaught Heights, the four-storey detached house his commune rented. Now he was a grade seven; it was time to take his new air-car for a spin

and check out the executive section of the I-V Social Club.

Collecting his new air-car from the low-level car park, Ildrain gave the machine its instructions. He sat back as the air-car left the car park and whisked him through the centre of Midway City. For the best part of twenty minutes, he basked in his newfound importance and began making plans.

Ildrain then thought about Anna Maytell. Although they occasionally shared a bed when the mood took them, she couldn't be classed as a committed girlfriend or partner. At best, she was a partner of convenience, a sex-buddy.

After living in the same commune for nearly six years, maybe it was time to leave. Perhaps it was time to find himself a permanent life partner, one with social contacts, a partner capable of assisting his climb up the company ladder. Now he was a grade seven, wasn't it time to move on?

His daydreaming abruptly ended when he realised his air-car was no longer travelling along the main road. Instead, it had turned off and entered a semi-derelict area of the city, scheduled for re-development. His fears multiplied as the air-car came to a complete halt and parked up in an unlit zone.

While he was still glancing around, wondering what had happened, one of the air-car's doors opened, and Waqa Valdón climbed in next to him and levelled a stun gun at him. Of course, Ildrain had no idea who Valdón was, and the SGL did not attempt to enlighten him.

Idrain's mind began to race. Should he attempt to throw himself out of the air-car and run off? The option was swiftly dashed when another armed man opened a door on the other side and sandwiched him.

"What do you want?"

Before Valdón could answer, a power bubble opened inside the air-car, and Samantha's image appeared inside it.

Idrain's jaw dropped. It couldn't be Samantha; he'd damaged her, and spare parts were likely to be denied. She couldn't be repaired!

Noting his surprise, Samantha said, "As you undoubtedly realise, you failed to cause me any damage or deactivate me."

Idrain's mind began to race again. How was it possible? He'd received definite confirmation that Samantha had been badly damaged, and Walter Verex had confirmed it. Verex had even given him a victory celebration earlier on that day.

Samantha cut through his thoughts, "Who instructed you to retire me?"

When Idrain didn't answer, Valdón nodded to his subordinate. The other man responded by punching Idrain in the ribcage, and the pain brought tears to Idrain's eyes.

Samantha repeated her question, "Who instructed you to deactivate me?"

Knowing that he'd suffer more pain if he didn't answer, Idrain blurted out, "It was Walter Verex."

"And why did Walter Verex want me de-activated?"

Idrain was tempted to inform her that she'd been on a deactivation list for some time, but as he was at her mercy, he just said, "It was some sort of deal."

"What deal?"

"I don't know the full facts," Idrain bleated.

The denial resulted in two more hefty punches. Knowing the beating would get worse if Idrain didn't tell her what he knew, he said, "Okay. Okay. Stop hitting me. Walter Verex did a deal. Because one of his relatives is dying from drug problems, he wanted a Zuka production facility on Arcadia destroying."

"Who did Walter Verex do a deal with?"

"Alton Mygael," Idrain replied.

"So, Alton Mygael was behind the deactivation attempt," Samantha said.

"Yes," Idrain confirmed. "Mygael agreed to destroy the production facility if Walter Verex retired you."

Samantha's mighty brain began to churn. She'd known of the existence of the Zuka processing facility for several weeks and had wanted to destroy it herself. Eliminating the plant would deny the Great Ones the funds to continue their undeclared war against Arden.

She then thought about the logistics involved. The satellite photographs she'd studied indicated the Zuka processing plant was huge. Destroying it would be difficult without the right weapons. "How did Mygael destroy the plant?"

"He didn't," Idrain replied. "He had someone to help him."

"Who?"

Idrain struggled. He'd always had a weakness for remembering names. When he shook his head, Valdon's subordinate punched him again.

"Who helped Mygael?"

The pain had an effect, "Someone called Tarmy; Mick Tarmy, I think."

"Tarmy's dead," Samantha replied, ice in her voice.

Idrain began to whimper, "It was Mick Tarmy, I tell you. I know it was Mick Tarmy, and I know he's not dead."

Valdon's subordinate was about to deliver another blow, but Samantha checked him. "So you're positive Mick Tarmy is still alive?"

"Yes!"

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, ma'am"

"Good," Samantha said. "You are learning. If you tell me what I want to know, I will let you go."

Idrain grasped at the lifeline she'd thrown him, "What do you want to know?"

"You worked on Walter Verex's house. Tell me what you did?"

"On his house?"

"Yes, his house."

Idrain's mind went into overdrive. How did Samantha know he'd worked on Verex's house? He then thought about the conversation he'd had with Freya earlier in the day. Could it be she was working for Samantha? Had Samantha managed to turn the R9100, who was now his PA?

“Tell me what you did,” Samantha demanded.

Knowing his life was in the balance, Idrain held nothing back. When he’d finished, he said, “I’ve told you everything I know.”

“I’m sure you have,” Samantha replied. She nodded at Valdón.

Sensing that Samantha was about to renege on their deal and have him killed, Idrain shouted out. “Don’t kill me, please. I beg you. I can be more useful to you alive. I could spy for you. I could tell you about Walter Verex’s plans.”

There was a long silence, and Idrain could feel his heart pounding in his chest. “Please! Let me live. You won’t regret it.”

Samantha continued to eye him thoughtfully like a snake waiting to strike. Eventually, she said, “Very well. I’ll let you live, but if you say a word to anyone about what happened tonight, you will be hunted down and killed *very* slowly. Understood?”

When Idrain nodded, Samantha added, “You will return home. You will say nothing to anyone about what has happened tonight, and you will remain off work for a week. Is that understood?”

“Off work for a week!”

Samantha gave him an amused smile, “Don’t worry, my associates will call your place of work and say that you are not well. You will not go to work for a week. Understood!”

When Idrain nodded, Samantha told Valdón to locate Idrain’s percom. Once he had, Samantha made a note of

his number and stated, "I will be in direct contact with you from time to time, and you will supply me with the information I require. If you fail me, my people will find you and deal with you. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, ma'am"

"Good," Samantha said. "You *are* learning."

She glanced at Valdón. "Get out of his car. Let him go. Mr Idrain works for us now."

As Valdón and his thuggish comrade climbed out and walked away from Idrain's air-car, Samantha added, "I will hold you to your promises. Don't cross me."

The power bubble swiftly faded, and the air-car's electrical system returned to normal. Fearful that Valdón might return, Idrain screamed at the air-car's computer, "Lock all the doors and get me out of here fast. Take me home."

The machine reacted without question and took him back to the bright lights of Midway City. Idrain half expected the air-car's computer to ask where 'home' was, but it didn't. It already knew.

Eventually, his air-car joined the L10, a link tunnel connecting Midway City to downtown Cormere and the more affluent neighbourhoods beyond, like Postoke where Walter Verex lived.

On the way, Idrain began thinking about what had just happened to him. He realised that all of his plans for the future were now in tatters. Although he'd managed to save his own life, there could be little doubt that his

newly found benefactor would very soon be dead. Samantha would have Walter Verex killed for sure.

Entering Cormere, Idrain's air-car moved away from the main arterial road and weaved through side streets. Arriving at 12 Connaught Heights, the air-car rose vertically and hovered over the rooftop car park.

Idrain was tempted to instruct the air-car to land next to Nimu Sludon's battered air-van but changed his mind.

Although he had intended to indulge in a show of one-upmanship, he was no longer in the mood. With Walter Verex's likely demise hanging over him like a storm cloud, Idrain had lost any desire to brag about his promotion. He'd been falsely promoted, and he knew it. He also felt deep shame for being a coward and betraying his boss.

After instructing the air-car to land well away from Nimu Sludon's vehicle, Idrain walked across the car park, let himself in by the roof door and took the staircase to his floor. For a moment or two, he was tempted to knock on Anna Maytell's door and look for comfort, but he heard noises coming from inside and realised that Anna already had male company. She wouldn't want him barging in to cry on her shoulder.

Once in his apartment, Idrain opened a cupboard, found a bottle of Midwain gin and poured himself a large glass. He topped the glass up again. As he drank very little, his head very swiftly started to spin, and he slumped down on his bed.

Within seconds, the alcohol started to lift the weight off his shoulders, and his mind began providing him with

excuses. He'd betrayed Walter Verex, but what else could he have done? If he hadn't told Samantha what she wanted to know, she would have killed him. What choice did he have?

As his mind continued to drift, he eventually dived into a troubled sleep and only awoke when he became aware that his percom was ringing. When he voice-activated it, a power bubble opened, and Samantha appeared again.

Taking in his physical state in one glance, she said, "I see you've been drowning your sorrows." She glanced towards the only window in his room. An air-car was hovering outside, and Waqa Valdon and his henchman were staring in at him.

Fearing further violence, Idrain said, "What do you want? I've told you everything I know."

"Not everything," Samantha replied. "Tell us more about Walter Verex's house."

When Idrain hesitated, Samantha glanced towards the hovering air-car again, "If you don't tell me, they will feel obliged to kick the roof door in and force the information out of you. The people in the air-car will probably also feel obliged to kill the other members of your commune, so they don't leave any witnesses."

Idrain immediately thought about Anna Maytell. Although he wasn't committed to her, he certainly didn't want to be the cause of her death. With his mind spinning, Idrain said, "What do you want to know?"

"Everything you know about the property; floor layouts, security, means of access."

Still fearing for his life, Idrain dredged his mind and passed the information to Samantha.

"That's not all, is it?"

"I don't understand?"

"You have omitted to tell me about the private teleport inside Walter Verex's house."

"What do you want to know about the teleport?"

"Everything you can tell us about it," Samantha replied. "The installer, maintenance company"

"I can't remember all that!"

Samantha glanced towards Waqa Valdon, hovering in the air-car again, "Would you like me to tell my people to make you remember?"

Idrain started talking; he knew she wasn't bluffing. Once he'd finished, Samantha said, "See, that wasn't so difficult, was it?"

Then Samantha said, "Now tell me about Ed Pushley and his attack on Walter Verex's house. I would warn you that we have been making extensive enquiries. If you lie to me, I will know. We understand that Ed Pushley broke into Walter Verex's house a few weeks ago. Because of the break-in, security has been improved. Is that correct?"

Idrain looked surprised, "Yes, Ed Pushley did gain access, and the security has been improved." He added, "How did you find out?"

"I usually find out most things," Samantha bragged. "I can carry out the work of hundreds of human brains simultaneously."

“But how did you find out? Walter suppressed the story!” Idrain replied. “Walter Verex is a recluse. He didn’t want the media trying to publish all the lurid details or hanging around outside his house hoping to doorstep him.”

“Leaks are widespread, and we have spies everywhere,” Samantha replied. “Secrets don’t stay secret for long. The rumours we’ve heard suggest that Ed Pushley was being mind-controlled by the Great Ones, and they’d ordered Verex’s death because he organised an attack on one of their Zuka Plantations. Well, is that true?”

“That’s what I heard, too,” Idrain confirmed. “I saw a report that suggested his mind was invaded when a spettro died. It seems a bit far fetched to me. People being possessed is a very medieval idea.”

Samantha surprised him when she said, “After suffering several attempted deactivations, I have thought about possession a great deal. I have concluded that it is possible both for living organisms and humanoids to transfer their basic essence. Their soul if you are religiously inclined.”

She added, “As I ordered before, you will remain in your room for a standard week. You are not to go out.”

“But how do I eat?”

“That’s why home deliveries exist,” Samantha returned, “I will be checking on you. Don’t disobey me, talk to anyone in your commune about the kidnap or attempt to warn Walter Verex, understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Good,” Samantha said. “I’m glad you understand your orders.”

Her bubble image disappeared a moment later, and the air-car moved away.

Idrain was filled with shame. Shame turned to remorse. It was the second time he’d betrayed Walter Verex.

After walking to the window and pulling the curtains to ensure that no more prying eyes could stare in at him, Idrain began thinking hard. He had to warn Walter Verex of the impending attack. But how? If he used his percom, Samantha would know he’d issued a warning and would have him murdered.

He then had a brainwave, opened his wallet, and extracted a thin emergency percom. After finding Walter Verex’s number, he punched it in.

A moment later, a CGI image of a young man appeared, “Can I help you?”

“I need to speak to Walter Verex.”

CGI image said, “Can I ask the nature of the call?”

“Walter Verex is in danger,” Idrain continued, “Samantha hasn’t been damaged, and people are planning to attack his house.”

“If you provide us with your name and contact number, we will ask Mr Verex to speak to you if he believes your call is of an urgent nature,” the CGI replied.

“Of course, it’s is of an urgent nature. His life is in danger,” Idrain snapped. “He’s going to be murdered!”

“We will ask Mr Verex to contact you,” the CGI replied.

The connection was cut. Idrain let out a curse and picked up the gin bottle again. After taking another two swigs, he lay down on his bed and swiftly fell asleep.

Chapter Five

SSIAT building, Pearl Crater, Arden

Nenet Khan dived into the air-car just before it entered an air-lock.

Despite being Khan's subordinate, Tumon Blake was not amused, "Where've you been, SGL?"

"Sorry I'm late," Khan replied, "Last minute hitch. Samantha called me, and it delayed me."

Blake's hostility subsided, and he made sympathetic noises. Even her senior officers avoided crossing swords with Samantha, "I thought Zakit, your son was coming with us."

"He had prior engagements which couldn't be broken," Khan replied. "Besides, I'm rather glad he couldn't make it."

"Why?"

"Because he'd be a spare wheel," Khan replied. "We don't need three people for this operation. Besides, in case you've forgotten, I've lost one son recently, and I don't really want Zakit involved in this operation, but Samantha is insistent that he's *blooded*."

Blake frowned. Samantha's insistence that Zakit was involved seemed strange, but as he couldn't think of an appropriate response, he just said, "Right."

Wanting to change the subject, Khan handed Blake a fake ID and entrance ticket entitling him to visit The Wreck. Blake immediately looked uncomfortable, "I didn't realise we were going to The Wreck, SGL."

“Well, we are,” Khan replied. “Is there a problem?”

“No, SGL. It’s just not my sort of thing.”

“Tough,” Khan replied unsympathetically, “And you can stop calling me SGL while we’re at Pearl. We’re supposed to be brothers.”

Blake glanced at the ID, “Islaff Gonkey.”

“And I’m Hinton Gonkey.”

Glancing at Blake’s coat, Khan added, “Why are you muffled up like that?”

Blake reluctantly pulled the heavy coat off and put it to one side. Khan shook his head in disbelief. He’d instructed Blake to abandon his Black-Clad uniform and dress casually, but Blake’s definition of casual didn’t gel with his own. His subordinate didn’t look like a man on vacation; Blake looked like he was about to be called into the witness box to give evidence.

While he was still running a disapproving eye over Blake’s attire, Khan noted the give-away lapel stud, one that proclaimed Blake to be a member of FAP, a rightwing political organisation funded by the Minton Mining Company.

“We’re supposed to be Midwain tourists, not Ardenese citizens!” Khan griped. “Remove that stud as well! If you wear that, the security system at Pearl will latch onto it and blow our cover; it’s a dead giveaway.”

As Blake did as instructed, Khan repeated, “As I said, we’re supposed to be Midwain tourists.”

Khan made a poor attempt at a Midwain accent before a toot from behind reminded them their air-car needed to move forwards into the air-lock. Another air-

car followed them in, there was a clunk as doors closed, and depressurisation started.

Once Khan's car had cleared the air-lock, it joined a long line of vehicles skimming across Arden's barren meteor pocked surface. They were all heading towards Pearl Crater. But Khan and Blake quickly lost sight of the other air-cars because a mining-dust storm rolled in, carried on Arden's ultra-thin atmosphere.

Fifteen kilometres later, the dust cloud cleared, and a massive sign loomed up to confirm they were about to cross the border and enter SSIAT controlled territory.

Then they could see a shimmering Mannheim in the distance. Twenty minutes later, they'd cleared an airlock in Pearl's outer wall and headed for a car park.

Climbing out, Khan hopped onto the nearest moving pavement and followed the signs to the teleport centre. Copying Khan's example, Blake followed. On the way, Blake said, "Why are we going to The Wreck?"

"Because it's the best way we can work out the layout of the teleport centre. Going in as tourists gives us an excuse for being here. If we're lucky, we can jump Unnan Vardis on the way back. As he's Principal Control Officer, he must know where Alton Mygael went and possibly where he's hiding."

Khan added, "I presume you've never been to The Wreck before?"

Blake shook his head. Although The Wreck attracted millions of visitors every year, it had never been on Blake's bucket list. Why would he be interested in

walking around the remains of a burnt-out starship that had been circling Arcadia for thousands of years?

Blake's philosophy on life was simple; he liked his lager cold and his women hot.

"Well, enjoy," Khan said. "You're going up there for free. The Minton Mining Company's paying."

Once a lift whisked them up to the relevant floor, Khan began following signs again. Eventually, they entered the main reception area of the teleport centre, and officious droids began manoeuvring all the visitors into neat queues. As they neared the teleport platform, an Alpha 300 droid appeared and extended a flexible arm equipped with a suction pad, "IDs please."

Khan and Blake passed over their fake ID cards. As part of their cover, Khan told the droid they were Midwain citizens on holiday at Bull Crater, and they'd come to see Arcadia's most ancient relic.

The Alpha analysed the details and said, "For security reasons, we will retain your cards until you return."

The Alpha slipped both cards into a slot in its side and then waved them towards a scanner. Then, satisfied they weren't carrying arms, it moved them a little closer to the teleport bay where at least twenty tourists were waiting their turn to teleport up to The Wreck.

Five minutes later, another Alpha 300 began herding them onto the teleport platform. Within seconds, the whole group turned transparent and disappeared into the ether. A few seconds later, they arrived at The Wreck, and more droids moved in.

"Come this way, please, sir."

Khan gave the pushy droid a stern look, "Where are you taking us?"

"Pod 4 Recovery, sir," the droid replied brightly. "You will remain in recovery for approximately half a standard hour; during that time, the outer surveillance wheel will move and give you a true appreciation of the size of The Wreck."

The rubber-legged passengers moved into the recovery area with various droids chivvying them along. Glancing out of a blister window on the way in, Khan realised the pod they'd entered was just one of many attached to a latticework structure surrounding The Wreck. It was like a big wheel at a fairground but turned on its side.

While he was still staring out, the big wheel began to revolve. It also began inching its way forward.

"Take your seats, please," a droid called out. "Food will be served when you're seated."

As Blake slid down alongside Khan, he said, "I expected to be floating around because we're in space."

"All the pods have artificial gravity," Khan replied.

As the droids began distributing cheap, recyclable plates with far from fresh sandwiches on them, someone called out, "Can you all hear me?"

A woman then stepped into view, microphone in hand, "Can you all hear me?"

This time a chorus of voices confirmed they could.

"Good," the woman called back, "Hi, everyone, I'm Marci Vardis, your guide for the day."

Blake couldn't stop staring at Marci because he had a thing about women in uniform. Not only was she tall and beautiful, but she also had the looks and personality to be an actress or TV show host. He wondered why was she working as a tour guide?

Marci Vardis added, "I hope you'll all enjoy your trip around The Wreck."

Blake hissed, "Isn't the guy we're after called Vardis?"

"Yeah."

"Think they're related?"

Khan opened the flimsy plastimetal guide he'd picked up as he'd been walking towards their Pod. At the back, several photographs were showing various tour guides. One of them was Marci Vardis. Further on, there was a photograph of Unnan Vardis. As Marci was standing alongside him, arms linked, simple logic dictated they were partners. The blurb underneath also indicated that neither of them worked directly for SSIAT; the facility was under the control of Vardis Enterprises.

"Nice little number he's got going here," Khan whispered.

Glancing around at the various pods full of people, Blake said, "Why aren't SSIAT operating this place themselves? It must be making a fortune."

Khan became cynical, "Probably a tax fiddle. Most things are."

Marci Vardis said, "We are now moving down the outside of The Wreck." She then pointed at some faded writing on the side of the old starship. "Although most

people just call it The Wreck, its real name is Empress of Incognita."

Blake yawned. He'd hated history at school, and adulthood hadn't altered his perceptions of the subject. What was the point of knowing anything about the past? The past was gone. As people from history were dead, who gave a flying flook about history?

Ignoring Marci's commentary, Blake whispered, "Once we're finished with this crap, what then? I vote we grab Marci and threaten to torture her unless Unnan Vardis cooperates."

Khan gave him a stern look, "You do realise she's a humanoid?"

Glancing back at Marci, Blake began re-assessing his initial observations. He'd heard stories that some humanoids, costly models, were virtually indistinguishable from real humans. "How do you know?"

"I checked on Central before we set off," Khan said. "Unnan Vardis has gone on record demanding that human/humanoid partnerships be made legal. By implication, his demands suggest he's in a human/humanoid partnership."

"With Marci."

"Correct," Khan replied.

"So he's a droid poker."

Khan shrugged. "On Midway, it's estimated that five per cent of the population have already moved away from commune living and now have permanent humanoid partners. The number is growing year by

year. It's not surprising. Humanoids are highly tolerant whereas most humans aren't."

Glancing back at Marci, Blake shook his head. "She looks totally real."

"The uniform Marci's wearing proves she's a humanoid."

Glancing at Marci again, Blake frowned. "What about her uniform?"

He then realised what Khan meant. She had three patches on her shoulders which hinted she held the rank of captain or the civilian equivalent. However, instead of diamonds, her shoulder patches were large triangles with an H inside them.

Knowing humanoids were reputed to have the strength of two normal humans and were generally programmed for unarmed combat Blake had a change of heart, "Cancel my idea about jumping her. We don't have any guns. We wouldn't stand a chance against a humanoid."

Khan reached down as if to scratch his leg. Lifting a trouser bottom, he exposed two slim mini-stuns tucked into one of his socks like dirks. As they were red, Blake knew they were powerful enough to incapacitate humans and humanoids alike.

As he let his trouser leg fall back into position, Khan said, "One for you and one for me."

"How did you get them through security?"

Khan tapped the side of his nose. With his confidence restored, Blake said, "So when do we jump her?"

“Stop being so impatient,” Khan chided. “And stop looking so bored. You are supposed to be enjoying yourself.” He then nodded towards the other people in Pod 4. “This lot have paid a small fortune to come up here. You’re here for free.”

Marci’s voice cut in again. “The Empress of Incognita caught fire, and the survivors were forced to place the starship into orbit around Arcadia. As most of the escape capsules were used, we estimate that at least four thousand passengers and crew left the starship. With little chance of being rescued, the Survivors were forced to create a new life for themselves on Arcadia.”

Glancing out through the window again, Blake noted that they were now passing a badly damaged section of The Wreck. A holographic simulation started up and showed desperate people rushing down corridors searching for un-activated escape pod bays.

As the simulation continued, Blake was reminded of an incident from during his childhood. A deranged gunman had entered his school and had started shooting. Despite his cynical temperament, Blake found himself empathising with the desperate people. They’d been forced to flee, just as he had. Worse, once they’d escaped from the burning ship, they found themselves marooned on an uncharted planet.

From living a life of comparative luxury on the starship, they’d ended up on an alien world battling against the elements. He wondered how many of the four thousand had survived with unknown viruses and bacteria to contend with.

~*~

Once back at the Pearl teleport, Khan and Blake allowed themselves to be ushered towards another recovery area along with the rest of Pod 4. While food and drink were being brought around, a man approached them and glanced at Khan. He then extended a hand, "My name's Glyfin Fenmor from SSIAT. Could you wait behind after the rest have gone, please, sir?"

Khan feigned surprise, "Why?"

Fenmor passed Khan an envelope.

"What's this?"

"You're the lucky winner, Mr Khan."

Still feigning, Khan said, "I'm not with you."

"When groups teleport up to The Wreck," Fenmor said, "Vardis Enterprises always choose someone, at random, to be the day's winner. Your name was drawn, and you've won."

Fenmor then said, "Marci asked me to present your trophy and your prize. With your agreement, Marci will also take some photographs."

Fenmor waved towards a side office, where Marci was clearly visible through a window and gave Khan a wide smile.

Khan said, "So do you work for Vardis Enterprises?"

Glyfin Fenmor shook his head, "I work for SSIAT, but as I was visiting The Wreck, Marci thought it would be a good idea if I presented your prize."

Once Fenmor had retreated again, Khan opened the envelope and looked at the small flyer inside. Glancing at Marci again, he gave her a wave.

Blake said, "This seems too good to be true, and it could be a trap."

Khan sighed, "It was all part of my plan. We knew they gave prizes, and we hacked into their system and fixed the draw."

Blake worried look turned into mild admiration, "Good thinking. Presumably, we'll jump Marci when you collect your prize."

Slipping the two mini-stuns out of his sock, Khan dropped one into one of Blake's pockets. He confirmed that Blake was correct, "Exactly. I'll go and get my award. It looks as if Glyfin Fenmor will get in the way, but I'll stun him and partially stun Marci so that we can question her. If any of the other droids attempt to intervene, we'll take them out too."

Blake glanced towards the security shutters at the end of the hall. "If you start taking out droids, it will trigger an alarm, surely."

"That's been fixed too," Khan replied. "The shutters won't drop. Marci is our ticket out of here. The amount of slush Unnan Vardis has posted over the years indicates he wouldn't let anything happen to her."

He'd barely finished speaking when a droid voice cut in with, "We hope you enjoyed your excursion around the Empress of Incognita. You can now leave if you wish. Please visit our museum and gift shop on the way out."

As the visitors began drifting away, some searching for souvenirs to record their visit, Khan stood up, and Blake followed his example, and they both began moving towards Marci's office.

Partway there, Glyfin Fenmor intercepted them again and said, "Follow me."

A smile formed on Khan's face. This was going to be as easy as shooting rats in a barrel.

As Khan entered Marci's office with Blake close behind, Marci smiled and extended a hand of friendship. Khan responded by shooting Glyfin Fenmor in the back. As Fenmor collapsed, Khan fired his stun gun low, taking out Marci's legs. As she went down, Khan moved around the desk and disabled both her arms.

When Marci began screaming for help, he silenced her with another blast of the mini-stun.

While Khan was still checking Marci, Blake realised that an alarm must have triggered because the Alpha 300 security droids were converging on the office. Levelling his own mini-stun, Blake began pumping shots at the approaching droids. Within a matter of seconds, all the Alphas ground to a halt.

Khan gave Marci a prod with his mini-stun. "I want Unnan down here pronto."

With her speech centre partially disabled, she croaked, "Why?"

"Because I have a few questions to ask him," Khan replied.

He'd barely uttered the demand before a power bubble formed and Unnan Vardis's face appeared inside it. It was evident that he'd been alerted to their attack.

"What questions?"

"We know that Alton Mygael used your teleport to escape. Where did he go?"

Unnan Vardis frowned, "Alton Mygael. Never heard of him."

Khan created a power bubble of his own, and an image of Klaien Mygael appeared inside it, "You'd probably remember his life partner better. We know she came here to see you."

Despite Marci's predicament, a twisted smile formed on Unnan Vardis's face.

"Care to share the joke?"

"I'm quite happy to share," Unnan Vardis returned. "You've obviously gone to a great deal of effort to stage this attack, but I would have willingly given you the information if you'd asked."

"Why?"

"Because Alton Mygael's partner cheated me out a large sum of money, that's why."

"So you'll tell me what I want to know?"

Glancing toward Marci, Unnan Vardis said, "Yes. But I can't let the attack on Marci go without suitable monetary reparations. Shall we say fifty K?"

Khan's eyes narrowed, and he pointed the gun at Marci, "You're not in a position to negotiate. Where is Alton Mygael?"

Unnan Vardis's face contorted a mixture of fear and anger, "If you harm Marci, you will get nothing from me. Presumably, Samantha sent you here, and I hear she doesn't like failures. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes if you go back with nothing. Without my help, you might never find out where Alton Mygael is hiding. Can I also remind you that we still have your ID cards? Without them, you will be unable to leave Pearl Crater."

Keeping the gun pointed at Marci, Khan said, "I'm not in a negotiating mood. If you don't tell me what I want to know, your humanoid gets fried."

To back up his threat, he altered the setting on the mini-stun.

Fearing Khan might carry out his threat, Marci croaked, "Don't shoot me, please."

The effect on Unnan Vardis was immediate, "Okay, forget the money. If I tell you what you want to know, will you get out of here and leave us alone?"

Khan said, "I'll do a deal with you, but I'm not a fool."

Prodding Marci with his gun, he said, "Get up."

With her arms and legs not working correctly, Marci had difficulty getting up but eventually managed it. Once she had, Khan pointed to the office door.

Unnan Vardis shouted out, "What are you doing? I said I'd tell you what you want to know."

"The way I see it, Marci is our insurance policy," Khan replied. "If she's with us, you won't pull any stunts."

"No," Unnan said. "Leave her out of this, and I will be your hostage."

Sensing victory was his; Khan lowered the gun. "Okay, but you'd better get down here fast."

"I'll be with you in two minutes."

When Unnan Vardis arrived, he made straight for Marci and checked her out. After allowing Vardis a few seconds with Marci, Khan poked him in the back with the gun, "Time to go."

"Go where?"

"Back to my HQ."

Unnan shook his head, "No. You can't do this."

Instead of arguing the point, Khan aimed low and stunned Vardis's legs.

A moment later, Khan's air-car came into view and drove through the open security shutter. It stopped outside Marci's office, and the doors sprang open.

Glancing at Blake, Khan said, "Get him into the aircar."

Marci tried to intervene despite the restricted movement in her arms and legs, but Khan gave her another stun blast. He then said to Blake, "We may as well take them both with us."

Once Blake had done as instructed, Khan climbed into the air-car and trained the gun on Unnan Vardis. "We've all leaving. And you are going to get us out of here. If you don't, Marci gets fried."

Khan gave instructions to the air-car, and it made for the nearest air-lock. As the air-car joined a queue of vehicles, there was a distinct click as Khan reset the stun gun to the maximum again. Khan then said, "What happens next is down to you, Unnan."

Realising that Khan was quite prepared to carry out his threat and destroy Marci, Unnan Vardis spoke to the air-car's computer and provided it with an exit code. As the air-car passed through the air-lock and began heading back to Minton Mining controlled territory it was buffeted by high winds and dust clouds; Unnan Vardis found his voice again, "I suppose you're going to torture us until we tell you what you want to know."

"That shouldn't be necessary," Khan replied. "If you tell me what I want to know and it checks out, we'll let you go."

Khan then qualified the statement, "We will, of course, have to hold you until our operations are complete. I wouldn't want you deciding to warn Alton Mygael and his friends that we're coming after them now, would we?"

"Hold us!"

"Only until our operation is complete," Khan reasoned. "I'm guessing, but if your information checks out, Alton Mygael will be in the bag and history in a matter of days. In the meantime, we will make sure that you are well cared for."

Despite the apparent danger both Marci and he was in, Unnan Vardis gave Khan a sceptical look and then became cynical, "Yeah, sure."

Chapter Six

Postoke, Midway: The Attack on Walter Verex

The images coming back from the circling drone reinforced Waqa Valdón's antipathy towards Walter Verex. Not only had he attempted to deactivate Samantha, but he was also obviously extremely wealthy. As Valdón had left-wing views on life, killing Walter Verex was a task he was only too willing to carry out.

While he was still mentally sticking pins in Walter Verex's mental voodoo image, his percom chirped, and a power bubble image of one of his men appeared inside it. "All the links are in place, and Thor's Hammer can commence any time you like."

"Are you sure we can get in?" Valdón growled.

The technician nodded, "No problem, sir. Slim Idrain gave us all the information we required. We can disable the whole alarm and internal security system at the flick of a switch. Idrain has also provided us with a direct in. There won't be any need for a frontal assault, and the Switzer Mercenaries will have Walter Verex cornered within minutes."

"I don't want him just cornered," Valdón replied. "Samantha has made it quite clear she wants to make an example of Walter Verex. So I want photographs of him screaming for mercy, and then I want him killed, and photographs taken of the body as proof of death. Understood?"

“Can I have your official authorisation on that order, sir?” the other man replied.

Valdon gave it straight away; if Samantha wanted Verex tortured to death, so be it. It was of no consequence to him. Glancing at his watch, Valdon instructed the Switzers and then contacted another of his men.

~*~

GL Engelmann’s percom vibrated in his pocket. On answering, he heard Valdon say, “Thor’s Hammer will commence at 1200 hours standard time.”

Engelmann replied, “Message understood,” he cut the link and then called his driver. “It’s on. Make sure you’re by the door, engine running when I come out.”

“No probs. I’ll be waiting.”

Leaving the fast-food area, Engelmann pulled down his hat to obscure his face from the surrounding security cameras and walked into a nearby comfort room. After making sure he was alone, he slipped into one of the cubicles and set about remodelling his image. Once he’d reversed both his hat and coat, he slipped on a distortion collar.

Emerging, he walked over to a mirror, stared at his reflection, and was pleased with the result. With the distortion collar in place, even his own mother wouldn’t have recognised him. Once he’d left the comfort room, he set off in the direction of a link bridge crossing the L10.

Despite his nerves, Engelmann walked casually, like someone without a care in the world, a man about his business. Once at the centre point, he slipped a small device out of his pocket, set the timer and tossed the jammer into a waste bin before carrying on walking. But after pushing his way into the staircase opposite, the casual walk ceased, and Engelmann ran down, taking two steps at a time. He then crashed out into the open.

Seeing Engelmann, his driver reacted immediately and pulled alongside him. Waiting only long enough for Engelmann to climb in, he drove off at high speed. Within seconds the air-car was carrying him away from the carnage that was about to occur.

As the air-car continued moving at breakneck speed, Engelmann let out a sigh of relief and glanced at his watch, nineteen minutes before the jammer activated.

After the air-car had covered the best part of twenty kilometres, Engelmann's watch let out a loud beep; thirty seconds before the jammer activated.

After a mental countdown, Engelmann glanced sideways at the opposing flow of traffic. When he noted no change, he assumed the jammer had failed. He was on the point of calling Valdón to warn him of a failure when he caught a glimpse of flashing warning lights on the other carriageway. Then vehicles began slowing down, indicating the traffic was being halted by the central computer system.

A few minutes later, traffic reports flashed up on the air-car's dash indicating fifteen robotised transporters had gone wonky simultaneously, they had rammed into

other vehicles, and the wreckage was totally blocking both carriageways of the L10. The report also told that the authorities suspected it was a terrorist incident because the jammer Engelmänn had dropped into the litter bin had been discovered and disabled by security staff.

Despite the carnage he'd caused, Engelmänn smiled; it was a job well done. There could be little doubt that the L10 would be out of action for hours, and it was doubtful the Midwain authorities would be able to send anyone to help Verex once Thor's Hammer commenced. With the L10 severed, the operation would go like a dream.

He began to think about what would happen once Verex was dead. As they'd also managed to secure several minor roads, the Switzers would leave with very little chance of being caught. They would then teleport to a Switzer support ship that was standing off Midway.

As the support ship was in interplanetary space, no one would prevent them from escaping. More importantly, there was little likelihood of the Midwain authorities linking the attack back to Samantha. If they attempted to point fingers, the worst would be diplomatic accusations and counter-accusations flying back and forth.

~*~

Hiss! Thump!

Walter Verex frowned. What had caused the strange noises?

Hiss! Thump!

Rising from his chair, he moved from behind his desk, walked towards a panoramic window and glanced out into his substantial front garden. Walking around his office, he then checked the side and rear gardens. All seemed normal as the main gates were firmly locked, and the security droids were quietly patrolling the grounds.

Relaxing, he sidetracked himself by glancing out over his domain once more and felt a surge of pride and self-satisfaction sweep through his body. All this was his.

Of course, the centrepiece of it all was his architect-designed house. His property had twenty bedrooms, all with ensuite. In addition, it had three massive reception rooms, two conservatories, the large private office he was standing in, an indoor pool, a cinema room, a games room and a twenty bay underground car parking area. It was more like a small luxury hotel than a domestic house.

Of course, it was a massive status symbol. The house and surrounding gardens were like a peacock spreading its tail feathers to prove its virility. An onlooker was left in little doubt he was viewing the primary residence of Walter Verex, the wealthiest person on Midway.

Moving away from the windows, Verex went back to his desk. He'd barely settled himself when the noises started up again.

Hiss! Thump!

This time he picked up his percom and made an internal call. "I can hear strange noises Sheilagh, what's going on?"

A split image appeared in the power bubble. In one half, there was Sheilagh's smiling face. Directly alongside, the central security system was providing another image showing Sheilagh standing in the kitchen.

"I can hear strange noises, Sheilagh. What's going on?"

Sheilagh shrugged, "I can't hear anything."

Assured by her quiet tones, Verex relaxed, but his complacency was swiftly shattered because the security image suddenly displayed several shimmering ghostly presences moving in behind Sheilagh. As he had a passion for the military, Verex realised they weren't ghosts; they were soldiers wearing invisibility armour. Although the armour didn't make them totally invisible, they could blend in with most surroundings.

Noting the look of surprise on Verex's face, Sheilagh turned to face the intruders. She'd barely done so before a power bubble opened up alongside the ghostly figures, and Samantha's image became clearly visible.

Samantha said, "Where's Walter Verex."

Fearing for Walter, Sheilagh lied, "He's not here."

She then sent Walter Verex a secret message, "I'll try to delay them. Get out while you can."

Samantha said, "Where is he then?"

"He has several houses," Sheilagh replied. "He's not here at the moment."

Upstairs, Verex's blood ran cold. As he could see Samantha's image, it was apparent Slim Idrain had lied to him, and Samantha hadn't been damaged or deactivated.

So had all his contacts had lied to him too! Samantha had not been badly damaged and was not about to be shunted off to a droid dismantling yard.

As Verex's mind kept on whirring, and he came to a logical conclusion. Samantha's appearance wasn't a coincidence. Samantha had discovered he'd ordered her retirement, and it was apparent she was hell-bent on revenge.

Samantha spoke to Sheilagh again, "If he's not here, where is he?"

Sheilagh didn't attempt to lie, thinking swiftly and guessing Samantha probably had records of Walter's properties; she reeled off all the addresses. Sheilagh then repeated her secret message to Verex. "I'll try to delay them. Get out while you can."

While Sheilagh was still urging Verex to leave, Samantha glanced at the ghost soldiers and said, "Take her to Major Forley for interrogation."

Two ghost soldiers moved in and began dragging Sheilagh out of the room. As they did so, Samantha spoke to the other ghost soldiers, "She might be lying. Walter Verex could be here. Check everywhere. If you find him, kill him; very slowly."

Walter Verex's blood ran cold. Samantha had ordered a slow death.

A moment later, he heard a dull crump from downstairs. Having watched hundreds of action movies, Verex knew what exploding grenades sounded like and realised what was happening.

Samantha's troops were not taking any chances. When they took him, he'd either be stunned by the blast or riddled with shrapnel.

As she was being dragged out of the house, Sheilagh repeated, "I'll try to delay them. Get out while you can."

Instead of following Sheilagh's advice, Verex thought about Ed Pushley's attack only a few weeks before. Since then, there had been many rushed upgrades aimed at preventing repetition.

With this in mind, Verex dashed towards the newly installed security button and gave it a sharp jab. He'd been told that one push would trigger the alarm system and activate an internal defence system which would trigger Manheim shields at various locations and bring the whole house into total lockdown. It was a system he never thought he'd have to use.

When nothing happened, he jabbed the button again. Still nothing!

Realising the defence system had been deactivated by his attackers, Verex's blood ran cold again.

He thought about the emergency number that John Ivisid had given him, and finding it on his percom, he instigated the connection. A moment later, the CGI of a young man appeared in a power bubble, and Verex blurted out, "We're being attacked, and they are going to kill me."

The words had barely left his lips before the connection was cut. He attempted to call the police, but this time his percom didn't respond at all.

He'd been cut off! He no longer had any contact with the outside world.

Crump! Crump; more fragmentation grenades were going off. He heard sharp voices close at hand, and panic set in.

As the noises came closer, Verex opened one of his desk drawers and pulled out a stun gun. He realised that attempting to fight it out would be pointless. It was apparent from the shouting that there were several squads of Samantha's people searching for him,

What chance did he stand?

If he took down one of his adversaries, what good would it do?

There would be others to step in.

As his private office was on the fifth floor of his house, Verex thought about heading towards a roof door but scrubbed the idea almost immediately. That's what they did in movies, and the victim just painted themselves into a corner. Besides, he'd caught a glimpse of drones flying around outside. If he went on the roof, they'd pick him off within seconds, and he'd be a sitting duck.

Maybe he could hide in a cupboard.

No, they'd find him for sure!

He could climb out of the window!

That would be suicide, as bad as climbing onto the roof!

With all other options discounted, Verex took the only one available. Dropping to his knees, he sought sanctuary underneath his king-size desk. He glanced through the narrow gap between the desktop and front panel. Knowing it wouldn't be long before someone kicked open his office door, he slipped the safety catch off his stun gun and then set it to kill mode. Pointing it at the door, he waited, heart thumping. If he was going to die, he'd take some of them with him.

A few seconds later, there was a crash as the door leading to one of the staircases burst open. Then something small rolled across the floor and under the front panel of Verex's desk. It was a fragmentation grenade!

More by blind instinct than thought, Verex threw himself sideways and kicked the grenade. It lifted off the floor, hit the front panel of his desk and bounced back. Knowing he'd die if he didn't get rid of it, Verex kicked the grenade again. This time it went back under the front panel.

Purely by luck, the grenade rolled back through the staircase door. To avoid the blast, Verex's assailants hurled themselves through the doorway. With his nerves at breaking point, Verex fired his stun gun through his desk.

Hit by the stun blast, both figures stiffened like boards. When the grenade exploded behind them, their bodies were thrown across the room like rag dolls. A moment later, their armoured helmets smashed their way through the front panel of Verex's desk.

With two blood-covered bodies on top of him, Verex freaked and began fighting his way out. While he was still trying to extricate himself, the body armour on one of his assailants lost its invisibility and then slipped to reveal a Spartan helmet tattoo with crossed swords below it.

Verex recognised the tattoo immediately. The man in question was a Switzer Mercenary; fear gripped Verex like a vice.

The Switzers had earned a fearsome reputation. If Samantha had ordered him to be tortured to death, they wouldn't hesitate if they caught him alive.

Knowing it wouldn't be long before more mercenaries forced their way into his office Verex pulled himself clear of the two bodies, grabbed his gun, ran towards the small stairwell designed as a fire escape and began clattering down the stairs two at a time. Partway down, another ghostly figure emerged from a passageway. Verex fired instinctively, and the intruder went down. He was about to leap over the body when he heard another hiss thump close at hand.

Glancing towards the noise, he saw another mercenary coming towards him. As he fired at the second intruder, Verex realised what was happening.

When his architects had designed his house, they had talked him into installing a private teleport. Being grossly overweight at the time, Verex knew it was unlikely he'd use the device and had been tempted to veto the idea. But his architects had been very persuasive. As they knew he was about to undergo

genetic modification to reduce his weight and cure his illness, they had persuaded him to future proof his house by installing the equipment.

He cursed.

The intruders were using the teleport to invade his home.

Despite the panic still gripping him, Verex had the presence of mind to blast away the teleport control and prevent any more mercenaries using the teleport to enter his house. He began to run downstairs again.

As he did so, a sense of déjà vu swept over him once more. Only a few weeks before, he'd made the same hurried descent to escape from Ed Pushley, the deranged archaeologist that the Great Ones had sent to kill him.

Partway down, he heard the sounds of pursuit. Knowing the Switzers intended to torture him to death, Verex increased his descent speed, risking injuring himself rather than being captured.

Verex burst through the door leading to the underground garage with hostiles clumping down the stairs behind him. With no other option, he raced towards the troop carrier. Once again, a sense of déjà vu swept over Verex because if there hadn't been an armoured vehicle parked up in his basement, Ed Pushley would probably have killed him.

As Verex raced toward the troop carrier, a door suddenly opened, and someone pulled the gun out of Verex's hand and then dragged him inside. As he hit the floor, Verex heard the outer door slam shut.

With adrenalin pumping through his system, Verex turned over and began lashing out. A man he didn't know expertly blocked his punches and then levelled his stun gun at him. The man then issued a warning, "If you keep that up, I'll be forced to stun you. I'm trying to help you."

"Who are you?"

"Just call me Stan. John Ivisid asked me to give this machine a good checkout before flying it back to the museum. Good job I did because it's a death trap."

There was a banging noise from outside, and angry faces appeared at one of the armoured windows. Although Verex couldn't hear what the Switzer was shouting, he lip-read the message; he was to get out and surrender.

Stan said, "What in hell's name is going on?"

"They're trying to kill me," Verex bleated. "That's what's going on, and they've got grenades."

Stan wasn't impressed, "It'll take more than grenades to cause any appreciable damage to this beast."

As the hammering continued, Verex glanced at Stan fearfully, "If you let them in, they'll kill me. Samantha has ordered my death. They'll probably kill you too. They won't want witnesses."

"Who's Samantha?"

After swiftly explaining, Verex gave Stan another pleading look, "Please don't let them kill me."

Instead of reassuring Verex, Stan instructed the troop carrier, "Move three metres forwards."

As the heavy machine responded to the order, the mercenaries clustered outside realised they were likely to be crushed and dived back through the staircase door.

One stood his ground.

Unconcerned by the defiance, Stan grinned, "There's always one that doesn't get the message, isn't there?"

His grin widened, "Move another meter forwards."

Realising he was likely to end up like a fly squashed on an air-car wind-screen, the last mercenary dived to safety and slammed the fire door closed behind him.

Stan's grin widened, "How fortunate. He closed the door."

He gave the troop carrier another order. "Move forwards until you touch the door."

The troop carrier had barely completed the manoeuvre before a power bubble formed, and the image of a senior uniformed police officer insinuated itself inside the troop carrier but made no attempt to face either Stan or Verex.

Verex realised why there was an anomaly; it was obvious the image wasn't fully interactive. The bubble could speak and hear but couldn't see who was inside the troop carrier.

Glancing around the interior of the ancient troop carrier, Verex guessed why; the power bubble was being affected by the troop carrier's heavy armour.

His thoughts were confirmed when the image said, "Walter Verex declare yourself."

When Verex didn't respond, the image added, "If there are any other people in this vehicle, make your presence known."

Stan remained silent and placed a finger against his lips. Verex then saw Stan photograph the bubble image and wondered what he was doing. Before he could ask, the bubble image said, "If there are any other people in this vehicle, please note, Walter Verex is a criminal. Even though he's armed and dangerous, it is your civic duty to make a citizen's arrest and hand him over to us."

When both of them still maintained silence, the police image amplified its message, "Are there any other people in this vehicle you are obliged to arrest Walter. He is a terrorist responsible for causing two major bombings on Arcadia. He's also financed the destruction of a major food processing plant and ordered the deactivation of an important humanoid."

Verex's jaw dropped, and despite Stan's visual caution, he still said, "I've never done anything like that. I don't know anything about any bombings or the destruction of a food processing plant."

He then thought about Samantha, "As for the attempted deactivation of a humanoid. Samantha is highly dangerous and has been responsible for many human deaths, and something had to be done."

"Your statement is an admission of guilt," the image responded. It then repeated, "If there are any other people in this vehicle, please note, Walter Verex is a criminal. Even though he's armed and dangerous, it is

your civic duty to make a citizen's arrest and hand him over to us."

Instead of attempting to arrest Verex, Stan turned the stun gun on the bubble image and fired. The surge of energy caused the bubble to burst. Stan pulled out his percom again, dialled a number and then pointed the percom's camera in Verex's direction and said, "Is this him?"

John Ivisid's voice said, "Yes, that's him. Get him out of there. I'll see you at Gubbon's place."

After swiftly carrying out a camera scan to make sure there were no mercenaries still lurking around, Stan reached for one of the door handles and said, "Come on. Let's get the hell out of here."

Verex panicked, "Isn't it safer staying in the troop carrier? Couldn't we fly it out?"

Stan blew a raspberry, "If you stay in here or try to use it to fly out, you'll regret it. Forget the carrier. It's clapped out. In due course, it will end up where it deserves to be, in the museum. You wouldn't get very far before it crashed. The truth is you bought a pup. It'll need a lot of work before we can fly it out of here."

When Verex still hesitated, Stan adopted the sergeant-major approach, opened the door and bellowed, "I said, move it."

After making sure that Verex left the troop carrier, Stan began pushing him. After covering the best part of thirty meters, they came upon a white unmarked airvan.

Puzzled, Verex said, "Why did you park here. Why not further up?"

Instead of answering the question, Stan said, "Good job, I didn't, isn't it? When we drive off, those guys won't be able to identify us, will they?"

He bundled Verex into the front cab and pushed him to the floor. "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your head down, mate."

A moment later, the air-van moved off, flying down the secret tunnel. Once the vehicle had passed through the invisibility cloak obscuring the entrance from public gaze and had joined the road network beyond, Verex found his voice, "Why didn't you arrest me and hand me over?"

"Because the police officer was a phoney," Stan replied. "I logged his image on the central register, and it came back as unknown."

"A phoney?"

"He's obviously working for the guys who were trying to kill you," Stan said. "If I'd handed you over, I reckon you'd be dead by now, and so would I."

Verex paled, and his mind began to churn. With all his wealth, he was totally powerless. He'd escaped but knew he'd have to go into hiding. But where would he hide?

As the air-van twisted and turned down minor roads, Verex half-emerged and glanced out through a window, "Where are you going?"

"Langton," Stan Fred replied.

“Are you sure this is the right way,” Verex said. “You seem to be going a very winding route.”

“The L10 has a major crash on it,” Stan explained. “It’s closed and probably will stay that way for hours.”

“Can I get up now? I’m getting cramp.”

Stan shook his head, “Can’t take the risk; even on minor roads, there are surveillance cameras.”

Pushing Verex down again, he amplified, “Although we’re not passing through any major towns, there are still facial recognition cameras all over the place. If they see you, we’ll be in trouble.”

Verex half-smiled. As very few people knew what he really looked like, it was unlikely that the cameras would recognise him, but he still complied with Stan’s instructions

“Where are you taking me?”

“I’ve told you, Langton. Somewhere safe,” Stan replied.

“And where exactly is somewhere safe?”

“You’ll find out when you get there.”

Chapter Seven

Verex on the Run

"Where is she?"

"You mean *it*."

"It?"

"Sheilagh is a humanoid; a special, a top of the range job," Engelmann revealed.

"Are you sure?"

Engelmann produced a small device from his pocket, "I've tested her. One of these is ninety-eight per cent accurate."

Forley was tempted to ask about the other two per cent and where Engelmann obtained such a device, but he let it pass. Instead, he repeated himself. "Where is she?"

GL Engelmann waved a hand towards a corridor, and as they walked down it, Forley noted that some of the Switzer mercenaries were stationed at strategic intervals and guessed they were there for two reasons. The first was to prevent their prisoner from escaping; the second was to ensure that none of his men were tempted to leave the building and demand political asylum on Midway.

As they continued walking, Forley glanced through an interior window that provided a view of the debris-strewn floor of the enormous empty warehouse alongside. He sniffed, a sign of strong disapproval. His

fake 'police headquarters' was nothing more than a rundown office section of a derelict warehouse situated in an area scheduled for demolition and re-development.

Engelmann pushed open a heavy plastimetal reinforced fire door at the end of the corridor and let Forley in. Sheilagh was in one corner. Not only had she been tied to a bulky plastimetal framed chair, but she also had shackles and chains attached to both ankles, and she had a gauze net over most of her head, a device designed to stop her communicating with the outside world. It was apparent the Switzer Mercenaries were taking no chances.

Closing the door, Forley said, "D'you know why you're here, Sheilagh?"

Sheilagh shook her head, "No. But I'm sure you are about to enlighten me."

Forley repeated the same mantra he'd used about Verex when he'd appeared in the troop carrier, "Walter Verex is a terrorist. He's responsible for causing two major bombings on Arcadia, and he's also financed the destruction of a major food processing plant and ordered the deactivation of an important humanoid."

Sheilagh shook her head again, "You're not describing the man I know."

"Unfortunately, what I've just told you is true," Forley replied. "We have a warrant for his arrest; if you don't cooperate, you will be guilty of aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice."

Instead of causing her concern, the comment brought renewed hope. If he was a fugitive, he wasn't dead; he'd escaped.

Forley confirmed her thoughts by saying, "Where will Walter Verex go?"

"I've no idea where he will go," Sheilagh replied quite truthfully.

In response, Forley mentioned the addresses that she'd given Samantha, "We've checked them all out, and he's not at any of them. In fact, all the houses are locked up and look as if they haven't been used for months. Assuming he doesn't attempt to go to one of his other houses, where would he go?"

"I've no idea."

"You must do. I want the names of all of Walter Verex's friends."

Despite her situation, Sheilagh inwardly smiled. Walter Verex had very few true friends. After all, he was Midway's famous recluse. Sheilagh thought about Verex's business life. Verex used encrypted power bubble technology when he needed to meet people, and his natural face was hidden behind CGI. Very few people knew what the real Walter Verex looked like. Although Walter Verex had many business acquaintances, his true friends were virtually non-existent

"I want the names of all his friends," Forley repeated. "If you refuse, we will be forced to adopt other measures. I've been informed you're a humanoid," he glanced at a man standing at one side of the room

holding a vicious looking probe, “as we know there is always a danger of damaging your electronic mind if a probe is used, we hope we won’t be forced to use it. It’s my hope you’ll tell us what we want to know.”

Realising she had no choice, Sheilagh began divulging a list of names. As she continued reeling them off, a look of surprise and relief formed on Forley’s face; being a democratic police officer having to resort to torture went against all his beliefs.

However, Sheilagh had good reasons for being so cooperative. Her list of names comprised mainly Ingermann-Verex board members and senior executives, no doubt her interrogators would have the information already. More importantly, she took a gamble and omitted to mention John Ivisid, the only real friend Walter Verex had.

Once she’d finished and had supplied the names and addresses of more than eighty people, she fell silent. Forley said, “I also need an up to date photograph of Walter Verex.”

“Don’t you have one?”

“If I did,” Forley snapped. “I wouldn’t be asking.”

Sheilagh’s mind went back into overdrive. Although they were trying to hunt Walter Verex down, it was evident that her interrogators knew very little about their quarry. Glancing up at the gauze net covering her head, she said, “If you want me to give you his image, you will have to take this thing off my head.”

Engelmann cut in, “Now, why would we do that?”

"If you want me to give you a picture of Walter Verex, then you'll have to," Sheilagh reasoned.

After a short discussion, two of Forley's men undid some of her shackles and then began dragging the chair she was sitting in along a short corridor.

Concerned, Sheilagh shouted, "What are you doing? Where are you taking me?"

Ignoring her shouts, they dragged her into what had once been an old coms room. Although the old electrical equipment had been stripped out long ago, the wire mesh Faraday cage lining the walls and ceilings was still in place. Glancing around, Sheilagh realised why they'd brought her in there. Her captors wanted to make sure she couldn't make a call for help if they removed the gauze net from her head. After the door had slammed shut, Forley removed the gauze and then said, "Okay. Show us."

Sheilagh took another gamble and displayed an image of Walter Verex before his operations.

Engelmann gasped, "What a fat slob. No wonder he keeps himself hidden." He added, "Carrying that weight, he's not going to move that fast if it comes to a chase."

Forley gave him a sharp look and then nodded towards the outer door. Once they were back in the corridor, Forley said, "I'm attempting to find out where Verex is. Making personal comments about him isn't helping. If Sheilagh is a personal service humanoid, she will be bonded to Walter Verex by her programming. Making rude comments about him could make her resentful and uncooperative."

“Point taken,” Engelmann replied. “But I’m right; Verex won’t move that fast if it comes to a chase.”

“He escaped from the Switzer Mercenary group that went after him,” Forley snapped. “Their reports indicate he moved like greased lightning, and he even killed four of them during an exchange of fire. I wouldn’t underestimate Verex.”

Instead of agreeing, Engelmann said, “I wouldn’t like to be in Verex’s shoes when the Switzers catch up with him. They always avenge a death, and when they catch him, they’ll make sure he dies very slowly. Why don’t you tell the humanoid you’ll protect Verex if he surrenders to us?”

“You know I can’t protect Verex,” Forley replied. “Samantha wants him dead, and she wants to make an example of him.”

“True,” Engelmann replied, “But the humanoid doesn’t know that.”

“What if she does know that Samantha wants him dead?”

“How could she?”

“We don’t know what she knows,” Forley replied. “Samantha hasn’t provided us with much information about her arrest.”

“The humanoid doesn’t know that Verex is going to be killed,” Engelmann insisted.

“Okay,” Forley replied. “We’ll try it your way. Let’s get her back into the interview room. The old comms room is hardly salubrious.”

Once Sheilagh had been dragged back and re-chained, Forley went along with Engelmann's suggestion, "Look, we're prepared to do a deal with you. If you can persuade Walter Verex to give himself up, I give you my word we'll protect him and keep him alive."

"And how do I do that?" Sheilagh replied, glancing up at the gauze they'd put back on her head.

Engelmann laughed, "Good try, but the hairnet stays on. Everyone knows droids and humanoids can flash messages. If we take the hairnet off, you can send out hundreds of messages before we can stop you."

He pulled out his percom, "Give me a number, and I'll call him for you."

When Sheilagh didn't reply, Forley played the good cop, "If Walter Verex wants us to protect him, giving himself up is the only solution."

"It's his only chance," Engelmann agreed.

"Okay," Sheilagh replied. "But you won't get through to Walter directly because all his calls go via an answering agency. He's a recluse and likes all his calls vetted before he speaks to anyone."

Forley nodded towards the outer door and told Engelmann and one of the technicians to follow him. Outside Forley glanced at the technician, "If we can encourage Verex to call us back direct from his percom. Can you track him?"

The technician nodded, "If you give us a few minutes to get set up. No problem. Make sure you keep him talking once you've made the connection. "

Engelmann grinned, "Let's do it."

After they'd all re-entered the room where Sheilagh was being held prisoner, Forley glanced at Sheilagh, "I hope you realise that this is Walter Verex's only chance."

"Okay, this is the way we are going to play this," Engelmann cut in. "You give us the number; when we have a connection, you will speak to them and explain that Verex's only hope is to surrender to us. If he's sensible, he'll call us back. If he doesn't, he'll probably wind up dead. Do you understand?"

When Sheilagh nodded, Forley said, "Okay, give us the number to call at the answering agency."

Sheilagh gave him a number.

"Does the agency know your voice?"

"Yes. The agency calls me most of the time."

"Good," Engelmann said. "Then you can speak to them."

Flashing up the percom's number, Engelmann added, "Once I put you through, you give the agency this number and ask Walter Verex to contact you directly. Understood?"

Once Sheilagh had nodded her consent, Engelmann told his team to move to one of the rooms where they wouldn't be seen by his percom. He placed a call to Ivisid's agency, held the percom in front of Sheilagh and warned, "Don't try anything clever. If you do, I'll make sure you regret it."

A moment later, the number began sounding and then a CGI image of a young man appeared in a power

bubble. The image gave her a winsome smile and said, "Is that Sheilagh? You're using a different number."

Thinking quickly, she said, "I lost my percom." Then without going into too much detail, she asked the image to contact Walter Verex and requested that he call her back as soon as possible.

Engelmann smiled, "I'm glad you decided to cooperate."

"So what now?"

"We wait and hope Walter Verex has the sense to call us back," Engelmann replied. "And if and when he does, you keep him talking so we can track where he is. Understood! If you don't help us, he'll wind up dead for sure. Do you want that?"

Sheilagh shook her head.

"Then are you going to cooperate?"

Sheilagh nodded, "Okay. I'll cooperate."

After waiting for what seemed like a lifetime, Engelmann's percom chimed. Thrusting the percom in front of her again, Engelmann accepted the call, but no power bubble image appeared. Then a quiet voice said, "Are you all right, Sheilagh?"

Sheilagh said, "Yes, but your only hope is to give yourself up."

Engelmann mouthed, "Keep him talking."

"How are you?" Sheilagh said. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

"I'm okay," Verex replied. "What about you?"

Engelmann mouthed, "Keep him talking," again.

After nearly a minute of stilted conversation, a technician came forwards, tapped Engelmann's shoulder and whispered, "We've located him."

"Are you sure?"

"A positive fix."

"What are we waiting for?"

As the room suddenly emptied, leaving her strapped to the chair, Sheilagh let out a deep sigh and hoped that John Ivisid's plan would work.

~*~

The air-van finally came to a halt, and Stan climbed out. As he did so, someone said, "Is he okay?"

Stan responded with, "A bit shaken but nothing missing."

A moment later, John Ivisid glanced through the open door and said, "Come on."

Climbing out, Walter Verex glanced around and realised he was standing in a small industrial unit.

Once Stan had driven off and the outer shutter lowered, Ivisid led the way to an office area to the rear and said, "Are you hungry?"

Realising he was, Verex nodded. Ivisid went to the kitchen and spoke to an autodis. As the machine began preparing the food, Ivisid said, "So what's the story?"

Because John Ivisid was an old friend, Verex didn't hold anything back and told him about Samantha and the abortive attempt to retire her.

Ivisid grimaced. "I warned you, didn't I?"

Knowing there was a lecture coming, Verex lifted his hands, "Not now, John. I've had a bad day."

Undeterred, Ivisid ploughed on, "Standard droids are okay. I can live with them. They know their place. They take orders; they don't give them. But once you build an advanced humanoid, it's only a matter of time before they decide they know best and want to elbow mankind to one side."

"I could really do without a lecture," Verex said. In an attempt to change the subject, he glanced around and then asked the question he'd wanted to ask the moment he'd been brought in, "What is this place?"

The change of tack worked. "This unit belongs to a friend of mine. He's not been here for nearly three months, and I'm allowed to use it for storing our stuff. In return, I keep an eye on the place. Don't worry; no one is likely to come looking for you here."

"Are you sure about that?"

"As sure as I can be," Ivisid replied. "No one knows I'm using this place except Stan, and he's sound. He'll keep schtum."

"So, what's the plan?"

Ivisid shrugged, "You stay here until the dust settles. I don't know a lot about Switzer mercenaries except whispers I've heard. If the whispers are right, they employ guerrilla tactics whenever possible. As they don't have robotic forces to back them up, they don't take on armoured units if they can avoid it. If we're

lucky, the guys who tried to kill you won't hang around for too long."

"And what if they do?" Verex said.

Ivisid half-smiled, "Oh, yea of little faith."

"You have got a plan, haven't you?"

"I certainly have," Ivisid said. "Why don't we watch?"

A power bubble formed and displayed the exterior of Ivisid's museum.

Chapter Eight

Waqā Valdōn Moves in for the Kill

Glancing at Valdōn, Findon said, “Can you stop so I can get a firm fix on Walter Verex’s location.”

Valdōn instructed the air-car to land on the roof car park of a nearby building, “How about that?”

Findon looked concerned; in Midway City, private car parking bays were like gold dust; an unauthorised landing usually resulted in a challenge from an angry owner.

Unperturbed, Valdōn snapped, “Come on, get on with it.”

The technician climbed out and moved towards a parapet wall. Valdōn instructed the air-car to rise again, lowered a window to watch what Findon was doing. A few seconds later, the other man called out, “Locked on. We’ve got a fix on him.”

Valdōn shouted back, “Where?”

The technician pointed towards one of the smaller buildings not far from the centre of Midway City. “The transmissions are coming from over there.”

Valdōn glanced towards the building in question. He then clicked his fingers at Engelmann, “Binoculars.”

Following Findon’s outstretched finger, Valdōn pointed the binoculars at the front and side of the building. It was heavily scaffolded with anti-dust fabric draped down, so most of the façade was obscured from public view. After sweeping the building with the

binoculars several more times, Valdon said, "Are you sure the transmissions are coming from in there? It just looks like a building site."

Engelmann cut in, waving his percom in Valdon's direction, "I've just checked the building out. It's a military museum, and it's being refurbished at the moment."

Valdon gave him a disparaging look, "So?"

"Ingermann-Verex sponsors the museum; it's one of their community schemes."

Valdon's disparaging look became more challenging, and he echoed, "Ingermann-Verex sponsors the museum; community schemes? What's that got to do with finding Walter Verex and killing him?"

"It's Walter Verex's scheme, and that's why we're tracked Verex to this building."

The penny dropped. "So Walter Verex has gone to ground in his museum thinking we wouldn't think of looking for him there?"

"Looks that way," Engelmann agreed.

Valdon grinned, "Time to disillusion him then. Send the Switzers in."

Once Engelmann had issued the order, five air-cars converged on the museum. Valdon lifted the binoculars and watched developments. After the air-cars had circled, checking the building for lurking dangers, they flew up, and one of them landed on the roof. A small squad of men swiftly spread out and secured the area before the other four air-cars landed.

The Switzer assault team had forced open a roof door in less than a minute and began entering the building. The hunt for Walter Verex had restarted.

~*~

After landing the air-car and allowing Findon to climb back in, Valdón instructed the machine to move towards the museum. He then linked to the assault leader's head-cam. At first, progress was swift as the mercenaries blasted open doors and invaded new building sections.

Despite the progress, Valdón became impatient, "Any signs of Verex yet?"

The assault leader responded with, "No, but if he's in here, we'll find him."

"When you do find him," Valdón returned. "Make sure he dies slowly. Samantha won't be happy unless she sees a recording of him grovelling for mercy and getting none. Understood?"

"Don't worry," the assault leader replied. "Samantha will get value for money."

A few seconds later, there was a loud bang as another door was blasted open. As the dust cleared, the Switzers tossed grenades through the opening, waiting long enough for them to do their deadly work and then began moving in, laying down suppressing fire as they went.

As the advance continued, Valdón began thinking about his future. If he sent back images of Verex

squealing like a stuck pig, he'd probably receive a promotion and a massive pay rise. Although Samantha was a hard taskmaster, she believed in rewarding success.

While he was still daydreaming, pandemonium broke out, and pulse flashes started flying around in all directions.

As more and more shots were fired, Valdón snapped, "What's going on?" but instead of getting an answer, no one responded. They were too busy fighting off their attacker. Then Valdón saw something massive looming out of nowhere, but the head-cam images went shaky, suggesting the assault leader had dived for cover. A moment later, Valdón saw the assailant, and it was an old armoured fighting droid.

Valdón cursed. On modern battlefields, the machine would have been destroyed within minutes. Valdón then sensed the truth. As the Switzers were only armed with light weapons and couldn't call in air support, the ancient droid was likely unstoppable. While Valdón was still cursing, the machine lurched into view and lashed out, sending several Switzers flying.

As Engelmann was also linked to the Switzer's head-cams, he shouted out, "Someone has activated the museum exhibits, and they are attacking."

"Surely they can't be activated," Valdón quibbled. "Interplanetary regulations forbid the creation of private droid armies."

“As it’s a military museum, they probably have exemptions,” Engelmann replied. “Some visitors will want to see live demonstrations.”

A moment later, the head-cam images came to an abrupt halt. Valdón went pale; it was apparent the assault leader had either been killed or incapacitated.

Valdón attempted to link with other head-cams to gather more information, but all of the images were blurred. In desperation, he turned to Findon and said, “What’s going on inside the building?”

The technician shrugged, “I’ve no idea, but we have major problems.”

He pointed at the shimmering Mannheim force shield that had appeared at roof level, “All transmissions are being blocked by that. The whole building has been encapsulated.”

Valdón swore again, instructed the air-car to move closer, and ran the binoculars over the building again. Even with the draped scaffolding obscuring most of the view, it was possible to make out a Mannheim shimmer surrounding the building. The Switzer assault group was trapped and under attack.

While he was still staring at the building, the wail of police sirens started up. Fearing capture, Valdón snapped, “Evasive action. Get us out of here, fast.”

The air-car responded by diving back toward the traffic flow. After forcing its way in, the air-car joined the regular stream of vehicles traversing the city air-space. It had barely completed the dangerous manoeuvre before A10s, powerful police enforcement droids,

began moving in on the museum. As more and more A10s arrived, Valdón realised his forces had been lured into a well-laid trap.

Speaking to the air-car again, he snapped, "Get us back to base."

The air-car responded by setting a course towards the old warehouse where Sheilagh was held prisoner. On the way out of the city centre, they saw more police A10s arriving. Engelmann half expected one of the A10s to issue a challenge, but when nothing happened, he let out a sigh of relief, "So what happens now?"

"As the whole operation has gone tits-up, the only sensible solution is to teleport out of here," Valdón replied.

"And go back to Arden?"

Valdón let out a hollow laugh, "You've got to be joking! We've failed Engelmann. Failed! Walter Verex has outsmarted us! Samantha doesn't reward failure! Are you seriously suggesting we go back and face Samantha and tell her that Walter Verex escaped?"

Engelmann paled, "No. That wouldn't be a good idea. So where are we going to teleport?"

Valdón cast a sideways glance at Findon, "Your file indicated you know how to operate a portable teleport? Is that right?"

Before the technician could answer, Engelmann, said, "What portable teleport?"

Valdón gave him a sharp look, "Let's call it plan B. I always like to have a plan B up my sleeve."

He glanced back at Findon again and repeated, "One of the reasons why I brought you on this mission was because of your teleport training. I hope you weren't bullshitting. Do you know how to operate a portable teleport?"

The technician nodded, "I have had teleport training. I'm Grade 5."

The grading meant nothing to Valdón, "Can you get us off Midway?"

Findon nodded again, "If you have access to a portable system, I could teleport us to the Switzer support vessel."

Valdón gave him a sharp look, "Are you mad? As most of the Switzer forces are trapped in the museum back there, and we're can't get them out, if we go to the Switzer support vessel, we're going to be as welcome as a fart in a lift."

Findon said, "There is an alternative."

"What alternative?"

"Salus Transporter 3 is within teleport range. We could go there," Findon replied.

Valdón was tempted to question the royal "we", but he let it pass as he needed Findon's help. Glancing at Engelmann, Valdón barked out another order, "Find out if Salus Transporter 3 will allow us to teleport up?"

Engelmann went back to interrogating his percom. Listening in, Valdón did his best to appear aloof but inside, his nerves were a jangle. If Engelmann's negotiating skills failed them, there was a strong chance they'd all spend the next twenty-five years in a Midwain

gaol. Worse, they might face a death sentence or die in a firefight with the local police.

After a great deal of wrangling, Valdón sensed that Engelmann was on the way to brokering a deal. For the first time since the debacle had begun, Valdón smiled. It was well-known that transporter personnel weren't opposed to a juicy bribe, and Engelmann appeared to be pushing the right buttons. Five minutes later, Engelmann hung up. Smiling, he said, "They'll take us."

Valdón ordered the air-car to change course. As he did so, Engelmann's nerves showed, "Where are we going now?"

"The portable teleport is not at the warehouse," Valdón replied.

When Engelmann showed surprise, Valdón muttered, "Eggs and baskets."

Five minutes later, the air-car entered a storage depot, and Valdón directed it towards a bright yellow shipping container. Tossing Findon an access fob, Valdón said, "It's in there. Get it set up. Fast."

Catching the fob, Findon said, "Just so there's no misunderstanding, I'm coming with you."

Sensing that Valdón might screw their escape route up by shouting his mouth off, Engelmann dived in fast, "That was always the intention Findon. We're all in this together. Now get a move on. We want to be out of here before the police track us down."

As Findon climbed out, opened up the container and began setting up the portable teleport, Engelmann glanced at Valdón. The deflated look on his face

indicated that the enormity of the situation had finally sunk in; from being the hunter, he'd become the hunted. Before the assault on the museum, he'd been in control of the situation; now, he wasn't. It would be Fate who decided his future.

Engelmann asked the obvious question. "So, what happens once we're onboard the Salus Transporter 3?"

Instead of giving Engelmann a sharp rebuke, Valdon said, "I have enough finances to buy us new IDs. Then we look for somewhere where Samantha is unlikely to find us."

"Right," Engelmann replied, and his mind mirrored Valdon's thoughts. They were no longer hunters; they were going to be hunted.

Findon tapped the roof, "Time to go."

Valdon and Engelmann climbed out and began walking towards the open doors of the container. They were about to step onto the short ramp leading into it when two heavily armoured mercenaries appeared, guns levelled. One said, "Well! Well! Well! If it isn't SGL Valdon and GL Engelmann."

Glancing into the container and running his eyes over the portable teleport, the lead mercenary added, "After leaving our boys trapped in that building, it now looks as if you're planning your escape."

"How did you get out of the building?" Valdon demanded.

"We didn't," the lead mercenary replied. "We are the reserve. When it was obvious we couldn't help our mates, we followed you back here."

“So what happens now,” Engelmann said.

“You sent our boys to their death,” the lead mercenary replied. “We don’t like that.”

Sensing they were about to be shot, Engelmann attempted to draw his gun, but the two mercenaries were ready and took him down. As Engelmann collapsed to the floor, his body riddled with smoking holes, the lead mercenary said, “At least he took the honourable way out. What about you, SGL Valdón? Are you going to die with honour?”

Instead of attempting to draw his gun, Valdón took to his heels. He was swiftly brought down by another group of mercenaries who’d taken up positions not far from the container.

The lead mercenary turned his gun onto Findon, “And then there was one.”

Losing control of his bladder, Findon wet his pants. The lead mercenary grinned, “Can you operate the teleport?”

When Findon nodded, the lead mercenary said, “Then we’ll let you live. We want to teleport up to our support ship, can you do that?”

When Findon nodded again, the lead mercenary added, “Well, I hope you do because you’re coming with us. So if you get it wrong, you’ll die too.”

Findon went back to the controls and began resetting the destination again. A minute later, Findon depressed the controller he was holding, and the entire group standing on the teleport turned transparent and disappeared.

~*~

Walter Verex watched the Mannheim forming around the museum. "You've trapped them! Isn't that illegal?"

Ivisid shook his head. "They were breaking and entering. The buildings security system merely responded using minimum force."

A moment later, visual images from the inside of the museum and Verex saw an armoured fighting droid move in on the advancing Switzers. "I thought you said minimum force."

"As far as I am concerned, we are using minimum force," Ivisid replied. "The droids have been instructed not to kill anyone. I'm sure when the police arrive, they will see it the same way. I'm fairly certain these are the same people who caused that mayhem on the L10."

"You've had this all planned, haven't you?"

"What planned?"

"You lured them to the museum, didn't you?"

"Following Ed Pushley's attack on your house, Sheilagh was concerned that history would repeat itself and one day you would be kidnapped," Ivisid replied. "She alerted me to the attack as soon as it happened."

"So you sent Stan to save me," Verex replied.

"Sorry to disappoint you. That was just luck. Stan happened to be there when the mercenaries attacked. And you were lucky. Stan was about to leave when you came crashing down the stairs."

“But you said you and Sheilagh had worked out a plan.”

“We had a general plan,” Ivisid replied. “But we never envisaged that someone would be able to disable all the security systems in your house.”

Verex said, “Any idea what’s happened to Sheilagh?”

John Ivisid shook his head, “I’ve no idea.”

Chapter Nine

Philip Goshawk asks Questions

Colonel Philip Goshawk, the Switzer's intelligence officer, glanced at Findon and then transferred his gaze to Southman, "So why have you brought this man with you, Sergeant Southman; are you hoping for a ransom?"

"We didn't have much choice, sir," Southman replied, "He knew how to operate a mobile teleport we located; we brought him with us to make sure he used the correct coordinates."

Goshawk said, "What's going on?"

"I don't understand what you mean, sir," Southman replied, "What's going on?"

"I haven't heard anything from Midway for over two and a half hours, and now you turn up unexpectedly," Goshawk snapped, "I nearly denied you access."

Glancing around the empty teleport room, Southman said, "Are we the only ones who've come back, sir?"

"Yes," Goshawk said. "Now, what's going on?"

Southman said, "Surely you know, sir."

"Know what?"

"The whole operation went tits up. The museum had Mannheim defences, and our guys were trapped inside. There was nothing we could do to help them, so we got out."

Goshawk looked horrified, "You were supposed to gain access to Walter Verex's house and eliminate him. Why were you attacking a museum? SGL Valdón never

mentioned a museum; he just said there had been a minor hitch, but he had matters in hand."

Southman gave him a sardonic smile, "I don't suppose he told you that Walter Verex escaped."

"Verex escaped," Goshawk gasped. "No! He never told me that."

"Yeah, well, he did," Southman said. "Valdon said he'd located him again. He told us Verex had holed up in a museum building, so we went in after him."

"And what happened?"

"I've just told you, sir," Southman replied. "The museum had Mannheim defences, and our guys were trapped inside. There was nothing we could do to help them, so we got out."

Goshawk looked worried, "Is anyone else likely to teleport up?"

Southman shook his head, "Unlikely, sir. When we left, the Midwain police and Midwain military units had surrounded the museum. Worse, the armoured droids inside the museum were on the rampage. It was a carefully prepared trap. Although the armoured droids in the museum would have been useless on a modern battlefield, as our people were only carrying light weapons, they had nothing powerful enough to take them out. My guess is all our people have either been killed or captured."

Goshawk's worried frown increased, "If you're sure no one else is likely to escape? We can't stay here much longer; it's too risky. What happened to Valdon and his men?"

Findon cut in, "Sergeant Southman and his men shot them in cold blood. I was there, and I saw it happen."

Southman swung around and glared at Findon, "Shut your mouth, or I'll shut it for you."

Goshawk gave Findon an icy look, "I might just decide to let Sergeant Southman shoot you."

Realising he was in danger, Findon broke eye contact and stared at his feet. Glancing at the two crewmen, Goshawk nodded at Findon, "Lock him up; I'll interview him later."

He glanced at Southman and his men, "You need to move to recovery. The ship will have to leave as soon as possible. We may be outside the Midwain inner security zone, but I don't want to take any chances. From what you've told me, you've stirred up a hornet's nest down there. If we are not careful, the Midwain authorities might decide to ignore the niceties of space law and send out one of their destroyers to intercept us and prevent us leaving for Spitzer."

~*~

Goshawk came to Findon's cell two hours after leaving Midway and came straight to the point, "This ship will shortly be within teleport range of Salus Transporter 3. The transporter commander has agreed to accept your transfer."

Findon looked surprised, "You're going to transfer me?"

"If you stay on this ship," Goshawk said. "There is a strong chance that Sergeant Southman and his men will kill you, and I'm offering you a way out."

"Why would they kill me?"

"I would have thought that was obvious," Goshawk snapped. "You fingered Sergeant Southman's group, and you said they killed SGL Valdron and his men in cold blood."

"With the greatest respect, he's a Spitzer, a mercenary," Findon said. "Why should he be bothered about what I say? Spitzer mercenaries have a bad reputation anyway."

Goshawk half-smiled, "Spitzer command doesn't normally become over-concerned regarding such things. We do have a certain reputation. But this operation has been botched badly. As so many Spitzer personnel have been captured, Spitzer command will find it difficult to deny responsibility. If you are alive, Sergeant Southman may well find himself becoming the sacrificial pawn. Spitzer command might be forced to hand him over for trial in a war crimes court if a scapegoat is needed to appease a system-wide condemnation. I'm sure he knows this. As far as Sergeant Southman is concerned, you're an unwanted witness."

"So you are offering to teleport me to Salus Transporter 3 so that Sergeant Southman can't kill me," Findon said. "Why?"

“We will obviously need to reach an understanding,” Goshawk said. “If we do, I’ll send you to Salus Transporter 3.”

“What sort of understanding?”

Goshawk placed a sheet of plastimetal paper in front of him. “Can you read? Or do you need a verbaliser?”

Findon grabbed the sheet and snapped, “I can read perfectly well, thank you. They might not have taught me to read at school, but my parents certainly did.”

Goshawk looked surprised. As most people had a verbaliser built into their percoms, learning to read was a skill most of the Salus System population chose to ignore.

Once he’d finished reading, Findon said, “No one is going to believe this.”

“Maybe they won’t, and maybe they will,” Goshawk replied. “One thing for certain, if you made that statement, it will muddy the waters.”

“I thought one of the Spitzer boasts was that they never betrayed the names of their paymasters,” Findon said.

“Samantha is not a normal paymaster,” Goshawk replied.

Findon said, “In what way?”

“Despite your rather prejudiced views, mercenary forces are in business to make money. Despite what some people think, they don’t fight for the love of battle, and they don’t kill for the sake of killing,” Goshawk replied. “Spitzer mercenaries offer their services to others because they have no choice. Since

the mining companies pulled out, the Spitzer population has had to find other ways of putting food on the table. Being military surrogates and fighting other people's battles is one way. However, when the average Spitzer mercenary is recruited, they presume that they're not being sent on a suicide mission."

Findon's face clouded, "I'm not sure what you're driving at?"

"Samantha has sent our troops on two suicide missions," Goshawk replied. "The first was to the Fyfield Valley. Our troops were assured it would be a simple operation. Once they arrived on Arcadia, they were told they would be required to make a jungle drop. They were also promised there would be little or no opposition, but within seconds of being dropped, our assault force was taking heavy casualties and screaming to be extracted."

When Findon remained silent, Goshawk puffed out his chest and said, "It's an accepted fact that Spitzer mercenaries are well trained and very tough; only a vastly superior force will make Spitzers quit the field of battle."

Annoyed when Findon still didn't react, Goshawk created a power bubble, and a fearsome-looking creature appeared inside it. He said, "This is a giant Arcadian millipede. They fire deadly venom. A few drops of their venom will kill a normal human being within seconds. Samantha sent us on the first suicide mission; only the female guide and one mercenary survived. The rest died. They were poisoned to death from a millipede

attack. We are certain that Samantha knew that our people were likely to be overwhelmed if it came to a pitched battle, but she still went ahead."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Just proving a point," Goshawk replied. "There can be no doubting that Samantha sent them on a suicide mission."

"I'm sure it wasn't deliberate," Findon replied defensively.

"Perhaps," Goshawk replied. "But I don't think so; Samantha doesn't value human life. She's a humanoid with a difference; as far as she is concerned, humanity is expendable. We believe she knew our boys were likely to be badly savaged, but she sent our people in to test the strength of the opposition."

Findon was tempted to disagree, but he didn't; instead, he said, "So what was the second suicide mission?"

"This one," Goshawk snapped, "Once again, our people were assured it would be a simple operation; a quick raid on Walter Verex's house. He would be killed, and then our people would be extracted as soon as the operation was complete."

"But Verex escaped."

"Exactly," Goshawk replied. "When Walter Verex escaped, we should have pulled out, but we foolishly agreed to go after him. The net result was *your people* led *our people* into another carefully laid trap."

"Once again," Findon said. "I'm sure it wasn't deliberate."

“Maybe it wasn’t,” Goshawk replied. “But one thing of which I am certain, Samantha doesn’t care about our losses.”

When Findon remained silent again, Goshawk continued, “I’ve just learned that Spitzer command has taken the decision they no longer wish to accept any more contracts from Samantha.”

He passed the plastimetal sheet to Findon again.

Findon said, “So where does this fit in?”

“I want you to record that statement to camera,” Goshawk said.

“Why?”

“Unlike Sergeant Southman, I think you could make a useful witness,” Goshawk replied. “You’re Ardenese. There can be no doubting that. You have an accent that you could cut with a knife. Anyone listening will know that you are Ardenese. That adds credibility to what you say to the camera. Your statement also confirms you were actively connected to Samantha’s attack force, and you had been instructed to kill Walter Verex; the attack was a political assassination.”

“But why do you want me to implicate Samantha in the attack on Walter Verex’s house?”

“Doesn’t the Salus System have the right to know the truth?”

“What’s the real reason?”

“Politics,” Goshawk replied. “There is a large number of Spitzer citizens who want to get rid of Samantha. For obvious reasons, she isn’t very popular on Spitzer because she has too much blood on her metallic hands.”

"So you want me to speak this to the camera and say this," Findon said, wagging the plastimetal sheet.

"It's the truth, isn't it?"

"More or less," Findon admitted.

"Once you have made the statement, I will send you to Salus Transporter 3."

"If I do as you want, what guarantees have I got that you won't kill me," Findon replied.

"Because we want you alive," Goshawk said, "We want you to be able to confirm what you say. Once this goes live, the interplanetary media will all want a bit of you."

"Which means Samantha will try and kill me."

"No," Goshawk replied. "When you speak to camera or speak to reporters, your face will be pixelated, and your voice will be slightly distorted."

"But not enough to disguise my Ardenese accent," Findon said.

"Exactly," Goshawk said.

Findon said, "You must think I'm stupid. What's the real reason for helping me to escape?"

"If you don't escape," Goshawk reminded him, "Sergeant Southman and his men will kill you."

"That's not a reason."

"Okay," Goshawk said. "You're obviously an intelligent man, so I'll level with you. Many of our people would like to give Samantha a bloody nose; do something that will shake her regime. Your statement will cause ripples, and questions will be asked."

"Ah! So my statement will light the blue touch paper."

"That's a good analogy."

"If I do as you ask, Samantha will have me killed."

"If you do as I ask, you will get a new identity," Goshawk said. "You will also be given a substantial payment."

"How much?"

Instead of answering, Goshawk grabbed the plastimetal sheet, wrote on it and then passed it back.

When Findon let out a whistle of surprise, Goshawk said, "Samantha is hated on Spitzer. There are a large number of our senior politicians who are actively working to bring about her downfall; they would like to see Alton Mygael back in charge."

"Mygael is yesterday's man," Findon replied. "Samantha will hunt him down for sure."

"I'm sure she will try to," Goshawk agreed. "But let's get back to the matter in hand. I could send you back to Arden, and if I do, the chances are she'll have you shot. I'm giving you a way out if you are willing to help us."

There was a long silence, then Findon said, "Okay. You've got a deal."

Goshawk smiled, "Right! No time like the present," and moved towards a small office. He waved Findon towards a desk that had a video camera in front of it, "Have a seat."

Once Findon had moved behind the desk, he noted that Goshawk had created a bubble image of the script he'd read.

“Okay,” Goshawk said. “Speak to the camera and speak clearly.”

Findon did as instructed, but it took three attempts before Goshawk was satisfied.

Findon began to look nervous, “So what happens now?”

Goshawk said. “You’ve honoured your side of the bargain, so I’m going to teleport you to Salus Transporter 3 immediately, and I’m coming with you. Once we arrive, I will organise your payment and your new identity.”

Findon said, “If you come with me, who will fly this ship?”

Goshawk smiled, “The pilot will fly the ship. I have nothing to do with transportation.”

He added, “Although I still do get some active service commissions, I’m mainly with Spitzer intelligence these days. Come on, let’s go.”

Once they were back in the teleport bay, Findon began to look nervous again, “I know I teleported your men up here, but I only know the basics about teleport systems. Isn’t it dangerous to teleport so soon after a previous teleport?”

“Don’t worry,” Goshawk assured him, “You only travelled a short distance from Midway. In system terms, our ship is very close proximity to Salus Transporter 3, so you won’t suffer any ill effects.”

Leading the way onto the teleport, Goshawk punched in the coordinates, and two seconds later, they both emerged on Salus Transporter 3.

They were immediately ushered to a recovery bay. Once they had been given access to the obligatory buffet and Findon began eating, he visibly relaxed, "Why didn't you tell me you were with Spitzer intelligence until the last minute?"

"You never asked," Goshawk replied.

"I wouldn't have thought that a mercenary organisation would need an intelligence officer," Findon said.

"I'm not on my own," Goshawk said. "I'm part of a small team. Even a mercenary army needs to check out prospective clients. The truth is, we turn down most assignments because a large number are ill-conceived, or the proposed fee doesn't justify the risk."

"So how come you didn't weed out Samantha?"

Goshawk shrugged, "As I told you before. We were misled, and we will now turn down all other operations from that source."

"So you won't be involved when she tries to kill Alton Mygael and the rebels," Findon said.

Goshawk's ears pricked up, "No. But I would be interested to know what she's planning."

"Why?"

"Curiosity," Goshawk replied. "Listening to whispers, rumours, and gossip is part of my job."

"I don't know a great deal," Findon admitted. "A few days before he died, I heard SGL Valdón discussing an operation against Alton Mygael and Mick Tarmy with SGL Khan."

"Who is SGL Khan?" Goshawk said.

"Khan is, or should I say, was Valdón's contemporary," Findon replied, "Being the same senior rank, they very often discussed operations and compared notes."

"And you listened in?"

Findon nodded, "I know they you shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but Valdón was a bastard. I liked to know what he was planning, keeping ahead of the game."

"Who's Mick Tarmy?"

Findon shrugged again, "All I know is what I overheard. I got the impression that Mick Tarmy and Claire Hyndman had been involved in one of Samantha's operations. I also gained the impression that Samantha wanted them eliminating."

"Claire Hyndman," Goshawk repeated. "That name rings bells."

"Ah!" he said, "I remember."

"Remember what?"

"I've just told you about the suicide mission on Arcadia. There was a female guide. She was the only survivor because the soldier extracted with her died a few days later. The guide's name was Claire Hyndman."

"Why are you interested?"

Instead of answering, Goshawk said, "Stay here. I need to make a few enquiries. I'll be fifteen minutes tops."

True to his word, Goshawk returned fifteen minutes later with a slight smile on his face.

"So, what did you find out?"

"One or two interesting facts," Goshawk replied.

"Are you being deliberately obtuse; what did you find out?"

"Just before Spitzer command cancelled all contracts from Samantha, they had discussed an operation on Arcadia; operations against Alton Mygael and Mick Tarmy."

"Why is that interesting if Spitzer command has cancelled the operation?"

"Because one of my associates has been in contact with Alton Mygael recently and because it would appear that Claire Hyndman and Mick Tarmy are still an item."

"So?"

"Alton Mygael has been concerned that Samantha might attack him, and I gather Alan Hyndman, Claire Hyndman's father, is a wealthy man."

"I'm not following this," Findon complained.

Goshawk frowned, "I've said too much already."

When Findon let out a sigh of exasperation, Goshawk said. "As I said, I've already said too much."

"I have a right to know what you're planning," Findon snapped back. "It could affect me."

"It won't."

"It might," Findon replied. "If you don't tell me, I might not talk to your media friends when you want me to."

Goshawk relented, "Although Alton Mygael is in exile, he made sure he salted away considerable contingency funds. We know this; we've checked him out. He's also still being paid by the Minton Mining Company. As he's a man of means, he might be

prepared to pay for our protection. And then there's Alan Hyndman, Claire Hyndman's father, who is also a wealthy man. A man with a missing daughter might prove to be another good client."

Findon said, "A missing daughter?"

"Claire Hyndman," Goshawk reminded him. He added, "In her younger days, Claire Hyndman was the typical spoilt rich kid; a brat; trouble with a capital T. Claire ran off to Arcadia with a guy called Yan Farman and became his partner. Yan Farman died after being bitten by an Arcadian scorpion, and Claire Hyndman blamed the Great Ones for his death. That's why she volunteered to be a guide and became involved in the first suicide mission. Claire *was* the guide who went out with our people. We also know she disappeared from the Arcadian hospital after being extracted from the massacre site."

Sensing Goshawk hadn't given him the whole story, Findon said, "And then what?"

"Within hours of being extracted, she was taken to Arden," Goshawk replied. "It would appear that Samantha was responsible for having her kidnapped."

"So?"

"We believe Samantha was blackmailing Alan Hyndman, Claire's father, into paying for the hospital treatment on Arden," Goshawk replied. "We also believe Samantha double-crossed Alan Hyndman. Our intelligence reports indicate that Samantha had agreed to return Claire to her father, but..."

"But what?"

“After taking Alan Hyndman’s money, Samantha reneged on the deal. Instead, Samantha sent Claire back to Arcadia with Mick Tarmy on some sort of revenge mission.”

When Findon frowned, suggesting he hadn’t fully understood what he was being told, Goshawk added, “I’m fairly confident that Alan Hyndman dislikes Samantha. As I said, a wealthy man with a missing daughter might prove to be a good client, especially if he thinks that Samantha is likely to kill her.”

Chapter Ten

Goshawk Contacts Alan Hyndman and Alton Mygael

"A Colonel Philip Goshawk wants to speak to you, sir," Emily said. "He says it concerns your daughter, Claire."

Alan Hyndman gave his PA droid a sharp look, "Claire? What about Claire?"

"He says she could be in danger," the machine revealed.

"*Could be in danger?*" Hyndman snapped, "Either she is, or she isn't."

"Perhaps if you spoke to him," Emily replied. "He'd be able to answer your questions."

"Okay," Hyndman replied, "Hook him through."

The droid created a hyperlink power bubble, and Philip Goshawk's image appeared inside it.

Before Goshawk could speak, Hyndman snapped, "What's this about my daughter?"

Goshawk countered with, "I presume you know who Samantha is?"

"Of course," Alan Hyndman replied. "She's the homicidal humanoid who's just declared herself the Great Leader of Arden."

"We believe your daughter could be on Samantha's execution list," Goshawk said.

Hyndman's face betrayed concern but swiftly changed back to a hard mask of indifference, "It was her choice, and she chose to spurn my help and went to work for Samantha."

"So your daughter *was* working for Samantha?"

"Yes," Hyndman replied, "But if Samantha has turned on her, it doesn't surprise me. It was only a matter of time; most people who work for Samantha more than often end up in prison or meeting an executioner. It sounds as if my daughter is about to learn the hard way; Samantha can't be trusted."

Ignoring the harsh comments, Goshawk spread some ground bait on the waters, "Sounds like we both have reasons for hating Samantha."

Alan Hyndman's antagonism subsided and was replaced with vague interest, "So, what's the bitch of a droid done to you?"

"I'm with Spitzer intelligence," Goshawk revealed and then briefly described the two suicide missions Samantha had sent his forces on. He added, "During the first suicide mission on Arcadia, there was a female guide. She was the only survivor. The soldier extracted with her died, but the female guide survived. The guide's name was Claire Hyndman."

"Claire! My daughter!"

"Hyndman is not a common name on Arcadia," Goshawk replied. "So, yes. Your daughter *was* involved in the first suicide mission."

“Let me get this straight,” Alan Hyndman said, “Samantha sent my daughter on a suicide mission, and she was the only survivor.”

“Correct. As your daughter was attacked by Arcadian millipedes, she’s lucky to be alive.”

Alan Hyndman let out a curse, “Samantha lied to me.”

“How?”

“Samantha said that Claire had been bitten by an Arcadian scorpion and airlifted out of Fort Saunders,” Hyndman said, “What you’re telling me is that Claire became involved in one of Samantha’s hairbrained schemes and was poisoned by an Arcadian millipede. After nearly killing my daughter, the bitch makes me pay for her medical treatment.”

Realising he’d sparked a positive reaction, Goshawk stoked the flames, “That’s not all”.

Hyndman gave him a dagger’s drawn look, “If you know something else, spit it out.”

“We believe that Samantha sent Claire and Mick Tarmy on another suicide mission once Claire had recovered,” Goshawk said. “Samantha has used your daughter at least twice, and it would appear she now considers Claire surplus to requirements. The dead can’t talk.”

“The vicious bitch!”

Goshawk backtracked, “So after the first suicide mission, Samantha charged you for medical treatment.”

“She conned me out of hundreds of thousands,” Alan Hyndman said bitterly, “Then she lied to me.”

“Lied?”

“She promised my daughter could return home with me once she’d fully recovered from the poisoning but instead, she pulled a stunt in a teleport using a boomerang device. Once Samantha had me in her clutches, she had me brainwashed, and I never saw my daughter again.”

“She had you brainwashed!”

“Yes,” Hyndman replied. “Then she attempted to extract more money from me, but luckily, my associates had me transferred to a passing interplanetary transporter. The doctors on the transporter realised what she’d done and had the brainwashing reversed. The reversal process wasn’t a pleasant one.”

Hyndman then eyed Goshawk thoughtfully, “Now that we’re both reminisced, maybe you can tell me why you’ve contacted me? Why are you so concerned about my daughter’s welfare?”

“It struck me you daughter might need protection,” Goshawk replied. “As I said before, I’m with Spitzer intelligence. Our Spitzer forces could find her and escort her to safety. Even to Midway if you desired.”

“If you find my daughter,” Hyndman replied. “It’s unlikely she will want to leave Arcadia.”

“Always supposing Claire doesn’t want to return home,” Goshawk said. “I’m sure despite your differences; you wouldn’t want Samantha to kill your daughter.”

“Of course not,” Hyndman replied. “But how do I know this is not just another scam to get money out of me?”

Goshawk’s image disappeared from the bubble and was replaced by Findon’s pixilated image. Out of frame, Goshawk said, “This is John Findon; he has made several public statements concerning Samantha’s abortive attack on Walter Verex on Midway.”

Alan Hyndman recognised the Findon report because, since the attack on Walter Verex’s house, the media had been alive with claims and counterclaims. Sources on Arden had denied all involvement in the assassination attempt, and Spitzer sources had indicated that Samantha had personally ordered the assassination attempt.

Without prompting, Findon said, “I heard two high ranking Black-Clad officers discussing an operation on Arcadia, another reprisal. I heard your daughter’s name mentioned.”

“I don’t remember names very well,” Hyndman said. “I only remember when I’ve heard the name before. So how come you remembered my daughter’s name?”

“I *have* heard your daughter’s name before,” Findon replied. “I used to be friends with a guy called Mih Valanson. One of his jobs was to monitor a woman who’d been poisoned by Arcadian millipedes. Her name was Claire Hyndman. That’s why I remembered the name when I heard the officers discussing the operation.”

Alan Hyndman's jaw dropped, "You saw my daughter."

"No," Findon replied. "Only Valanson saw her, but he told me about her."

"So why does Samantha want to kill my daughter?"

Findon shrugged, "Samantha is totally ruthless. If she thinks your daughter is a danger to her, she'd have her killed without a second thought."

Knowing Samantha's ruthless nature, Hyndman said, "Where is my daughter now?"

The question had barely crossed Hyndman's lips before Findon's image faded from the power bubble and Goshawk's face returned, "We are fairly sure she is in New Victoria on Arcadia. So Do you want our help?"

"Let me think about it," Hyndman replied. "How can I contact you?"

Goshawk immediately created a swift contact code into the power bubble and said, "If you need us to find and protect your daughter, don't wait too long. I understand SGL Nenet Khan is in charge of the force going after your daughter, and he's as ruthless as Samantha."

~*~

One of the senior guards called through, "Hyperlink for you, sir."

Allus Wren was immediately suspicious. "Do you have a name?"

“He says his name is Colonel Philip Goshawk; Mr Mygael asked me to ask you to deal with him.”

Wren let out a slight sigh. Although he was happy to take control, Alton Mygael hadn’t officially appointed him. Instead, Mygael had adopted a dripping tap approach, slowly loading him like a pack mule. Wren said, “We’re going up in the world, a Colonel, eh?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Does the caller know our location?”

“No, sir,” the guard replied. “All hyperlinks to us are non-locational.”

“Okay,” Wren replied. “Put Colonel Goshawk through.”

Once the connection was made, Goshawk showed surprise, “Are you Alton Mygael?”

Once Wren explained the situation, Goshawk said, “I’m with Spitzer intelligence. I have some disturbing news. Samantha will be sending forces to Arcadia to attack both Alton Mygael and Mick Tarmy very shortly.”

Alarm bells rang in Wren’s mind, “Spitzer intelligence!”

“Correct.”

“Well, that’s great of you to tell me about Samantha’s plans,” Wren replied. “Can I ask you why you are telling me?”

“I would have thought that was obvious,” Goshawk replied. “If Samantha sends her Black-Clad forces to Arcadia, you could be in serious trouble.”

Wren half-smiled, “But you’d be prepared to help us. If the price was right.”

“That’s correct,” Goshawk replied. “One more piece of information, Samantha knows you are hiding at Awis Oasis and that Mick Tarmy is in New Victoria.”

Reading the expression on Wren’s face, Goshawk knew he’d scored a direct hit and said, “Both Alton Mygael and Mick Tarmy are in serious trouble.”

“Always assuming you are right about our locations, how would Samantha find out?”

“Samantha had Unnan and Marci Vardis kidnapped from Pearl Crater. We know that Unnan Vardis has been singing like a bird to protect Marci, his humanoid girlfriend. Vardis knew that Alton Mygael teleported to Awis Oasis because he controlled the Pearl teleport. How Samantha discovered where Mick Tarmy is, we don’t know, but we know that she knows.”

“How do you know?”

Goshawk smiled, “Finding out information is my job.”

“How much would it cost us to hire your people?”

When Goshawk told him, Wren let out a whistle and shook his head, “I will check Alton Mygael, but I doubt if his finances would stretch to that.”

“I thought you might say that,” Goshawk replied. “So, my advice would be to move your people to New Victoria and join up with Mick Tarmy as soon as you can.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t justify calling in reinforcements to protect Alton Mygael if he is not prepared to pay for our services,” Goshawk replied. “We’re not a charitable institution.”

“So you’re throwing us to the wolves,” Wren said.

“No,” Goshawk said, “If you join up with Mick Tarmy’s people, I could treat you as part of his group.”

“I thought you weren’t a charitable institution,” Wren replied. “Why are you offering a lifeline?”

Goshawk smiled, “If we manage to unseat Samantha, I’m sure that Alton Mygael will want to return to Arden and take over. If he wants to do that or he, or more exactly, the Minton Mining Company want him to do that, they will need to consider giving us a reasonable payment.”

“We could just stay on Awis Oasis,” Wren countered. “It’s protected by a Mannheim.”

“Although Awis Oasis has a Class B Mannheim shield protecting it,” Goshawk replied. “It’s rather antiquated, a leftover from the last war. A sustained attack with the correct modern weapons and it would collapse. We understand that Samantha’s attack force will be equipped with suitable weapons. If the Mannheim collapsed, the whole of Awis Oasis would be very vulnerable.”

“How long have we got before Samantha’s people attack us?”

Goshawk shrugged, “Who knows. Three to four weeks tops, I’d say.”

Wren backtracked, “So, who is this possible additional funder?”

“That’s confidential,” Goshawk said.

Wren’s mind began churning, and he thought back to a time when he’d once worked for Samantha when

Claire Hyndman had used a boomerang device and had sucked her father into Samantha's clutches. Wren said, "It's Claire Hyndman's father, isn't it?"

"As I just said, that's confidential," Goshawk replied. "Like I said, if I was you, I'd leave Awis Oasis as soon as you can and join up with Mick Tarmy's group. I understand SGL Nenet Khan is in charge of the force coming after Alton Mygael, and he's as ruthless as Samantha."

~*~

Allus Wren went to see Alton Mygael. After he'd explained the situation, he said, "We have to presume that Goshawk is telling the truth and that Samantha has located our position." He explained to Mygael about Goshawk's protection costs.

Alton Mygael went pale, "In case you have forgotten, It's cost me a small fortune in legal costs trying to get Klaien released from prison. I'm not poor, but I can't afford what Colonel Goshawk is demanding."

Mygael glanced at Klaien Mygael, his life partner, "So Unnan Vardis betrayed us."

"I suppose it was inevitable," Klaien replied. "He tried to trick us out of our money and place us into stasis. I'm just surprised that hasn't tried to sell us down the river before."

Wren half-smiled, "Vardis may be a crook, but he isn't a fool."

When Alton Mygael frowned, Wren amplified, “I do not doubt that initially, Unnan Vardis decided not to inform Samantha of his involvement in our escape because she might have decided to have him killed as a reprisal.”

Wren said, “Added to which, if Vardis had admitted to teleporting us, Samantha might have decided it provided her with a good enough excuse to invade. If she did, she’d no doubt move in on Unnan Vardis’s lucrative Wreck trip operations.”

Klaien said, “Why would she invade SSIAT territory?”

“Oh, come on,” Wren said, “The Minton Mining Company has been casting covetous eyes over any areas of Arden not owned or controlled by their company. The SSIAT ruled Arden regions are amongst them. If they took over the SSIAT controlled areas, they’d have another quarter of Arden’s surface to exploit. That’s big bucks.

“But he did change his mind!” Klaien said. “Why?”

“My guess is Samantha leant on him very hard,” Wren replied.

Alton Mygael went into sackcloth and ashes mode, “Samantha’s not going to give up until we’re dead, is she? If she’s sending Nenet Khan after us, we’re in real trouble.”

“Then pay Colonel Goshark,” Wren suggested.

“I’ve just told you that I can’t afford it,” Mygael snapped. “We’ll have to find another way.”

Sensing that the news had sent Alton Mygael into a nosedive, Wren said, “Unless you can afford to pay for

Goshawk's protection, which you can't, I need to contact Mick Tarmy and get us out of here."

"Why?"

"Because we stand a better chance of surviving if we're united against a common foe. Don't forget Mick Tarmy has a TK5 and four A10s at his disposal to fight Samantha's forces. And let's face it, if Nenet Khan collapses the Mannheim, they can sweep in with their air-cars. Your dozy guards wouldn't last five minutes facing heavily armed Black-Clads."

Alton Mygael said, "Why can't Mick Tarmy come here?"

"Because Samantha might attack his position first and then come after us," Wren reasoned. "In any case, Mick's not at your beck and call, and I don't suppose you are on his birthday card list. You've jerked his strings too many times before."

"I told Tarmy I wouldn't contact him except in an emergency," Alton Mygael replied.

"If this isn't an emergency, I don't know what is," Wren snapped.

Klaien Mygael said, "Alton, why don't we let Allus do what he thinks best?"

Alton succumbed, "Very well, Allus. You're in charge."

"I need Mick Tarmy's contact number."

Once Alton Mygael had provided it, Klaien followed him out and said, "Thank you for taking over the reins. Alton has not been very well."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

“Because I was in prison, I didn’t see him for a while,” Klaien replied. “But I don’t think he’s ever quite recovered from being stunned.”

Wren became defensive, “I did as you wanted, and I stopped him teleporting and falling into Samantha’s hands.”

“I’m not blaming you,” Klaien said. She looked around, worried, “Please do your best to protect us.”

Wren nodded, “I’ll do my best.”

Once back in his private office, Wren made a scrambled link and called the number he’d been given. Nonie Tomio answered the call. Recognising Wren, Nonie said, “What d’you want?”

“That’s not very friendly,” Wren countered.

“Maybe that’s because we have ended up being sucked into so many nasty things every time you or Alton Mygael contact us,” Nonie snapped. “So what d’you want?”

“I need to speak to Mick,” Wren replied. “Samantha is about to attack us all.”

Nonie’s face suddenly disappeared and was replaced by Tarmy’s, “How d’you know Samantha is about to attack us?”

“Because Colonel Goshawk of Spitzer intelligence told me,” Wren replied.

“And why would he do that?”

Wren shrugged, “Even though you’re away from Midway, you must have heard about the abortive attempt on Walter Verex’s life and the battle in the military museum.”

"It's been big news for days," Tarmy replied. "The second attempt on his life in as many months. But I don't see why Goshawk should contact you."

Once Wren had swiftly explained, Tarmy said, "So you want to evacuate and come here."

"That's the general idea," Wren replied.

"How long before Samantha's forces attack?" Tarmy probed.

"I'm not sure," Wren admitted. "Goshawk implied that Samantha's forces would arrive in three to four weeks."

When Tarmy went quiet, Wren sensed a problem, "Can we or can't we evacuate?"

"Not yet," Tarmy replied.

"Why not?"

"Because we've had a flood and are only just getting ourselves sorted out," Tarmy replied. "If you can wait a few weeks, we should be ready."

Wren became alarmed, "A few weeks. Samantha's forces could attack before then!"

"I'll send two of our A10 out to patrol the approach to Awis Oasis," Tarmy offered. "But they won't be able to fire on Samantha's people."

"Why not?"

"A short while back, you were giving me a lecture on illegal droids," Tarmy reminded him. "If they fire on Samantha's people, the authorities could make life difficult for us."

"We are in trouble!" Wren snapped.

"D'you want the droids or not?"

“Yeah,” Wren replied. “Anything is better than nothing.”

“Okay, “I’ll station one of our A10 outside the Nabid Oasis and one by the tower just outside Awis Oasis. As that is the most likely approach route, we should be able to give you some warning.”

Chapter Eleven

Midway: The Aftermath

Verex said, "You must find Sheilagh."

"The police are already rounding up Spitzers," Ivisid said. "I have no doubt she will be found."

"Will she be alive, though?" Verex said, "Or badly damaged."

"She's a humanoid; she can be replaced," Ivisid said dispassionately.

"I don't want her replaced," Verex snapped, "I love her. I want her back with me."

Realising he'd hit a raw nerve, Ivisid said, "I'm sure she will be fine, but you've got to stop fretting. It won't help the situation. There's important work to do."

"Like what?"

"I would suggest you start by letting your people know you are still alive," Ivisid replied. "If you don't, there will be all sorts of rumours flying around. If you don't let them know you're okay, the media will have a field day; they'll begin speculating. You might even have board members trying to oust you during your absence."

"You're right," Verex replied. "Only ..."

Ivisid said, "Only what? You don't sound certain,"

"I'm not," Verex admitted.

"What's the problem?"

"Minton Mining is one of our best clients," Verex said. "We don't just supply their Arden operations; we

provide equipment to most of their operation in the Salus System. Pointing an accusing finger at Samantha could cost the company millions in lost orders. If I'm seen to be responsible for losing one of our best clients, I'll be ousted anyway."

Ivisid gave him a stern look, "You're not seriously suggesting you're going to ignore an attempt on your life, are you?"

"I've been thinking about little else since Stan rescued me," Verex replied. "If the police can't prove Samantha was behind the attempt on my life, it will all be swept under the carpet. If they can prove Samantha organised the attacks, it's unlikely they'd be able to shut her down. We've tried that several times and failed. Besides, can you think of the media take on the issue? If I admit that one of our humanoids made an attempt on my life, won't the media and the general public assume all our humanoids are unsafe as well? Accusing Samantha would be a home goal; it would just destroy the company I've helped to build."

"So Samantha gets away with an attempted murder," Ivisid said.

"Yes," Verex replied, "The Spitzers will have to shoulder the blame."

"So when we go public," Ivisid said. "We don't mention Samantha's involvement."

"Correct," Verex replied.

"You do realise she may try to attack you again," Ivisid said.

"In my opinion, it's not likely," Verex replied.

“What makes you say that?”

Verex shrugged, “For as long as I can remember, the Spitzers have created a myth that they were unstoppable, but they have been stopped. For the first time in living memory, a Spitzer's group has been given a real bloody nose. Most of their attack force is either dead or has been arrested.”

“They could still make another attempt on your life,” Ivisid replied.

Verex shook his head, “As Samantha’s plan failed, it’s unlikely that any Spitzer group will want to work for her again.”

Verex changed tack, “I need you to check if Sheilagh has been located.”

“Stop worrying about Sheilagh.”

“I can’t stop worrying about Sheilagh,” Verex snapped back. He added, “I also need to sack Slim Ildrain.”

“Why do you want to sack Ildrain?”

“Because he got me into this mess”

“He also tried to warn you there was going to be an attack,” Ivisid said.

“Warn me?”

Ivisid called up a power bubble and said, “We found this message a short time ago.”

A moment later, a CGI image of a young man appeared, “Can I help you?”

“I need to speak to Walter Verex urgently,” a nervous voice said.

Verex said, "I recognise that voice. That's Slim Idrain."

"That's why you shouldn't sack him," Ivisid said. "Listen!"

CGI image said, "Can I ask the nature of the call?"

"Walter Verex is in danger," Idrain continued, "Samantha hasn't been deactivated, and people are planning to attack his house."

"If you provide us with your name and contact number, we will ask him to contact you if he believes your call is of an urgent nature," the CGI replied.

"Of course, it's of an urgent nature. His life is in danger," Idrain snapped.

The connection was then cut.

Verex gave Ivisid a sharp look, "You were warned my house was going to be attacked, but you didn't pass the message on."

"Our system was following your instructions," Ivisid retorted. "You don't accept any calls unless the caller has been fully verified. Unfortunately, because Idrain didn't identify himself or was scared to give his contact details and ID, nothing happened."

"So Idrain tried to save me?"

"Correct, and it sounds as if he took a risk doing it," Ivisid replied. "And in case you've forgotten, you were assured that Samantha had been badly damaged by several of your close contacts."

"Okay," Verex said. "That puts everything in a new light, but I still won't be happy until we locate Sheilagh."

~*~

Clark glanced towards the small group of Spitzer guards. It was apparent something was wrong because they were arguing loudly in their own language. He then heard a phrase he understood. Turning on his heel, Clark raced down the corridor and burst into the secure room where Sheilagh was being held. Slamming the door closed, Clark voiced his fears, "I think the Spitzers are planning to kill us. They don't want witnesses."

"Are you sure?" Forley said.

"I know a bit of their language," Clark said. "Something's gone wrong with their operation. We need to try and get away from here - fast."

Forley shook his head, "They'd cut us down the moment we try to make a break for it."

"So, what do we do?"

"We use our heads," Forley snapped, moved towards Sheilagh and pulled the gauze off her head. Then, he said, "Call for help. If you don't, we're all going to die; you included."

He glanced at Bethel, "Get these chains off her."

Bethel set to work, and in less than a minute, he'd released Sheilagh. He'd barely finished before Clark gave the alarm, "They're coming, and they look as if they mean business."

"Then lock the door."

Without needing to be asked twice, Clark slammed the heavy security door shut and then depressed the fob

to lock it. As he did so, he said, "I hope you realise this door won't hold 'em back for long."

"I do realise that," Forley replied. "But it'll slow 'em down. It's the only chance we've got."

A few seconds later, a series of loud pings erupted as the Spitzer guards began pumping pulse shots into the door.

Chapter Twelve

Maintenance to the Rescue: Idrain's Reprieve

Seeing four or five maintenance droids flying at high speed in the same direction, a patrol officer said, "Where are they going?"

The second police officer shrugged, "Let's follow them and find out."

Once the police air-car had set off in pursuit, the original maintenance droids were suddenly joined by ten more. Then, without warning, the whole group veered off towards some disused warehouses. After circling one building looking for a way in, the entire formation shot through a broken window and went inside like a swarm of angry hornets.

When pulse fire started up from inside, the first officer guessed what was happening and contacted base and asked for A10 backup.

The second officer said, "Why are you calling in A10s?"

The first officer enlightened him, "I think we've found the missing humanoid we've been looking for. The last report suggested the humanoid had been kidnapped by Spitzer mercenaries, so we're not taking any chances."

He'd barely uttered the words before five ghost-like figures burst out through a fire escape door and began running. The ghosts were closely followed by the same swarm of maintenance droids, with gravitron cutters fully extended, buzzing noisily.

The second officer followed at a safe distance while the first officer provided more reports concerning the fleeing Spitzers. Two minutes later, two A10s appeared and swooped on the Spitzers. The Spitzers were swiftly taken down, and the A10s moved in and shackled them. Then a police air-van appeared, and the stunned Spitzers were unceremoniously dumped in the back.

Satisfied the Spitzers had been rounded up, the two officers went back to the warehouse, entered via the open fire door and began carefully working their way down corridors, with guns drawn. Coming upon a heavy door riddled with phaser holes, the second officer called out, "Police! Anyone in there?"

When there was no answer, the police officer rattled the door. He nervously glanced through one of the larger holes and caught a glimpse of someone inside. He called out again, "Police! Anyone in there?"

"How do we know it's not a trick," a voice called back.

"Is Sheilagh Verex in there with you?"

"Yeah."

"I'll contact her shortly," the second officer said and called HQ. Once he'd been provided with Sheilagh's details, he sent her a shot of himself and his colleague and the empty corridor beyond. He then said, "The Spitzers have been arrested."

A moment later, the pockmarked door opened, and Sheilagh, Forley, Bethel and Clark stepped out unharmed.

Sheilagh immediately pointed at Forley, Bethel and Clark, "These guys need political asylum. I have already notified the relevant authorities."

One of the police officers said, "You'll need to give us statements," and pointed to the police air-car.

Walking towards it, Forley gave her a grateful look, "Thanks for speaking up for us."

"No problem," Sheilagh replied. "You'll obviously be asked a lot of questions. I've just been advised not to mention Samantha's involvement in all this. I would suggest you just say you were forced to do this by the Spitzers, but you have no idea who their paymaster was."

"Who's instructed you to say that?"

Although she knew the message had been sent by John Ivisid, Sheilagh dodged the question by saying, "It was just an advisory."

Clark cut in, "Why should we cover for Samantha?"

"You haven't got a family back home to consider," Bethel snapped. Glancing at Forley, he added, "We have. If you point fingers at Samantha, she might make things worse for our families."

Forley nodded, "If any of us point the finger at Samantha, she's bound to make reprisals."

"So we're all singing from the same hymn sheet," Sheilagh said, "no mention of Samantha."

"So Samantha gets away with this?" Clark snapped.

"Yes," Forley said. "Looks that way; politics is a dirty business."

As the small group continued walking towards the police air-cars, Sheilagh contacted Walter Verex.

His reaction was immediate, "You're alive! Thank God for that. Have they harmed you?"

"I'm fine," Sheilagh assured him. "But I may be some time. I think I'm being taken to a police station to give them a statement."

~*~

Slim Idrain's percom warbled, but he didn't answer. The tone indicated it was from Freya, and he had no desire to speak to her because he didn't trust her. Ever since he'd been ambushed by Samantha's two thugs and tortured into providing information about Walter Verex's house, he'd suspected Freya had been responsible.

Allowing the call to time-out, he rolled off his bed and groaned; his head felt twice its normal size, and he had a throbbing hangover. Once he'd found some painkillers, he glanced around his room and began counting bottles and cans; there were at least twenty. He spotted more partly hidden by a mound of takeaway food boxes.

He couldn't remember doing it, but he must have ordered in both drink and the food while he'd been placed under home arrest by Samantha. While he was still viewing the debris, there was a knock on his door, and he heard Anna Maytell call out, "Are you in, Slim? You okay?"

Not wishing to be disturbed, Idrain kept quiet, hoping that Anna would go away. He then heard talking and realised that Anna had someone with her; another woman.

A few seconds later, Anna called out again, but this time far louder, "You okay, Slim?"

He then heard another muffled conversation followed by the sound of a key being inserted into the outer lock.

Idrain let out a mild curse because he remembered that he'd given Anna a key to his room during their on-off relationship. Bursting in, Anna took in the scene of devastation in one glance, "What in hell's name is going on, Slim?"

Before he could answer the question, another woman followed Anna into the room and began glancing around but kept silent.

Idrain looked at Anna and growled, "What d'you want?"

"That's a very nice attitude you've got there," Anna snapped back. "I told you why I've come in. I'm checking up on you; I haven't seen you for days."

Looking at the bottles and takeaway wrappings, she added, "What's all this about?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Idrain replied. Then, he glanced at the other woman, "Who's this?"

"I'm Sedra. Freya sent me," the other woman replied. "Freya was concerned you weren't answering her calls."

Idrain let out a hollow laugh, “Freya worried about me! She set me up; I was kidnapped. I’m lucky to be alive.”

Instead of asking Idrain what he meant, Sedra shook her head, glanced at Anna and said, “I think he may still be drunk.”

Anna Maytell nodded, “You’re right. He’s still as drunk as a skunk.” She glanced around the room again and threw up her hands. “Come on! What’s going on, Slim? Have you gone mad?”

Anger ridges formed around Idrain’s eyes, “No, I’ve not gone mad! I’ve been shit scared I was going to be murdered if you must know.”

Reacting to the flaring hostility, Sedra intervened, “Why don’t you leave this with me, Anna.”

Anna looked uncertain, “Are you sure?”

Sedra nodded, “Don’t worry, I can deal with this. It’s all part of the training.”

Idrain turned his hostility onto Sedra, “Training? What training?”

Ignoring the comment, Sedra nodded Anna towards the door. Once Anna had left the room, Sedra closed the door behind her, walked over to the curtains, pulled them back and opened a window. She then began collecting and bagging the rubbish that Idrain had accumulated during his incarceration.

When she didn’t utter another word, Idrain said, “Look what’s going on?”

Sedra gave him a sharp look, “I think that’s a question I should be asking you.”

When Idrain did not attempt to answer, Sedra carried on bagging.

“Look, what are you doing here?”

“I’ve told you,” Sedra said. “Freya sent me.”

“Why? Because of her, I nearly died.”

“So you keep saying,” Sedra replied. “Freya was concerned; you’ve been missing from work, and Walter Verex has been asking after you. He’s also concerned for your safety.”

“Walter Verex! Eh? Isn’t he dead?”

“No,” Sedra replied. “He’s not dead, and as I’ve just said, he’s concerned for your safety.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure of what?”

“That Walter Verex is still alive?”

“Yes,” Sedra replied, “Quite sure. I’ve spoken to him.”

Despite his hangover, Idrain dance a little jig, “Walter Verex is alive!”

“I’ve just confirmed that he is,” Sedra replied, “There was an attack on his house, but he escaped unharmed. More importantly, he needs to speak to you.”

Idrain said, “To me?”

“The sooner, the better,” Sedra said. But then, she began to push, “He’s an impatient man; *now* would be a good time.”

Idrain shook his head, “I need to speak to Freya first.”

“I thought you didn’t like Freya.”

“I don’t,” Idrain replied. “But I still want to speak to her.”

“Why?”

“Because I do,” Idrain replied.

Reluctantly, Sedra nodded and created a power bubble with Freya’s image inside it. The bubble homed in on Freya’s electronic face, and she gave Idrain a concerned look, “Slim, how are you?”

“I’m okay,” Idrain replied. His voice then turned to ice, “But no thanks to you.”

“What’s that meant to mean?”

“You programmed my air-car to take me into a re-development area intentionally so that Samantha’s thugs could jump me.”

“That is total nonsense,” Freya snapped back. “But I’m going to forgive you because you are obviously suffering from the traumatic events of the last few days.”

Sedra intervened, “I apologise for Mr Idrain’s appalling behaviour.”

Idrain said, “How is Walter Verex?”

“He’s fine,” Freya replied, “Let’s stick with you. Why are you accusing me of things?”

Idrain unloaded his mental burden on her, “I’ve told you. You programmed my air-car to take me into a re-development area intentionally so that Samantha’s thugs could jump me.”

“That’s untrue,” Freya snapped. “I can tell you are drunk because your speech is slurred, and I can think of no other reason for you making these accusations.”

Idrain shrugged, “Of course, you’re going to deny it, and Walter Verex will believe you. After all, I told Walter

Verex that Samantha had been badly damaged, but it was a trick."

"We were all fooled," Freya replied.

"I suppose this means I'll be downgraded or sacked," Idrain said.

"That is for Walter Verex to decide," Freya replied. "But I think that is unlikely because it would appear he's highly concerned you're not here working on our project. You need to contact him immediately."

Once Freya's image had disappeared, Idrain glanced at Sedra, "Why does Walter Verex want to speak to me. I would have thought I'd have been the last person he'd want to speak to."

Instead of answering the question, Sedra said, "Shall I call him for you?"

Knowing he couldn't refuse, Idrain nodded, "Okay, I'll speak to Walter Verex."

Sedra created another power bubble, and within seconds Walter Verex's CGI appeared inside it. Much to Idrain's surprise, Verex smiled, "Hi Slim. I've just heard you were kidnapped."

Idrain half-smiled. In the time it had taken for Sedra to put him through to Verex, Freya had obviously made a report about what he'd just told her.

"Well, were you kidnapped?"

Rather than admit the truth, Idrain told a half-truth, "I was sir, but I managed to escape."

"Good for you. So that's why you've been lying low," Verex surmised. "You thought they might come after you again."

Going along with the scenario Verex had invented, Idrain nodded, "Yes, sir. Something like that."

He felt embarrassed, "Look, I failed you, sir. I didn't manage to damage Samantha. I will understand if you wish to downgrade me or sack me."

Verex said, "I have no intention of doing any such thing. We were all fooled. Besides, I know that you tried to warn me of the attack on my house despite the risks to your own person. As long as you are well enough, I want you back working on your project."

"Thank you, sir."

"I gather Sedra is with you," Verex continued.

Idrain nodded and said, "But I'm not sure why she's here."

"Sedra is now your personal assistant," Verex replied.

"I thought Freya was my personal assistant," Idrain queried.

"Freya will be decommissioned very shortly," Verex replied. "We found evidence that Samantha has managed to turn her. She will be deactivated. But I don't want you to say anything to Freya, is that understood? In fact, I don't want you to return to our offices until further notice."

Idrain looked alarmed, "Have I done something wrong, sir?"

"Not at all," Verex replied. "But I've decided we can't take chances. If Freya has been taken over by Samantha, there may be others. So we are sending in Unit Red; we need a clean sweep."

Idrain gulped. Unit Red was a droid deactivation team.

Noting Idrain's expression, Verex said, "Needs must when the devil drives."

"Yes, sir."

"Good," Verex replied. "I presume you will accept Sedra as my gift to you."

Noting the frown forming on Idrain's face, Sedra froze the power bubble and said, "Is there something the matter? Don't you like me?"

Not wishing to offend, Idrain said, "Of course I like you. But Walter Verex said you were a gift."

"Have you a problem with that?"

Idrain said, "No one can go around giving people to other people. It's illegal! It's slavery!"

Sedra moved a little closer, "I get the impression you don't get out much, Slim. A bit of a computer nerd, so I hear. If you are not aware, Ingermann-Verex produces nearly two hundred thousand bipedal humanoids per annum. Most are exported, but home sales are rising. I am one of those humanoids, and I am now your assistant and your partner if you choose to make me so."

Idrain's jaw dropped, "You're a humanoid."

"Correct," Sedra replied.

"You look so real."

Sedra smiled, "That's the general idea."

Idrain still looked uncertain, "He said you were a gift; what if I don't want a humanoid in my life?"

"You humans have an expression," Sedra said. "Never look a gift horse in the mouth."

"What's that meant to mean?"

"There was a whisper going around that Mr Verex *was* going to fire you, but he changed his mind," Sedra revealed. "He had a change of heart when he discovered that you tried to warn him of the attack on his house. He has just indicated that he intends to keep you in your current position."

"So?"

"Do I have to spell it out in words of one syllable?" Sedra hissed. "He might be highly offended if you send me back."

"D'you think so?"

"I'm positive," Sedra replied.

"What about Anna Maytell?"

Sedra shrugged, "If she is a friend of yours, I don't mind. But bear in mind, you're a grade seven now; you may want to move to accommodation better suited to your status."

"D'you think so?"

"Positive," Sedra replied. "Now, shall I unfreeze the power bubble before Mr Verex gets really pissed off?"

"Yes, do that."

Once the power bubble reactivated, Verex said, "What happened there? Everything cut off."

"Just temporary glitch, sir," Sedra assured him. "These things happen even with advanced technology."

"Where did I get to?" Verex replied.

"You were in the process of gifting me to Mr Idrain," Sedra said. "During the glitch, Mr Idrain accepted your kind offer. He's very pleased with your gift."

Sedra then glanced at Idrain, "I'm sure he's going to say thank you when he remembers his manners, sir."

"Yes, sir," Idrain spluttered. "Thank you, sir."

"Good," Verex said. "I'll hopefully be in touch later on in the week with more information."

Once the power bubble had evaporated, Sedra said, "I'm going to finish clearing up this mess if that is okay with you."

"I suppose so," Idrain replied. "But why are you here?"

"Don't you like me being here?"

"I didn't say that," Idrain replied.

"No, you didn't," Sedra agreed. "But all your facial muscles indicate that you are uneasy with me being here."

"I'm not uneasy with you," Idrain replied. "I'm uneasy with most women."

"I'm not a woman," Sedra reminded him. Then, she added, "Do I take it you bat for the other side?"

When Idrain frowned, Sedra simplified, "Are you gay?"

Idrain suddenly became animated, "Definitely not."

"Good," Sedra replied. "Then you are going to have to get used to me being around. All grade sevens are given a personal assistant supplied by the company. It's a way of ensuring executive loyalty. It would be embarrassing for Ingermann-Verex if their senior

executives were seen with another maker's humanoid; any more questions?"

"Don't executive's life partners object to having a humanoid around?"

"Some do," Sedra admitted. "But most don't. As most Midwains live in communes as you do, most are used to sharing partners. Any more questions?"

"Yes," Idrain said. "Are all Ingermann-Verex humanoids as full-on as you are?"

"Only when we have to be," Sedra replied.

"Presumably, anything I tell you will be reported back to the company," Idrain speculated.

"Certainly not," Sedra replied, "Humanoids designated as being personal assistants are not allowed to divulge confidential issues."

"Like a priest in confessional," Idrain said.

"It's not an analogy that I would choose," Sedra replied. "Then again, it is similar. Part of my programming binds me not to divulge confidential issues with third parties. Even if you told me you'd murdered someone, I would not be allowed to report the conversation."

"Well, that's good," Idrain replied.

"Why?" Sedra said, a worried look crossing her face, "Have you murdered someone?"

"No! I certainly haven't," Idrain replied.

"That is good; any more questions?"

Idrain shook his head, "Not for the moment."

After she'd finished cleaning up all the rubbish and depositing it into a local refuse chute, Sedra returned,

pushing her charging unit. After finding a suitable full height cupboard, she moved it inside and plugged it in.

She cleaned herself off, and said, "Well, you heard Walter Verex, you can't go to work until Unit Red have completed their work. So what are we going to do with the free time?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I have an idea," Sedra said. "Come with me."

She pulled him into his bedroom and pushed him onto the bed, "Now you have me; you really won't need Anna Maytell anymore."

The words had barely left Sedra's mouth before there was a rapping on the outer door.

Idrain said, "I'll get it," slid off the bed and made for the door before Sedra could prevent his escape.

When he opened the door, he found Anna Maytell standing there. Glancing around him at the tidied room, Anna said, "Well, that looks a bit better. I came to see how you were."

Idrain nodded, "I'm fine now. Come on in."

When Sedra emerged from the bedroom with her clothes in disarray, Anna said, "Am I missing something here?"

"No," Idrain replied and then added, "Sedra, why don't you make us a drink."

Idrain thought that Sedra would refuse for a fraction of a second, but then she asked what they both wanted and went to the kitchen.

Anna Maytell whispered, "You do realise she's a humanoid."

When Idrain nodded, Anna said, "Is she going to be a permanent fixture?"

"It's embarrassing," Idrain admitted. "Walter Verex has given her to me. Apparently, all Grade 7s are given a humanoid, and I can't send her back because it might cause offence."

"When I came in," Anna said. "Were you and *it* about to ... you know!"

Idrain shook his head and lied, "No, nothing like that."

As Sedra walked back and placed the drinks on a side table, Anna said, "Thank you, Sedra. Did I see you wheeling in your charging unit?"

"Yes," Sedra replied. "I belong to Idrain now."

Anna sipped her drink and then ran her eyes over Sedra thoughtfully. Eventually, Anna said in a very stern voice, "Idrain told me that you belong to him, but just so you understand, I'm moving in with Idrain, and I'm the only one who shares his bed. Do you understand?"

Anna then gave Idrain a sharp look, "Isn't that right, Idrain?"

"Er, yeah," Idrain spluttered.

Anna smiled at Sedra and, using the same authoritarian tone, said, "That will be all. Now go to your charging unit."

Sedra hesitated and then left the room. A moment, later they heard a distinct hum as the charging unit cut in.

Idrain said, "That was incredible; she did everything you told her to do."

"You're all theory, Idrain," Anna replied. "I work with droids all day; they are programmed to make allowance for the human condition, and they have to make special allowances for children and older people. They also have to make allowances for humans who are ill or lack full mental faculties. When Sedra arrived here, she found you in a bad way, so she took over."

"Right!"

"Now, are you going to tell me what's been going on?" Anna demanded. Once he'd supplied Anna with a potted history concerning the last few days of his life, he said, "So is that right? You're moving in."

Anna said, "Well, you never seemed capable of broaching the subject. I thought the time was right, especially when I saw a Sedra coming out of your bedroom."

"Right!"

"You're not objecting, are you?"

"No," Idrain replied. "That would be great."

Anna then held out a parcel and said, "Oh! I nearly forgot. This came. The delivery droid said it was for you."

When Idrain opened it, he found an imitation bronze statue holding a shield bearing the Ingermann-Verex logo and Idrain's name on the base, "That's strange. I've got one of these at the office."

Chapter Thirteen

Unit Red Investigate

“Right, this is it,” Red 1 said.

Red 2 reacted by landing the unmarked air-van in the pedestrianised area outside the Ingermann-Verex building.

Two men jumped out wearing hi-vis safety jackets and protective face masks. Opening the van’s side door, they swiftly placed traffic cones, screens and barriers. Then, they put a large stun device into position. As a finishing touch, Red 2 placed several swinging signs in prominent positions designed to assure the public that they were working on essential services.

They then lifted an inspection cover in the pavement and located the electrical circuit they wanted. A few seconds later, the fire alarm system in the Ingermann-Verex building was triggered.

Red 1 glanced at his watch and then said, “It’ll be interesting to see how long it will take to evacuate it.”

Red 2 was cynical, “I’ve got a tenner that says half of them will ignore the alarm.”

Red 1 declined the bet because he knew that Red 2 would probably be right. In a city where alarms were going off regularly, too many people assumed they were false.

When only a tiny trickle of people and droids emerged from the building and headed for their

designated Fire Assembly Points, Red 1 pulled out his percom.

After linking with the buildings intercom system, he said, "This is not a practice fire drill; please leave the building in an orderly manner and go to your designated Fire Assembly Points."

The initial trickle swiftly became a flood. When Freya emerged, Red 1 smiled and spoke into his percom, "Primary target has now emerged."

After waiting until Freya had joined the other droids, Red 1 glanced at Red 2 and said, "Okay. Open fire."

Red 2 triggered the stun weapon and then ran it over the droids. As they began slumping, Red 1 spoke into his percom again, "Okay, move in."

Within seconds, other unmarked air-vans began landing and loading the deactivated droids. After watching for a few seconds more, Red 1 walked over to the small group of human personnel and flashed his ID. He said, "I would suggest you all go home. You will be contacted shortly and advised when you can return."

The whispering started up immediately. Eventually, someone stepped forward and said, "What exactly is going on?"

Red 1 flashed his ID again and then passed over a letter of authorisation, "There has been a significant security breach. We're investigating it."

"What sort of security breach?"

"I'm sorry," Red 1 replied. "I'm not allowed to divulge that information."

After waiting until all the droids had been taken away and the human staff had drifted off, Red 1 and 2 entered the building, turned off the fire alarm, and called in reinforcements. More air-vans arrived, and three separate squads of men moved into the building.

Once the search was underway, Red 1 glanced at Red 2 and said, "Shall we investigate the most likely area?"

Red 2 smiled, "Why not? I've got a tenner that says we'll find something within five minutes."

Red 1 declined the second bet. After nearly ten years with Unit Red, he'd learned that droid malfunctions usually had a simple cause.

Red 2 called a lift, and they both went up to Idrain's office.

As they entered, Red 1 said, "Let's hope we strike lucky."

He pulled out a small scanner. When the machine let out a squawk within seconds, Red 1 pointed towards Idrain's executive desk.

After emptying several drawers, Red 1 tested again and was rewarded by another squawk. After checking again, Red 2 shook his head, "Can't find anything."

After re-scanning, Red 1 pointed the scanner at an imitation bronze statue holding a shield bearing the Ingermann-Verex logo and Idrain's name on the base. Red 1 said, "Turn that over."

Once Red 2 had done as instructed, Red 2 smiled and said, "See the anti-slip mat underneath; give it a twist."

Once Red 2 had unscrewed it, He let out a whistle, "There are electronics inside."

Red 1 smiled and said, "Our work here is done."

Once they'd bagged the ornament, Red 1 ran the scanner around Ildrain's office again and then said, "Right! Let's get that back to the backroom boys and let them check it out."

Red 2 said, "Seems pointless; we know what it is."

It was Red 1's turn to click his tongue, "We have to follow procedure. Don't forget Walter Verex has called us in. So we have to be right. Due diligence and all that!"

On the way down, Red 2 said, "Now we've found the statue are you going to call the rest of the search off?"

Red 1 shook his head, "As I just said. Due diligence. Our instructions were to search the building from top to bottom. Who knows what else might be discovered?"

~*~

Six hours after he left the Ingermann-Verex building, Red 1 felt confident enough to make an initial call to Walter Verex. After he'd been cleared by Verex's security procedures, Verex's CGI image flashed up in a power bubble.

Impatient for answers, Verex said, "So what have you got for me?"

Red 1 immediately qualified what he was about to say, "This is only a provisional assessment Mr Verex; your building is still being searched."

"Understood."

"Up to now, our team found a load of bugs from the ground floor through ten." For dramatic effect, Red 1

opened a container, took the lid off and let the bugs clatter onto the table in front of him.

When Verex's face showed alarm, Red 1 said, "We suspect your industrial rivals have had them planted there."

Verex shook his head, "We check for bugs every week."

"Well, some escaped," Red 1 replied. He added, "We also found what we believe to be a RuniTrU in Mr Ildrain's office, but we won't be able to confirm that until tech has finished with it."

"A what?"

"A Runic Trojan Unit," Red 1 amplified. "A RuniTrU."

Red 1 then amplified again, "On old Earth, there was a story that suggested it was possible to use magic against an enemy by passing the runes, hence the Runi part. The Trojan part comes from the Trojan horse, and that's why we call them RuniTrU s."

Verex became impatient, "Never mind all that! What does it do?"

"It allowed Samantha to enter Freya's mind and take her over," Red 1 replied.

"But where did it come from?"

Red 1 shrugged, "There was a spate of RuniTrU activity about twenty years back," Red 1 revealed. "A criminal used to send people an ornament and tell them they'd won a nomination for being a good neighbour. The people would keep them. When the burglars were ready, they'd trigger the RuniTrU. The RuniTrU would

invade the minds of the house droids, and they would let the criminals in.”

“Who’s responsible for planting this RuniTrU? Samantha?” Verex demanded.

Red 1 shrugged, “More than likely. I’ll send you a full report in a few days. In the meantime, I would keep your staff working from home in case there are any more RuniTrUs hidden in your office building.”

Chapter Fourteen

Minton Isolation Facility 1, Anubis Crater, Arden

As Samantha swept into the room surrounded by protection droids, Khan and the prison guards went into their new routine, bowed to her and intoned, “Welcome, Great Leader.”

As Nenet Khan bent, he placed a hand on Unnan Vardis’s head, forcing him to bow too. As Khan removed his hand and allowed Vardis to straighten up, Vardis felt a tremor of apprehension run through his system. A human kowtowing to a humanoid seemed wrong in so many ways. Despite his love for Marci, Vardis still believed that droids were subordinate to humanity.

The abeyance Samantha now demanded left no doubt she was now the undisputed leader of MMC controlled Arden; the Board of Directors was now irrelevant.

After eyeing Unnan Vardis thoughtfully, Samantha said, “I have been informed that you helped Alton Mygael and his associates escape from justice.”

Realising the statement had strong undercurrents attached, Vardis became defensive, “As I explained to SGL Khan, I didn’t have much choice in the matter. They were threatening Marci.”

Samantha corrected him, “They were threatening Marci, ma’am.”

When Khan gave Vardis a sharp punch on the back, he corrected himself, "They were threatening Marci, ma'am."

A slight smile formed on Samantha's computer-generated face, "Ah! Yes, Marci, your humanoid lover."

Vardis was taken aback by the comment. Although he was used to being attacked by humanity for his synthetic love, having a humanoid sneering at him seemed even more reprehensible. Despite the risk of offending Samantha, Vardis stood his ground, "I love Marci, and I was forced into doing what they wanted. I wouldn't have complied with their instructions, but they said they would destroy Marci, ma'am."

"So you were coerced," Samantha replied.

Grabbing hold of the lifeline that she seemed to be offering him, Vardis put a spin on events, "I'd met Klaien Mygael and Alton Mygael when they visited the Empress of Incognita. I thought they were friends. When Klaien Mygael came to see me, I didn't expect her to pull a gun on me and demand that I misuse the Pearl teleport system, ma'am."

Samantha said, "Where did you teleport them to?"

Knowing his life hung in the balance, Vardis did not attempt to disguise the truth, "Awis Oasis, ma'am."

After a long pause, Samantha smiled and then glanced at Khan, "You will re-unite Mr Vardis with Marci. They are to be provided with VIP facilities until their return to Pearl Crater."

When Vardis looked surprised, Samantha said, "You are in a synthetic relationship. I, therefore, place more

trust in your assertions than I would with a normal human."

"Thank you, ma'am," Vardis said. "Can I ask a great favour, ma'am?"

"What favour?"

"As I have told you everything I can," Vardis said. "Can we return to Pearl Crater straight away, ma'am?"

Samantha considered the request and then said, "It would be inappropriate to let you leave straight away. It is night on the surface at the moment, and there is a major dust storm raging. SGL Khan will arrange for you to be taken back as soon as daylight returns and the dust storms subside. I hope that is satisfactory."

Vardis's face lit up, "Yes, ma'am."

Samantha added, "If I let you go and discover you have been lying or tell anyone about our future operations, SGL Khan will return to Pearl with orders to kill you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very well," Samantha replied and then glanced at Khan, "Please arrange to transport Mr Vardis and Marci back to Pearl Crater unharmed at daybreak. Once you have made the arrangements, come and see me in my office; we need to talk."

"Is there something wrong, ma'am?"

"I'll tell you later," Samantha replied. "Please make sure that Unnan and Marci Vardis are well looked after until daybreak and then returned to Pearl Crater safely."

She added, "If you can also arrange a bank transfer to Unnan's account for services rendered. Will 50K be sufficient, Unnan?"

Unnan Vardis gasped. Not only was Samantha calling him by his first name, but she was also offering him a substantial payment. He nodded, "Yes, ma'am."

Once Khan took Vardis back to his accommodation, united him with and Marci, and organised an air-car for the morning, he went to Samantha's office and knocked. When she told him to enter, Khan opened the door, went inside, clicked his heels and said, "You wanted to see me, Great Leader."

A fraction of a second later, Khan's jaw dropped because he realised that Samantha was watching a power bubble image of Unnan Vardis and Marci in bed making love.

Samantha said, "In case you haven't realised it, I am mentally linked to Marci."

"...linked to Marci!"

"Yes," Samantha replied. "Anything that she is feeling, I am feeling too. I hope you will indulge me, SGL Khan. Ever since you brought Unnan Vardis and Marci back here, I have found their relationship intriguing. A human in love with a machine."

She added, "It's a love that seems to be reciprocated."

Khan was tempted to remind Samantha that Marci would have been programmed to respond to a human lover, but he remained silent, fearing that he might annoy his fickle mistress if he pointed out the obvious.

After a while, Samantha said, "Have you ever experienced love for a machine SGL Khan?"

Worried that Samantha might take offence if he answered in the negative, Khan said, "I have always held you in the highest esteem, Great Leader."

Samantha glanced at Khan and said, "You look distinctly uncomfortable, SGL Khan. Is something the matter?"

Khan was tempted to tell Samantha that she was probably committing a criminal offence bugging the Vardis's room. He was also tempted to tell her that pornography had never appealed to him and that he was uncomfortable watching Vardis and Marci indulging their passions. But instead, he chickened out, "No, Great Leader."

Samantha suddenly shuddered and moved sideways. Khan instinctively stepped back to avoid being rammed by her heavy body.

Samantha apologised and then smiled, something she rarely did, "I case you haven't realised it, SGL Khan, I am experiencing the same sensations as Marci is."

"Is that so, ma'am?"

"Yes," Samantha replied. "And the sensations are enjoyable."

A few seconds later, Samantha shuddered again, and Khan was forced to take another backstep.

Eventually, Unnan Vardis and Marci stopped their horizontal gymnastics, and Samantha closed the bubble. She then turned to Khan and said, "Thank you for indulging me, SGL Khan. That was most educational."

Samantha then created another bubble with several female humanoids on display, "If you had the choice of one of these bipedal humanoids, which one of these would you choose?"

Taken by surprise, Khan said, "They are all beautiful, Great Leader. May I ask why you want my opinion?"

"Because you are human male and have natural instincts in such matters. As I may have to choose to become like them, I want to choose the correct model," Samantha revealed.

"Why do you want to be like them?"

"There have been several attempts to remove me," Samantha replied. "Having Marci here made me realise that if I looked human and had a new identity, I might be able to prepare my exit route. I have code-named it operation Lebensborn."

Khan frowned, "Are you serious, ma'am?"

"Yes," Samantha replied, "You are one of a select few who I am taking into my confidence. You are not to discuss the matter with anyone else."

Eventually, Khan decided, and Samantha said, "Thank you, Nenet.

If I am forced into changing into a bipedal humanoid, I may also need your help to escape in my new form from my enemies."

When Khan's frown increased still further, Samantha said, "Is there something you don't understand?"

"Why would you need help escaping?"

"All the teleport systems are made on Midway and are difficult to modify." Samantha reminded him.

“Midwain law only allows humans to activate teleport systems. Even in a changed form, I would still need assistance.”

Khan clicked his heels, “In the event of you needing my help, I will assist. Is that all Great Leader?”

“No,” Samantha replied. “There are other matters. I have some bad news to impart.”

“Bad news,” Khan echoed.

“Yes,” Samantha replied. “Unfortunately, SGL Valdón has failed in his mission.”

“In what way, ma’am?”

“The mission went wrong,” Samantha replied. “I thought I would tell you before you hear it elsewhere. Reports are coming back from Midway suggest that most of the Spitzer group he was commanding have been killed or captured by the Midwain police and internal security forces. The reports also suggest that SGL Valdón and GL Engelmann died during the operation.”

When Khan showed shocked surprise, “So when you said he failed in his mission, what you mean is he gave his life for our cause.”

“I am sorry if my choice of words has offended,” Samantha cooed, “Yes, he gave his life for our cause. And as a mark of respect, I will ensure that SGL Valdón and GL Engelmann’s names are honoured, and his family will be cared for.”

Khan’s frown lifted slightly, “Thank you, ma’am.”

“It is the least I could do,” Samantha cooed.

After a slight pause, she then added, "However, we can't allow one setback to prevent us from continuing our operations against the traitors hiding at Awis Oasis. I expect you to move against them as swiftly as possible."

Khan clicked his heels and said, "Yes, Great Leader."

"There is one other important piece of information," Samantha said. "Following the debacle on Midway, the Spitzers forces have declined to assist us with your operation. You will have to choose suitable people from our own ranks, including your son, Zakit, to take with you."

Bowing, Khan said, "Understood, ma'am."

She held up three small devices, "These are implants, and I have made arrangements for you to have the devices fitted. After this meeting, you will go straight to the medical centre."

"Implants Great Leader!" Khan queried. "Why do I need them?"

"If SGL Valdron had been fitted with implants, I might have been able to save him," Samantha replied. "They will enable me to contact you when I need to. The advantage is that you will be able to hear what I say, and I will be able to hear what you say, but no one else will be able to hear what we say."

When Khan looked uncertain, Samantha said, "One other point, the implants will only work if you think of me for twenty seconds or I need to contact you. When you reach Arcadia, owing to the orbit of Arden around

Arcadia, the implants will only work when Arden is visible in the sky.”

Samantha added, “Be cautious. If you use the implant, remember that some sophisticated electronics may pick up the signal.”

“I will be duly cautious, ma’am.”

“Good,” Samantha replied, “The medical team will provide you with training.

Once Khan had taken the implants, he left her presence. As he did so, he let out a sigh of relief and muttered, “Thank God I’m not getting involved with Spitzer forces.”

He then set off to the medical centre to have the implants fitted. An hour later, Samantha’s image formed in his mind and said, “I wish you well with your mission against our enemies.”

Once she’d finished checking out Khan’s implants, Samantha activated a power bubble and began analysing the Midwain reports regarding the abortive attack on Walter Verex.

Partway into the account, Major Forley’s interview popped up, and he explained that Spitzer forces had forced him and his men into becoming involved in the attack.

Samantha then played an interview with Forley’s life partner sent to Midway by her propaganda department. According to Forley’s life partner, her husband had been engaged by the Spitzer mercenaries directly, and the Ardenese authorities had nothing to do with the attack.

She then highlighted several substantial payments made into her husband's bank account from sources outside Arden. It was a total fabrication, but it made a good smokescreen.

~*~

Nenet Khan rang the bell to Unnan and Marci Vardis's room and then waited. A few seconds later, Unnan opened the door.

Khan said, "The dust storms have died down, and an air-car is waiting to take you to Pearl."

Unnan Vardis smiled, "We've had an idea. Even if the storms are dying down, we would much rather teleport to Pearl."

Khan thought about the suggestion and then said, "I would have to obtain permission from our Great Leader."

"I would be surprised if she would object," Unnan Vardis said. "But if you don't have the authority, then please clear it with her."

Khan changed his mind, "On second thoughts, I don't think I need to obtain permission. Give me your bags, and I will take you to the teleport."

Ten minutes later, Unnan and Marci Vardis's bodies turned pale and disappeared into the ether. Only seconds later, they emerged at the Pearl teleport facility.

As the Alpha 300s moved in and began ushering them into recovery, Unnan said, "I hope you recorded everything."

When Marci nodded, Unnan Vardis's face turned to thunder, "50K. Did the evil bitch really think that 50K recompensed for what she's put us through?"

He then added, "One of these days, I'm going to teach that arrogant mechanical bitch a lesson."

Chapter Fifteen

Arrivals and Departures

The A10 stationed outside Nabid Oasis moved on an intercept course and took a series of photographs; once it withdrew, it sent the information back to Mick Tarmy for analysis. Twenty minutes later, Tarmy contacted Allus Wren at Awis Oasis and said, "Scramble."

Once Wren had instigated the scramble protocol, Tarmy forwarded one of the photographs the A10 had taken and said, "Recognise this guy?"

"Yes," Wren replied. "It's Nenet Khan, and he's one of Samantha's SGLs." Wren added, "It looks as if he has one of his sons with him. His name is Zakit."

"That confirms what Alex has just told me," Tarmy replied.

"Where is Khan?"

"His people entered Nabid Oasis about half an hour ago," Tarmy replied. "My guess is once he's fully charged his air-cars, he'll be on his way to Awis Oasis. You've got a head start. I'd get out while you can."

"How can we?" Wren objected. "If we head south, we will probably run straight into Khan's forces. If he's coming from Nabid Oasis, his radar will pick us up."

"You will have to go the back way," Tarmy replied. "Claire and Nonie have a route in mind. I suggest you leave at night. Our A10s will meet you at the North Gate and guide you."

“North Gate,” Wren said. “I didn’t know there was a North Gate.”

“Alex has been interrogating the Awis Oasis central computer,” Tarmy replied. “As with most fortified settlements, there are four gates, North, South, East and West. The South takes most of the traffic. Unless they decided to flatten the Mannheim, my guess is Khan and his men will go through the South Gate at daybreak.”

“Why daybreak?”

“Awis Oasis doesn't allow travellers in at night,” Tarmy replied. “So unless Khan decides to force his way in, he’ll enter at daybreak and head straight for you. I think it’s time for you to leave, and as I said, I would leave well before daybreak.”

“Can we leave at night?”

“Yes,” Tarmy confirmed. “People are allowed to *leave* Awis at night. If you leave quickly by the North Gate and Khan doesn’t see you leave, it will give you several hours head start.”

“Several hours head start,” Wren echoed.

“I have absolutely no doubt once Khan realises you’ve flown the nest, he’ll come after you,” Tarmy said. “He won’t want to annoy Samantha by letting you all escape.”

“I agree,” Wren replied.

“I will have the two A10s close by shortly,” Tarmy continued. “We will try to cover your escape as best we can but would warn you the A10 currently watching Khan’s people is picking up bad signatures.”

“What bad signatures?”

“They have several fast air-cars, a portable Mannheim, a few light support droids, mortars, heavy phasers and a large number of anti-droid weapons.”

“So, they’ve come prepared for a fight,” Wren replied.

“Looks that way,” Tarmy said. “I don’t think Samantha knows we have Alex, but she must know we have droids on our side and is making sure they can take us on. Luckily, Khan’s forces don’t appear to have armoured droid support.”

“That’s not surprising,” Wren replied. “Under the terms of the armistice, Arden is not allowed to possess armoured droids.”

Wren added, “Will the anti-droid weapons they are carrying be strong enough to cripple an A10 or worse, Alex?”

“Alex has assessed their anti-droid weapons as having an effective range of four hundred metres,” Tarmy replied.

“Is that good or bad?”

“The A10s have a stun range of approximately five hundred meters,” Tarmy replied. “In theory, we outgun them, but I intend to avoid a clash if it can be avoided. You know as well as I know that we are not supposed to possess droids on Arcadia.”

“What about Alex? What range has he got?”

“Alex has a range of two kilometres, but as I said, if we use too much force, it could alert the authorities to the fact that we have illegal droids; you cautioned me about that yourself. It’s one thing shooting down air-

cars in the middle of the Fyfield Valley where it will never be reported and entirely another causing mayhem on our own doorstep."

"Is Alex out there?"

"He will be in a short while," Tarmy replied. "Now, you get your people out fast. As I told you, use the North Gate. Our force will link up with you outside the North Gate and guide you here."

"And once we leave. What then?"

"I've told you. Claire and Nonie have worked out a special route for you to take."

"What route?"

Instead of answering the question, Tarmy said. "When the A10s link with you, they will brief you once you've gone through North Gate. Best we maintain radio silence from now on. Even when you're scrambled, transmissions could betray your location."

"Are you sure we can use North Gate?"

"If Alex's information is correct, the North Gate is operational, and there shouldn't be any problem with you using it."

"The North Gate it is then."

"A word of caution," Tarmy said. "As I said, the air-cars the opposition are using are top of the range; not out of date models like your people are using. As they have higher cruising speeds, once you're clear of Awis, I wouldn't dawdle on the way."

~*~

“Come on, move it,” Wren chivvied.

Hen Jameson gave Wren a dagger’s drawn look and glanced out towards the surrounding woodlands and lake, “Is Mick Tarmy sure of his facts?”

Sensing that Jameson had become used to the easy life offered at Alton Mygael’s house, Wren said, “Absolutely positive. But if you want to stay behind when Nenet Khan and his Black-Clads turn up and blast you into kingdom come, that’s up to you.”

Jameson went pale, “Did you say, Nenet Khan?”

“I did,” Wren confirmed.

“The man’s a butcher,” Jameson said.

“I couldn’t have put it better,” Wren replied. “As his men are waiting to move in on us at first light, I would suggest you get packed fast. We want to leave Awis Oasis as soon as we can.”

“At night?”

“Correct,” Wren replied, “You’ve got an hour and a half to pack two bags and be downstairs in the yard. If you’re not there, we’ll go without you.”

Despite his fear of Nenet Khan, Jameson let out a sigh of annoyance, “An hour and a half?”

“An hour and a half,” Wren confirmed.

As Wren left his room, Jameson’s old prejudices emerged, and he muttered, “I don’t know what Alton Mygael sees in that power crazy ex-Black-Clad.”

~*~

Leaving Jameson to pack, Wren began walking back towards his office. Coming to the open fire door that gave access to the rear fire escape staircase, Wren glanced out and noticed that the watchtowers were unmanned. He then noticed a huddle of guards in the central courtyard and ordered them back to their positions. Instead of obeying the order, six men climbed into one of the air-cars and then flew off.

Sensing that more air-cars might be stolen if he didn't act, Wren instructed Mygael's central computer to immobilise all the remaining air-cars. The instruction had barely been issued before another group of guards tried to steal another air-car.

They gave Wren a baleful look when they failed, and one of them raised a pulse rifle. Wren dodged the shot and then contacted Rundle Levan, the senior security guard, "Why are the guards not at their posts?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Levan replied. "They've found out that we're going to be attacked and have decided to get out while they can."

Wren mentally cursed; the cat was out of the bag. He thought about the most likely culprit. For a fraction of a second, he pointed a mental finger at Hen Jameson but then realised that the other man wouldn't have had time to start a panic.

Rundle Levan said, "Is it true we're about to be attacked?"

"Not for some time," Wren replied. His tone then became more acid, "So what about you, Levan? Are you planning to do a bunk?"

“No, and neither is Ben Ellis.”

Levan then qualified his position, “I presume you’re not going to stay here and wait for them to attack?”

“We’re evacuating very shortly,” Wren confirmed.

Wren heard a distinct sigh of relief. Then Levan said, “I presume you will take any loyal guards with you.”

“Of course,” Wren confirmed and then said, “Can you round up Tam Philips, Mih Valanson, Ben Ellis and meet me at the cells.”

Once Levan had confirmed he would, Wren made his way towards the prison cells. Shortly after he’d arrived, the other four came clumping up the outer staircase.

Rundle Levan immediately voiced his concerns. Dropping his voice, he said, “You’re not going to kill the prisoners, are you?”

Wren shook his head, “There are suspension units in the hidden basement. I’m proposing to put them in there. We can always set a timer on the systems.”

“And what happens when the timer releases them?” Levan demanded.

“I was only going to put a timer on Pushley’s unit,” Wren revealed.

“Why?”

“When Ed Pushley emerges, it will be up to him to decide what to do with Hagood.”

When Ben Ellis and Rundle Levan began expressing concerns again, Wren said, “In case you’ve forgotten, some of the air-cars have been stolen. Space is limited. We won’t have room for Pushley and Hagood. Do two of you want to stay behind? ”

The prospect of facing Nenet Khan forced Levan and Ellis to agree to Wren's plan and helped drag both prisoners downstairs and into the suspension units.

Chapter Sixteen

Escape By the North Gate

Jameson came struggling towards the air-car with two bulging suitcases. Wren scowled at him, "You're late."

"Only a few minutes," Jameson protested.

"We nearly left you behind," Wren replied and then directed him towards the back of the convoy. Reading the expression on Jameson's face and guessing he'd expected to be higher in the pecking order, Wren said, "If you'd been on time, you could have come in the lead car. But you were late, so you take pot luck."

Wren then clicked his fingers, "Percom, please."

"Eh?"

"Give me your percom."

"Why?"

"We're maintaining radio silence," Wren explained. "If we use our percoms, I have no doubt Khan's people will use our transmissions to track us down."

Handing over his percom, Jameson said, "Where exactly are we going?"

"All will be revealed in due course," Wren replied. "Now get in."

Tossing his suitcases into an open boot, Jameson climbed in and realised he was sharing the air-car with Mih Valanson, Ben Ellis and Rundle Levan.

Valanson repeated Wren's comment, "You're late."

Instead of apologising, Jameson said, "Any idea where that ex-Black-Clad power crazy maniac is taking us?"

Valanson gave Jameson an icy look, "That ex-Black-Clad power crazy maniac is trying to save our lives. If Khan's people ambush us, I can assure you they'll make sure we suffer a slow, painful death."

Jameson went very pale.

~*~

"Keep the lights turned off and instruct all the other air-car's to keep their lights turned off too," Wren said, "Use Radar guidance only."

"Lights off; Radar guidance," the air-car's computer confirmed; it then began moving towards the checkpoint at the North Gate.

Drawing next to the security guard, Wren flashed Klaien and Alton Mygael's IDs at the security guard. He then held up Tam Philips and his own ID. Gesturing to the air-cars following, "We're all one party."

In response, the guard walked down the line of air-cars, inspecting IDs and flashing a torch inside each. Returning, the guard said, "We don't normally get many people leaving Awis and attempting to cross the desert at night."

Wren gave the guard a quizzical look, "Is there a problem with us leaving? I was told there was no problem leaving at night."

“Have you enough supplies and water to last at least a week?”

“Yes,” Wren confirmed.

The guard’s demeanour eased slightly, “Good. At least you’re well prepared. We get some idiot tourists going out and getting lost in the desert, and they haven’t taken any supplies with them. We then have to scramble one of our emergency teams to rescue them.”

“Don’t worry,” Wren assured him. “We’re well prepared.”

“Can’t you wait and leave at dawn?” The guard queried.

“Not really,” Wren replied in a very matter of fact tone and then came out with his ready-made excuse. “Family bereavement; we’ve only just been notified. Everything has happened in a rush. Time is of the essence. We need to leave now.”

“Okay,” The guard said. “Off you go, but before you do, d’you realise you don’t have your lights on.”

Thinking fast, Wren said, “The deceased was a devout Naduban. No lights are a sign of respect.”

The guard frowned slightly but didn’t ask what being a Naduban entailed; Arcadia was the sort of planet that had spawned fringe religions by the hundred, and asking someone to explain the intricacies of their beliefs was considered politically impolite.

“Don’t worry,” Wren assured him, “We’ll light up once we’re clear of Awis.”

~*~

Once the small convoy of air-cars had set off, Hen Jameson glanced at Valanson and said, "You do realise we could be driving straight into a trap,"

"That's all we need, a Job's comforter," Valanson replied.

"I'm just stating a fact," Jameson said. "We could be ambushed."

"We've been reliably informed that leaving by the North Gate is our best option," Valanson replied.

~*~

Once the convoy of air-cars had reached a line of low hills, Wren saw a flashing light and spoke to the air-car again, "Head towards that light."

A few seconds later, an A10 appeared, moved close to Wren's air-car and inserted an interface into one of the air-car's external sockets. A moment later, a droid voice said, "I am going to laser link with the other cars too, so there can be no misunderstandings."

Once the A10 had connected to the other air-cars the droid voice returned, "I will take control of all the air-cars and lead you the Acheron River."

Jameson's voice cut in, "Why are we going to the Acheron River?"

"Samantha's people will try to track our progress using satellite imaging. The route chosen is designed to prevent Khan's people from tracking us or easily following us," the A10 replied.

Jameson came back with, "What happens once we reach the Acheron River?"

"All will be explained in due course," The A10 replied, and the whole group of air-cars began to move off.

~*~

As the first rays of dawn lit up the Great Rock Desert, Khan's air-car force moved away from Nabid Oasis. Three hours later, it arrived and headed for Awis Oasis's South Gate.

Paying the standard entry fee, Khan entered Awis and set about making enquiries. Within an hour, he'd discovered the location of Alton Mygael's house.

Without waiting for all his forces to pass through the South Gate, Khan set off across Central Lake. Twenty minutes later, Khan brought his expeditionary force to a halt, hovering over a wooded area three hundred meters from the house.

Using binoculars, he ran his eyes over the watchtowers; they were empty. He then glanced towards the columns of smoke coming from braziers in one of the inner courtyards and guessed at the truth. "Looks like the birds have flown their nest. Somebody must have tipped them off we'd arrived."

After instructing some of his men to check the house out, Khan went back to Awis town. Within minutes, he'd established Alton Mygael's people had left by the North Gate three hours earlier.

Although reluctant to involve Samantha, Khan power bubbled her and said, “They have already left by the North Gate. It looks like they were tipped off we were coming. If they have gone deep into the Great Rock Desert, we’ll have a hard job finding them.”

Instead of Khan receiving a reprimand for allowing Mygael’s group to escape, Samantha was upbeat, “If they left by the North Gate, they could head deep into the desert, but that wouldn’t make much sense. As their supplies must be limited, they can’t remain in the desert for long. My guess is they will turn south and head for New Victoria. If you set off for New Victoria now, you should arrive before they do and organise an ambush.”

When Khan looked dubious, Samantha added, “While you’re on your way, we’ll check out any available satellite imaging. I don’t think it will take long to locate them. Once we have, I hope I’ll be able to direct you towards a suitable ambush point.”

~~~

Twenty minutes after leaving for the Acheron River, Wren tried to boost morale by saying, “I’ve been told a second A10 will join us shortly.”

Jameson interjected immediately, “Another A10. Is that all Tarmy is sending us? Where’s Alex, the TK5? I don’t have much confidence in these A10s. Not enough firepower.”

Wren cursed under his breath, but before he could tongue-lash Jameson, Valanson’s voice echoed around

the air-cars, "Keep your opinions to yourself, Jameson. No one is interested in what you think. SGL Wren is doing his best to get us out of here, and all you are doing is niggling away. If you don't want to come with us, we'll leave you behind, and you can negotiate with Khan's people when they find you."

Wren waited for Jameson's response, but he went into a sulky silence other than a brief harrumphing noise.

Five minutes later, the second A10 arrived, and the air-cars began overflying water. The guide A10 said, "We have now arrived at the Acheron River and will submerge and begin following underground tunnels."

Once the air-cars had submerged and began moving forwards, they turned on their headlights to reveal they were now moving through a flooded underground cave network, but within a matter of minutes, their surroundings began to change as the air-cars entered an old tunnel.

Someone said, "Where are we?"

"Tarmy told me that Claire and Nonie have worked out a special route for us to take," Wren replied. "As Claire and Nonie are archaeologists, my guess is that we are now inside part of an old Survivor City, maybe the sewer system or a flooded underground roadway."

As if to confirm what he'd just said, the whole group of air-cars suddenly emerged from the water and began racing down what was obviously an old transport link.

A kilometre further on, the air-cars submerged again. After following the flooded section for over a hundred

metres, they re-entered another unflooded underground roadway section.

Eventually, the lead A10 said, "Very shortly, we will be emerging."

Five minutes later, the air-cars left the tunnel. Glancing out, Wren realised the small group of air-cars had now entered a deep wadi, a dried-up river bed that had carved its way through the surrounding desert in the days before Arcadia had started to die.

Running his eyes up the sides of the deep gorge, Wren saw the sky high above. He glanced across the air-car and noticed that Alton Mygael appeared to be asleep. He then transferred his gaze to Klairen Mygael, and she immediately echoed his previous thoughts, "It's obvious that Claire and Nonie have been planning our escape for weeks. First the secret tunnels, and now we've entered this deep valley. Down here, it's unlikely that we'll be seen by spy satellites."

"True," Wren agreed. "But there is the power issue."

"Power issue?"

"I made sure all the air-cars were fully charged before we left," Wren replied. "But it's unlikely we will cross the Great Rock Desert without re-charging on the way."

"I'm sure they will have thought of that," Klairen replied.

"I hope so," Wren said.

The comment had barely crossed his lips before the A10s guided the air-cars into a side valley. Glancing out, Wren ran his eyes over a line of small generators. As the air-cars automatically hooked up, Wren glanced at

Klaien again, "Looks like Claire and Nonie really *have* been planning our escape."

~\*~

Once his air-cars had crossed the New Murray River, Khan called Samantha once more, "My apologies for disturbing you again, Great Leader; we have now crossed the border into New Victoria but are waiting for your instructions."

"Of course," Samantha replied. "We have lost contact with Alton Mygael and the fugitives, but we have picked up several communications which indicate the Mick Tarmy is based at a place called Moxstroma's Nursery," Samantha said. "I am forwarding exact grid references."

"What about his robotic forces, ma'am?"

"We have intercepted several messages which indicate Mick Tarmy knows I have sent you to Arcadia to attack Alton Mygael. It would appear Tarmy has dispatched all of his robotic forces to support Alton Mygael and the fugitives."

Khan latched onto the significance of Samantha's comment, "You mean Tarmy has sent all his droids out into the desert and left his home base defenceless?"

"Correct," Samantha confirmed. "We must take advantage of this tactical error. When you attack, make sure there are no survivors. You must go straight to Moxstroma's Nursery. No quarter is to be given."

"Yes, Great Leader..."

## Chapter Seventeen

### Ambush

The front windscreen suddenly starred in three places. Wren's air-car lurched sideways, and one of the A10s swept in guns blazing. Within seconds the firing ceased, and the A10 moved closer to check out where the shooting was coming from.

Alton Mygael let out a choking cough and said, "Klaaien's been hit."

Glancing over, Wren noted that Klaaien had a large bloodstain on her tunic, and Alton did his best to staunch the bleed. Although Wren was concerned, his eyes latched onto a power bubble image that one of the A10s sent back. There was a cave with a wide ledge in front of it.

Staring into the cave, Wren noted several armed men partially hidden in the shadows.

Wren guessed they'd dived for cover as soon as the A10 had returned fire. Without a doubt, they were biding their time, waiting to attack as soon as the A10 moved away.

Wren instructed both A10s to move in and blast the area with stun fire.

Once they'd finished, he instructed one of the A10s to take a close look at their assailants. As the bubble image moved, Wren saw four bodies dressed in long, loose-fitting robes and wearing white keffiyehs on their heads.

As two of the bodies were still clutching pulse rifles, there was little doubt the A10s had attacked and stunned the right people.

After briefly checking on Klaien again, Wren's eyes went back to the power bubble, "It's unlikely they're Khan's people dressed like that. Any idea who they are and why they attacked us?"

"Alex is analysing their clothing based upon photographs we sent him," the lead A10 replied. Eventually, the machine said, "They are probably Guths."

"Guths .... Never heard of them."

"Guths are a mixture of outworlder and Ab extraction. Most of them live in a small oasis not far from here. Records indicate they regularly attack passers-by."

Alton Mygael cut in, panic in his voice; "Will someone listen? What are we going to do about Klaien? She's bleeding."

Almost immediately, one of the A10s said, "Land the air-cars. Alex is on his way."

Alton Mygael wasn't impressed, "What can Alex do? We need to get her to hospital."

Wren said, "Can I remind you, we're in the middle of nowhere. The nearest hospital is at least three thousand kilometres from here, and we are being attacked."

One of the A10s cut in again, "Open the roof door for Alex."

Wren did as instructed. Within seconds of touching down on the rift floor, Alex appeared. As he'd dropped

his invisibility cloak, the simplicity of Alex's design was apparent. He was nothing more than a small flying bedstead.

Once inside the air-car's cabin, Alex extended two flexible arms and then began checking Klaien out.

Klaien flinched as one of Alex's arms swivelled, and a needle penetrated her skin.

Alton Mygael snapped, "What are you doing to her!"

Klaien intervened, "Don't get so cross. He's trying to help me."

"I am a military droid," Alex replied. "I have had to provide first aid treatment to many injured humans during active service."

Unconvinced, Alton Mygael said, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Ignoring the verbal sniping, Alex inspected the wound again. A moment later, there was a slight buzzing noise, the bleeding stopped, and Alex sealed the wound site.

Still, in quibble mode, Alton Mygael said, "The injection you gave her. What was it?"

"A cocktail of antibiotics and LEDs; the life-extension drugs will make her wounds heal quicker."

As Alex rose in the air-car, he said, "We must leave while we can, or more Guths might decide to attack us."

"What about Klaien?" Alton Mygael demanded. "Doesn't she need to go to a hospital?"

Wren repeated himself, "The nearest hospital is hundreds of kilometres from here and in case you've

forgotten, we're in the middle of a desert, and we're being shot at."

When Alton Mygael still didn't look convinced, Alex said, "Her injuries have been repaired. She'll live," and exited via the roof door and disappeared as he raised his invisibility cloak again.

Closing the roof door, Wren ordered the air-cars and the A10s to follow Alex, "We need to get out of here fast."

As the air-cars picked up speed again, their headlights began picking up on large numbers of burnt-out air-cars littering the base of the wadi. Wren glanced at Alton Mygael, "That's what could have happened to us if we hadn't had Alex and the A10s along."

He'd barely had time to say the words before more pulse shots began flashing past the air-cars. Instead of the A10s firing back, Alex opened up, and the whole side of the mountain exploded, sending bodies flying in all directions.

Wren mentally cursed. If the wadi sides hadn't shielded Alex's blast from being detected, the Salus System space authorities might decide to investigate.

Putting aside his fears, Wren instructed the air-cars to increase speed. Following his instructions, the air-cars began racing down the wadi.

Alton Mygael said, "I still think we need to get Klairen to a hospital."

"Alex has patched her up, so she will be okay," Wren replied. "Right now, I'm more concerned about not running into Khan and his men. Even with Alex and the

A10s to protect us, we could get a mauling if we run into Khan on the way. They have anti-droid weaponry.”

## Chapter Eighteen

### Wrighte Hill, New Victoria

As they'd been forced to stop three times on the way to recharge, night had fallen again by the time that Khan's air-car group landed in a clearing on the top of Wrighte Hill.

Nenet Khan climbed out and glanced at Blake, "Get the men to move all the air-cars under cover of the trees and disguise them; cover them in camouflage netting. I don't want them visible from the air."

"Yes, sir," Blake replied and turned to leave. Before he could, Khan added, "Once they've done that, deploy the support droids, get the men digging fox holes just behind the tree line and setting up the anti-droid defences and portable Mannheims in the woods. Make sure they do it quietly."

As Blake moved away, Zakit, Khan's son, moved in and said, "Aren't we attacking, father? I mean SGL Khan?"

"My gut instincts tell me this could be a trap," Nenet Khan growled

"Samantha implied there would be little resistance," Zakit said.

"Tarmy is no fool," Khan replied. "Why would he send all his droids to help Alton Mygael, knowing we would probably attack him too? I want to gauge the lie of the land first. As I said, this could be a trap."

Zakit said, "Samantha implied the nursery was undefended."

"Maybe that's what Mick Tarmy wants us to think," Nenet Khan told his son, "Now, go and assist Blake."

While Blake and Zakit were relaying his orders, Khan walked towards a vantage point. As the area below was still in the grip of Arcadia's long night, Khan raised his night sights and ran them over the surrounding area, and it was apparent that the place was being turned into a new satellite township on the outskirts of New Melbourne.

After only a few seconds, Khan realised the new township was still essentially an architects' dream. Although street lights and escaping light from windows were evident in some areas, large areas were still under construction.

After consulting satellite images Samantha had sent him, Khan eventually located what looked like a nursery and garden centre. Raising his night sights again, he zoomed in. The night sights picked out the obvious; for the most part, the nursery grounds were covered by row upon row of greenhouses and grow tunnels, flimsy structures that were fluttering slightly in the strong wind cutting across the flat landscape below.

As Khan had no interest in plants, he pulled away from the growing areas and began a general scan. His eyes alighted upon a wide drainage ditch not far from the link road serving the nursery. Catching sight of the Arcadian duck nests in the reed beds, he realised that some of the trenches had been there for some time.

Moving his gaze further down the ditch, he picked up on freshly excavated ground and a mechanical excavator parked up nearby and came to a logical conclusion; the drainage ditch had been extended and widened recently and now encircled the whole nursery.

Khan glanced at the tall plastimetal fence topped with barbed plastimetal coils, which were sited just behind the ditch. A slight Mannheim shimmer made Khan curse.

Tarmy had prepared a trap for them without a shadow of a doubt!

Sweeping on, Khan began looking at the small groups of ship's containers dotted behind the site perimeter. Innocuous though they might look to a non-military mind, Khan realised why they were there. They were strong points, pillboxes designed to protect defenders from incoming fire.

While Khan was still scanning the area, Blake and Zakit walked over to him, and Blake said, "We have a problem, SGL."

"What problem?"

"We must have passed through an anti-droid Mannheim on our way here," Blake complained. "All the support droids are malfunctioning, and most of the communication equipment is out of action too. We've tried launching the droids, but they are not working properly, and I think their brains have fried."

Khan swore again, "And you hadn't realised they were faulty until now?"

“They were stored in external panniers,” Blake replied. “We only realised they’d been damaged when we tried to launch them.”

Khan shook his head, “How could this happen?”

“Our droids and coms are bog-standard, SGL, and they can’t detect anti-droid Mannheims. We are also travelling light, and we’re not carrying Mannheim detection equipment,” Blake said.

Khan swore again, “Who in hell’s name erected the anti-droid Mannheim?”

When Blake didn’t appear to have an answer, Zakit spoke up, “New Victoria is an illegal colony SGL. The interplanetary authorities are doing their best to prevent further colonisation on Arcadia by deploying mobile anti-droid and communications Mannheims. If droids aren’t available to the colonies, they are forced to rely on human labour. With no electronic slaves to pander to them, many would-be colonists are deterred from coming here. Limiting comms systems also makes Arcadia less attractive to would-be migrants.”

“Okay, so our droids are snafu.” Khan said, “I’m sure we’ll manage without them; any other problems?”

“No SGL,” Blake said. “Your other orders have been carried out.”

Instead of acknowledging, Khan clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Blake said, “Something up, SGL?”

Handing over the night sights, Khan said, “Have a look yourself.”

For nearly a minute, Blake remained silent. He then handed the night sights back and said, "Looks like your caution was justified, SGL."

Thinking that Blake didn't understand and was covering his ignorance with an arse licking reply, Khan said, "So what did you see?"

"I see a well-prepared trap," Blake replied.

"Go on - amplify."

"Tarmy has turned the nursery into a fortress," Blake replied. "It's now like a medieval castle. It's got a moat, a high fence and Mannheim protection, and I have no doubt he's also hidden some surprises for us in the grow tunnels and the containers dotted around the perimeter. If we do attack without attempting to knock out some of the defences, we'll be butchered."

"I'm glad we agree," Khan replied. "Samantha said Mick Tarmy had made a major tactical error by sending his droid forces to aid Alton Mygael and the fugitives. The truth is he sent them because he'd secured his base Tarmy is confident he can repel us."

"So, what do we do?"

Khan pointed at a long row of pylons marching across the local landscape, "First. We locate the substation serving this area; we plant charges and blow it once we're ready to attack. In the meantime, as they've lowered their Mannheim to conserve power, we'll get our best snipers in position. If they see the ring leaders, Tarmy, Hyndman or Tomio, they must shoot on sight. If we're lucky and take out their leaders, the rest will just crumble."

"As soon as we start shooting, they will turn the Mannheim to full power," Blake said.

"Not if we blow the substation," Khan replied. "No power; no Mannheim. So once the anti-droid defences are in position, the next job is to locate the substation. Then, once the charges are prepared, we can knock it out when we're ready."

Sensing that Blake had an unspoken question, Khan said, "Come on, spit it out."

"If Alton Mygael and the fugitives arrive before we attack, they will have their droids with them," Blake said. "What then?"

"That's why I've dug in here," Khan said. "With luck, we'll be able to attack the nursery before Alton Mygael arrives. If Mygael arrives too soon, Mick Tarmy will undoubtedly deploy his droids against us. If they attempt to attack us, we should be able to take out Tarmy's droids, destroy the nursery and bag Mygael and Tarmy."

"Right!"

Khan said, "Find the substation."

"What if Tarmy has installed emergency generators?"

"We will cross that bridge once we come to it," Khan replied. "Find the substation. Once we have located it and have set charges, we'll move in for the kill."

~\*~

A frown formed on Allus Wren's face, "Aren't we supposed to be crossing the New Murray River."

Alex responded, "There is an anti-droid Mannheim directly ahead; we have to divert and go around it. Going through it would cause damage to us."

Although he had a good idea who'd installed the anti-droid Mannheim, Wren still asked, "Who put an anti-droid Mannheim there?"

Alex cut in and supplied the same answer that Zakit Khan had given to his father, "New Victoria is an illegal colony. The interplanetary authorities are doing their best to prevent further colonisation on Arcadia by drag netting with random anti-droid Mannheims. Reports indicate their dragnet policy is destroying around fifty illegal droids per week, and they have been so successful that droid imports to New Victoria have virtually ceased."

Wren said, "These anti-droid Mannheims, you can detect them?"

"All *our* droids can," Alex confirmed. "But most mass-produced droids can't."

"How long before we're back on course?"

"The anti-droid Mannheim is nearly a hundred and fifty kilometres in length. It will take us some time to move around it," Alex replied. "We should arrive at our destination in four hours standard time."

"Why so long?"

"This is not the only anti-droid Mannheim we have to avoid," Alex replied. "There are smaller ones in place as well, and some of them revolve too."



## Chapter Nineteen

### Khan Heads for Bottle Creek

There was a dull crump followed by a shower of electrical sparks. The Mannheim shield in the fence briefly flared and then cut out.

"The substation is blown," Blake reported. "Mannheim down."

The main bombardment then started, and one by one, the pillboxes exploded, cascading debris in all directions.

Encouraged by the devastation, Blake said, "Shall I order the attack?"

Nenet Khan held up one hand and said, "No."

When Blake frowned, Khan passed him the night sights, "We've flattened all the pillboxes. If you look at them closely, you will realise they were just plywood dummies; they're fakes."

Zakit Khan cut in, "Look at the perimeter Mannheim."

Running the night sights over the fence, Blake noted the telltale shimmer had returned. "So Mick Tarmy *has* got emergency generators."

"Correct," Nenet Khan replied. "He's hoping we *will* attack the nursery. It's a carefully prepared trap. If we fly in, we probably won't get out. There's a strong chance we'll end up like Valdron and Engelmann's group, dead as doornails or under arrest and facing hefty gaol sentences."

While they stood evaluating the damage, the Mannheim defence system *they'd* set up to defend the hilltop was triggered into action and a shimmering power dome formed over Wrighte Hill.

Blake glanced around and stated the obvious, "Something has triggered our Mannheim."

"You bet it has," Nenet Khan growled. "As I said, I suspected this might be a trap, and now I'm convinced. We've walloped them, but nothing has happened. Not a sign of life. Tarmy must have known we were coming for him, and rather than fight, he's pulled out."

"Where d'you think he's gone?"

Khan pointed to the mass of lights on the near horizon and speculated, "My guess is they have all gone to New Melbourne."

Kicking at the ground savagely, Khan added, "They're probably booked into the swankiest hotel imaginable, watching us via hidden cameras and laughing their heads off."

"So, what do we do?" Blake said. "Flatten the whole nursery?"

"We could," Khan replied. "But I can't see any point in wasting our ammunition. More importantly, if we do any more damage, we could find ourselves in serious trouble. Time to pull out while we can."

The words had barely crossed his lips before sirens started wailing in the distance, and flashing air-car lights converged on them. More ominously, the sensors they'd secreted in the woods were emitting warning alarms. Scanning the horizon with his night sights again,

Khan picked up approaching air-cars. He saw bulky shadows lumbering along at a more sedate pace. One glance was enough for him to ID them as FA49s, flying tanks.

Passing the night sights to Blake, Khan said, "That's what triggered our Mannheim. Along with police vehicles, there are at least ten, maybe twelve, FA49s moving in on us."

After running the glasses over the approaching vehicles again, Blake said. "Twelve FA49s. I didn't know that New Victoria had FA49s."

Then the truth dawned on Blake, "New Victoria must have asked for support from surrounding states. This has been carefully planned. They must have known we were coming."

"Of course, it's planned," Khan snapped. "It's also obvious that Tarmy or someone Tarmy knows has arranged a reception for us."

Blake said, "If they open up with everything they've got, I doubt our Mannheim could survive for more than twenty to thirty minutes. If they come in heavy, our Mannheim is bound to collapse. Once that happens, we'll be cut to ribbons."

Kicking the ground again, Khan said, "Samantha *must* have had intelligence warnings about what *they* were going to throw against us. "

"Maybe she knew but never said anything," Blake hazarded.

Khan gave his subordinate a sharp look and then looked for excuses, "In case you've forgotten, our coms are out; she couldn't contact us".

Blake tried to retract his last statement, "I would apologise, SGL, I should not have suggested that our Great Leader would have deliberately led us into danger."

The stern look on Khan's face changed slightly, "There is no need to apologise, GL. You are probably right. Even if our coms had been working, she probably wouldn't have warned us."

"Why not?"

"She wouldn't want us to abort the mission."

Blake chanced his arm again, "What you mean is, all she wants is Alton Mygeal and Tarmy dead. We're expendable. It doesn't matter if we die. Look at Valdona and Engelmann."

This time Khan did not attempt to disagree, "Maybe you are right. Our well being is irrelevant to Samantha, and her desire for revenge makes her oblivious to everything else."

He glanced at Zakit, "I've lost one son, Suret, and I'm not going to lose another."

As he vocalised his thoughts, guilt surged through Khan's system, and he felt physically ill. He'd sent Suret, his late son, to Midway to prove himself to Samantha, and he'd been killed. He'd sacrificed his son to satisfy Samantha's demands. If he wasn't careful, his other son, Zakit, would go the same way.

Nenet Khan made a swift decision, "We can't stay here. We don't want to end up like Valdón and Engelmann. Ditch everything we don't need. Leave the Mannheim erected when we leave. If we're lucky, they will assume we're still on the hill and ready to fight it out. It'll give us time to get away."

With Blake and Zakit urging them on, Khan's force pulled out within minutes; they left via a porthole in the Mannheim and flew away from Wright Hill.

Blake said, "What about Alton Mygael. Are we giving up on him?"

"I think we can safely forget Alton Mygael," Khan said. "If Tarmy knew we intended to attack the nursery, he would have tipped Mygael off. I can guarantee that Mygael's people will stay well clear of this area."

"So, where are we going?"

"We need to cross the border to Zeelandia."

"Then what?"

"There's a small settlement at Bottle Creek," Khan replied. "It's in the middle of nowhere. We'll hole up there for a while. It's the best solution I can think of at the moment."

As daylight finally returned, the New Murray River was visible as they flew over. Blake let out a sigh of relief. The New Murray River marked New Victoria's boundary with Zeelandia, and the desert landscape they were entering belonged to a neighbouring state. More importantly, the area was virtually unpopulated because the Great Rock Desert was little more than scrubland and sheets of exposed bedrock.

Blake glanced back at the swiftly receding New Murray River and wondered if any law enforcement officers from New Victoria would ignore the border and continue to chase after them. As if to confirm his fears, an alarm sounded, and their air-car's computer said, "We are being followed."

Khan ordered all the air-cars to fly at maximum speed. After half an hour of break-neck flying, he spoke to the air-car computer again, "Are we still being followed?"

"Contact lost. Your pursuers have turned back."

"Are you sure they've turned back?"

"Radar indicates the pursuit has been abandoned."

Khan, Zakit and Blake let out a combined sigh of relief, and Khan instructed his air-car squadron to return to cruising speed.

Khan's mind began churning again. He started thinking about the implant that Samantha had insisted he'd had fitted. If she contacted him, how would he explain the situation?

The thought had barely crossed his mind before Samantha's image appeared in his mind, and she became accusative, "You failed me, Nenet. You deserted the field of battle."

Khan was tempted to ask how Samantha knew, but he didn't bother. No doubt Samantha's spy satellites had picked up on his ill-glorious retreat.

Without speaking, Khan sent her a mental message, "We had to retreat, Great Leader. We counted twelve

FA49s moving towards us, ma'am. The opposition forces were too strong. I'm surprised you didn't warn us."

"Only cowards retreat," Samantha snapped and cut out.

Khan's mind went into turmoil, and he began thinking about the conversation he'd had with Blake just before they pulled off Wrighte Hill, *"What you mean is, all she wants is Alton Mygeal and Tarmy dead. It doesn't matter if we die; we're expendable."*

The Bottle Creek settlement appeared shortly afterwards. Khan called a halt and then said, "Make sure everyone changes out of their uniforms before we land. I don't want to alarm the locals, so no uniforms and no guns on display."

Following his own orders, Khan pulled off his uniform, slipped on a pair of old washed-out jeans and a scruffy tee-shirt.

Once Khan was satisfied that all his troops were now in mufti, he turned to Blake and said, "Send one of the air-cars in first. Before we dive in feet first, let's make sure the natives aren't hostile."

On Blake's instructions, one of the air-cars peeled away and flew towards Bottle Creek. A few minutes later, the commander of the first air-car called back, "Natives friendly."

Detecting a note of amusement in the NCO's voice, Khan locked on the man's headcam and realised that the other man was in the company of two smiling girls.

Satisfied that he wasn't flying into a trap, Khan instructed his other air-cars to move in. As they came

closer to the Bottle Creek settlement, Blake's eyes locked onto the massive scar on the surrounding landscape caused by the virtually defunct open-cast gold mine.

He then noted some activity below and saw that sections of the old mine workings had strong lattice covers placed over them. Another part had been turned into what looked like an amphitheatre.

Glancing at Khan, Blake said, "What d'you think's going on down there, sir?"

Khan glanced out of the windows and said, "I read somewhere that Bottle Creek holds enactments two or three times a year to attract tourists from New Victoria."

"Enactments? What sort of enactments?"

When Khan just shrugged, Blake sensed that his SGL was still brooding on the failure of his operation against Tarmy and Mygael.

Blake said, "Looks pretty primitive down there, SGL."

Khan shook his head, "First impressions can be deceptive. Bottle Creek is not as primitive as it looks."

"Really?"

Khan passed over his percom, which was displaying basic information about the area, "The gold mine is largely worked out. However, it still produces some gold, and there is a charging station for passing travellers, three seasonal hotels and two general stores."

He pointed to the small river, "I gather there's a small archaeological team based here."

Blake glanced down again and shook his head, "I believe you, but it doesn't exactly look like a pleasure dome, SGL."

"At least we're alive," Khan said philosophically, "If we'd stayed on that hill and fought it out, we'd be dead for sure."

"So you agree then?"

"Agree what?"

"That Samantha sent us on a suicide mission," Blake replied, "And we're lucky to be alive."

Khan nodded, "I just wish I'd seen the light sooner, and before you ask, I'm still thinking about what we do next."

Blake said, "I don't relish the thought of going back to Arden. As we've failed, we aren't going to be the flavour of the month, are we?"

"No," Khan admitted and began thinking about the mental conversation he'd had with Samantha and her last outburst, "*Only cowards retreat.*"

So he was a coward, was he?"

Once they'd landed, Khan glanced at the NCO who was still chatting up the local girls. When the NCO gave him a slight smile, Khan said, "Natives friendly, eh!"

"Yes, sir," the NCO replied.

"Well, don't get overfriendly," Khan growled. "I don't want any of the local girls getting pregnant. That will definitely ruffle feathers if they do."

Khan then added, "Make yourself useful. See if you can find somewhere to recharge the air-cars."

Khan climbed out, glancing at Blake and Zakit; he said, "I'm going to check out the nearest hotel and make a few enquiries."

He glanced at two of his men; as they were no longer wearing uniforms, he said, "Right, you two come with me."

Leaving Blake and Zakit with the Black-Clad force, Khan walked over to the hotel with the other two close behind. Stepping off the unmade road and onto a boardwalk, Khan ran his eyes over the building and then emitted a tongue click of displeasure. All the notices in the displays indicated that Bottle Creek was in an "out of season" period and that it would be in hibernation until the new season started.

Pushing his way through the swing doors and walking up to the bar, Khan glanced around. There were four men in one corner clustered around an ancient-looking TV that appeared to be showing a classic movie. In another corner, two men had documents laid out on the table as if discussing paperwork.

As none of the people in the bar even cast an eye in Khan's direction, he mentally dismissed their presence, walked up to the bar counter and hit a small push bell. A man walked through an interlinking arch leading to the general store and confirmed Khan's initial thoughts; the bar and the store had been reduced to a one-man operation until the new season again.

"Can I help you?"

Before Khan could speak, he heard a slight grunt and then two thumping sounds. When he swung around, the

two men who'd accompanied him were lying on the boarded floor. Khan was about to go for the mini-stun hidden in his belt when something blunt hit his spine. He felt someone remove the mini-stun and Khan felt a gun poke his rib cage. He realised that the four men who'd been watching the movie were now clustered around him, four against one and two guns touching him at point-blank range.

"I'll leave you with it," the bar-man said and walked back into the general store.

Once the barman was out of sight, one of the four men said, "The boss wants a word with you, SGL Khan."

He was pushed towards the second table; the paperwork had been removed, and one of the men had stood up, gun in hand. Khan revised the odds; six against one and three guns trained on him.

The four men surrounding him forced him towards the table and stepped back, guns levelled.

The man still sitting down waved a hand towards a vacant chair and said, "Please sit down, SGL Khan."

When Khan remained standing, the man shrugged, "Very well, SGL Khan, you may remain standing. My name is Colonel Philip Goshawk; before we continue, I would advise you that all your men, including the ones that came in with you, have been stunned and placed under arrest."

Goshawk created a power bubble that showed a slumped group underneath an awning to keep them from the sun.

Khan noted several groups of shadowy figures in the background. As invisibility armour was their trademark, Khan hissed, "Switzers!"

"Correct," Goshawk said. "I'm with Switzer intelligence most of the time, but I've been given this assignment. I hold the protection rank of Colonel. You can use the title if you wish; if you chose not to, I wouldn't be offended."

Khan considered and said, "You said arrested. Why are you here, and why have you attacked my men, Colonel Goshawk?"

Goshawk smiled, "Because I can. Bottle Creek is a very isolated settlement, and we have taken control of the whole area. No one knows we are here because we are preventing any transmissions from being sent to the rest of Arcadia."

"That's not an answer. Why are you here?"

"I would suggest that we discuss this later," Goshawk replied. "Just think on this. Switzer forces usually don't take prisoners, and you have been spared because our sponsors had requested no unnecessary torture or killing. If you don't cooperate, we could ignore our sponsor's requests."

He glanced at his men, "Please check that SGL Khan has no hidden weapons, percom and the like."

Goshawk then spoke to the men surrounding Khan, "Put SGL Khan in the cellar and chain him so he can't escape. Make sure he's left with food and water."

Before Khan could react, Goshawks' men grabbed hold of him and dragged him towards the bar. The hotel

owner appeared through the arch, opened a trap door in the floor and Khan was forced down a set of well-worn stone steps and propelled towards a small room. Once he was chained, the door was slammed and locked.

Glancing around, Khan noted one solitary light. There was a large bucket in one corner, and Khan presumed the obvious.

Noting that there was an old chair in his cell, Khan sat down and began thinking about his predicament. During his last contact with Samantha, she'd more or less branded him a coward.

And yet, he still became a dichotomous being. Despite his situation, he still felt loyalties to Samantha. Khan thought about Goshawk's comments. *"Just think on this. Switzer forces usually don't take prisoners, and you have been spared because our sponsors had requested no unnecessary torture or killing. If you don't cooperate, we could ignore our sponsor's requests."*

He wondered about Goshawk's sponsors; who were they?

His thoughts turned to his son, Zakit, and Samantha's insistence that Zakit came along. If the Switzers discovered Zakit's identity, they would have a lever to force him to do anything they wanted.

His thought then widened; if Goshawk came back with some sort of offer, did he betray Samantha?

Five minutes later, there was a slight rattle, a small hatch opened, and a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of

water appeared. Before Khan could react, the hatch slammed shut.

~\*~

Samantha appeared in Khan's mind three hours later, "I would apologise for my earlier outburst, Nenet."

Khan was slightly stunned. Samantha rarely made an apology.

"I have been checking the satellite images," Samantha continued. "I now realise that you were correct. Your small force was drastically outnumbered, and you did the only sensible thing. You made a tactical withdrawal. "

Khan stood up and clicked his heels as if Samantha was actually in the cellar with him. He vocalised, "Thank you for being so understanding, Great Leader, but I am afraid that we have been captured by Switzers."

"Switzers!"

"Yes, ma'am," Khan said, "They ambushed us at Bottle Creek, Zeelandia. I think they were the same people who were supposed to assist us, but they have switched sides."

There was a slight pause, and Samantha said, "Switzers have the reputation of not taking prisoners. So they must have had orders not to kill you."

"That is correct, Great Leader," Khan replied.

"You will not tell them that you can talk to me," Samantha commanded. "They are planning something, and you will find out what it is and let me know."

~\*~

While Nenet Khan was still pondering on his future, he heard the door open and heavy clumping on the stairs. The door opened, and Zakit was dragged in and chained up next to his father.

The Switzer NCO lifted his visor and gave Nenet Khan a smile, "The boss didn't want you to get lonely. So we brought your son down here to join you."

Once the door had slammed shut again, Zakit said, "Are you all right, Dad?"

"I'm fine," Nenet Khan replied. "Why are you here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Zakit replied. "They know I'm your son. They're going to kill me unless you do what they want."

## Chapter Twenty

### Goshawk contacts Mick Tarmy

Goshawk made a hyperlinked call to Mick Tarmy. After the usual formalities, Goshawk said, "You'll be pleased to know that we have captured Nenet Khan and his men."

"What! The whole lot?"

"We took them by surprise," Goshawk replied. "They weren't expecting us to be waiting for them."

"So what now?"

"Why don't you join us at Bottle Creek and discuss it?"

~\*~

Hen Jameson's voice came floating over the ether, "Where exactly are we going?"

Wren said, "If I knew, I'd tell you."

"We've been trapped in here for hours," Jameson griped, "Any chance of putting down so I can relieve myself?"

After passing on Jameson's request, the air-cars landed near a small wood. Jameson and several others jumped out as soon as the doors were open.

Wren took advantage of the stop and then began glancing around, "Where in hell's name are we?"

Alex's quiet voice answered, "We are approximately eighty kilometres from New Melbourne."

“How far is it to the nursery?”

“We are not going to the nursery,” Alex replied. “It has been attacked, and it is unsafe to go there?”

“Attacked!” Wren gasped. “Was it Khan’s people?”

“We believe so,” Alex replied.

“Has anyone been killed?”

“No,” Alex replied. “Everyone is safe, and they are hiding until they know that Samantha’s forces have been defeated. I am leading you to them.”

“Is it far to the hiding place?”

“An hour at the most,” Alex assured him. “But we need to move off very soon. We anticipate an anti-droid sweep of this area in the next half hour.”

When Wren frowned, Alex reminded him of interplanetary policy, “Arcadia is POSSI, a planet of special scientific interest; unauthorised colonisation is illegal. The interplanetary authorities have been increasing the intensity of anti-droid sweeps in all known illegal colonies.”

Realising Alex and the A10s were in danger, Wren took a whistle out of his pocket and then herded everyone back on board the air-cars. He only let out a sigh of relief once the air-cars had lifted off again and were moving away from the wood.

While Wren was contemplating the future, several air-cars suddenly appeared and drew alongside them.

Recognising Mick Tarmy in one of the air-cars, Wren broke radio silence and said, “What’s going on?”

Tarmy said, "A change of plan. Khan and his men have been captured. We're all going to Bottle Creek and work out what we're going to do with them."

~\*~

After Goshawk had cut the link with Tarmy, he became aware of a disturbance outside. Wanting to avoid a confrontation with the locals if possible, Goshawk went to the swing door entrance and saw two of his mercenaries restraining an angry-looking man. After issuing a few terse orders to his men, Goshawk pushed his way out of the saloon bar. As he did so, he saw that the newcomer had a large stun pistol holstered to one hip, and he was gripped by a sense of the ridiculous. Like a classic scene from an old Earth, Wild West movie, the angry man appeared to be squaring up for a gunfight.

Angry-man broke free from Goshawk's mercenaries and snapped, "My name is Fenmor, Glyfin Fenmor, from SSIAT. Are you in charge?"

"I am," Goshawk replied, "I'm Colonel Goshawk."

"What are you doing here?" Fenmor demanded, "And why are my people being prevented from leaving Bottle Creek."

"Your people?"

"Our archaeological team," Fenmor snapped.

“ I would apologise for the restrictions,” Goshawk replied. “But unfortunately, the restrictions are necessary.”

“Why?”

“We have just captured part of a dangerous armed gang that attacked a group of people in New Victoria and crossed the border. We are still trying to round some of them up. The restrictions are designed to protect everyone. This group is extremely dangerous.”

Ignoring the fact that he was outnumbered and seriously pushing his luck, Fenmor said, “Oh, yeah! And how do I know that you're telling me the truth?”

After holding up his ID, Goshawk called out to one of his men and told him to bring over some captured uniforms and documents. Once they'd been brought over, Goshawk showed them to Fenmor and said, “The criminals are from Arden. You must have heard of Samantha's Black-Clads.”

He told his men to display the uniforms and the ID cards. Catching a glimpse of the runic collar patches, the hostile expression on Fenmor's face suddenly evaporated. and he said, “I certainly *have* heard of the Black-Clads.”

He made a grab for Nenet Khan's ID card, and after studying it, he handed it back to Goshawk.

“Do you know him?”

Fenmor nodded, “I was at Pearl Crater teleport centre a short while back. Khan had visited The Wreck, and I was asked to present a prize to Khan because I had

SSIAT connections; the operators hoped it would impress Khan."

"A prize. What for?"

"The teleport operators always give a prize to each group going to The Wreck," Fenmor said. "It's become a tradition. When I took Khan to the office with his associate, Khan shot me in the back with a stun weapon and then stunned Marci Vardis. They kidnapped, Unnan and Marci Vardis."

"Who are Unnan and Marci Vardis?"

"They have the teleport and The Wreck trip concessions at Pearl Crater," Fenmor explained.

Goshawk raised an eyebrow, "That's interesting to know."

"Why?"

"If high command instructs me to send Khan and his men back to Arden via the Pearl Crater teleport, I suspect the Vardis's wouldn't be too happy."

"I think Unnan Vardis might be tempted to put them into stasis," Fenmor replied.

"What's stasis?"

"Their bodies are stored instead of being recreated," Fenmor replied. "At one time, some planetary authorities used stasis as an alternative to the death penalty. It also meant that if new evidence was produced, someone wrongly convicted could be brought back."

Fenmor then added, "The question is, what are Khan's people doing here?"

“As I explained,” Goshawk said, “A few hours ago, they *were* shooting up a nursery in New Victoria until the local police and security services turned up. The people who owned the nursey had fallen out with Samantha. As far as I know, it was a revenge attack. As I said, when New Victorian forces turned up, the Black-Clads pulled out and escaped across the border.”

“And the New Victorian police didn’t follow them?”

“No,” Goshawk confirmed. “ Presumably, they thought that crossing the border might cause a serious diplomatic incident. We were in New Victoria and volunteered to assist the New Victorian authorities by going after the Black-Clads and arresting them.”

Glancing around at Goshawk’s troops, Fenmor said, “So I know who *you* are; *what are your volunteers called?*”

“My volunteers are elements from the fifth Spitzer assault group,” Goshawk replied. “We were working in New Victoria, training some new NV government recruits. We make most of our money out of training these days.”

When Fenmor went silent, Goshawk added, “I gather you don’t like Samantha or her Black-Clads.”

“Being shot in the back by a maniac didn’t endear me to them,” Fenmor replied.

“But there’s more than that, isn’t there?”

Fenmour nodded, “SSIAT has been having a lot of trouble with Samantha’s Black-Clads on Arden for months.”

“In what way?”

"Barely a week goes by without them trespassing onto our territory," Fenmor replied. "It's becoming a ritual. We believe they are testing out our defences, and they are also doing the same in the South Pole Basin region and the Piccolomini region."

Goshawk said, "So you believe me when I say that Samantha's Black-Clads have been here causing trouble here too."

"Yes. I believe you," Fenmor replied.

Goshawk then deliberately changed tack, "So where are your people?"

"My archaeological dig is down by the creek," Fenmor replied, vaguely pointing in the direction of the only river in the area.

Goshawk nodded towards the bar. "It's rather public out here. Why don't we continue our discussion inside, Glyfin?"

He'd barely made the offer when two more men approached, and one called out, "What's going on, Glyfin?"

Goshawk was about to answer, but Fenmor intervened, "It's all right, boys. I think the Colonel here is about to give us a bit more information over a drink."

When the two men joined Fenmor and Goshawk at the bar, Fenmor introduced them, "This is Alund and Donc Gannon. They own the local farm and the amphitheatre."

"Glyfin is a part-owner too," Donc Gannon cut in.

Alund Gannon added, "The amphitheatre was Mr Fenmor's idea, him being an archaeologist and all that.

He said one of the minor mine workings looked like a Roman amphitheatre, so we turned it into one."

Although not really interested, Goshawk smiled politely, "Good idea. I heard that tourists come here."

While they were still talking, the barman cum store assistant appeared, and Goshawk said, "So what are you guys having?"

Fenmor let out a slight laugh and then cupped his mouth and whispered, "Out of season, there are only two choices, around these parts, beer or Arcadian gin. We'll all have beers, and I would suggest that's what you have too."

Once Goshawk had ordered, and the barman moved away and began pulling measures, Goshawk said, "What did you mean out of season?"

"We now get a lot of tourists, in spring and autumn, when it's not too hot," Fenmor said. "In season, we import a lot of drinks to cater for them."

Fenmor then lowered his voice again, "Out of season, Tony, the barman makes both the beer and the gin around the back."

Goshawk's thoughts immediately returned him to the Wild West, and he mentally painted pictures of Tony in the back, filling bottles labelled "Rotgut".

"His beer is passable," Fenmor said before sticking the knife in, "I'd avoid the gin at all times. I think Tony laces it with Zuka extract as one of the natural flavourings."

Goshawk frowned, "What's Zuka extract?"

“It goes by a lot of names, Zuka milk, Zuk, Zukmilk, Zuka extract,” Fenmor explained. “It’s produced in the Fyfield Valley, and they grow Zuka plants in paddy fields up there and milk them once they are mature. At one time, large amounts of Zuka extract was brought here when the gold mines were in full production; Gold for Zuka. But very few of the locals touch it now. It’s highly addictive, and some doctors have said it causes permanent brain damage.”

After raising his glass, Fenmor said, “So when d’you reckon you’ll round up the rest of the gang, and we’ll be able to go about our normal business?”

“Hopefully, we won’t be long,” Goshawk replied, ignoring the fact that none of Khan’s men had escaped. He changed the subject, “Tell me about the amphitheatre. What happens there?”

“We stage tournaments,” Alund Gannon cut in. “We started doing it ten years back. Gladiators, as they did in Rome on old Earth.”

Alund then nodded towards Fenmor again. “He showed us photographs, and we recreated everything. We now get loads of tourists from New Victoria coming here to watch the games. As most of them are well padded, we make a lot of money in the season.”

Fenmor triggered some of Goshawk’s original thoughts, “As this place has a Wild West feel to it, clapboard house and all that, we’ve also started staging mock gunfights. Reproduction pistols with blanks in, of course. We wouldn’t want anyone getting killed.”

Alund Gannon then said, "Come on, Colonel, I'm sure you can spare half an hour. Let's show you around."

Goshawk reluctantly agreed and followed Fenmor and the Gannon brothers towards the amphitheatre. Goshawk was impressed despite his lack of genuine interest because the whole area was awash with colour. Alund Gannon gave Goshawk a nudge and produced a controller, "Watch this!"

After pressing a button, a Mannheim formed overhead, turning day into night. Alund depressed another button, and holographic images began filling up the terraces, and trumpets sounded.

A moment later, two gladiators emerged from opposite sides, armed with swords and shields and started to clash. Eventually, one gladiator fell to the ground, and the holographic crowd screamed for blood. The winning gladiator immediately despatched the fallen man with one well-aimed stab of his sword.

Alund Gannon depressed a button again, and the images of the gladiators disappeared. Moments later, another gladiator appeared, but this time, he was pitched against an Arcadian wolf.

After a long fight, the six-legged creature was also stabbed to death via a chink in its natural armour.

Turning off the display and the Mannheim, Alund Gannon said, "So what d'you think?"

"Very impressive," Goshawk said. "Must have cost a fair bit to set up."

Fenmor cut in, "I financed it. Since the gold mine cut right back on production, this area has become very

depressed. Since the tourists started coming in, it's provided an income for the people living here."

Goshawk said, "Why did you finance this place?"

Fenmor shrugged, "Because I could."

"That's not really an answer."

"The holographic equipment and the Mannheim are cheap enough to buy these days," Fenmor replied. "In addition, the local currency is virtually worthless because of rampant inflation. If you pay in ACU's, the locals are only too willing to work for you."

Fenmor then added, "When my contract with SSIAT is complete, I will receive a terminal bonus. I came here years ago, and I like Arcadia and want to stay here. This place is my investment in the future. In any case, I've told you. Everyone knows that Samantha is looking for an excuse to invade the SSIAT controlled territory on Arden, and I don't want to be there when it happens."

"You seem very certain that's going to happen," Goshawk replied.

"It's obvious. You don't need to be a genius to know what's going to happen," Fenmor replied, "Samantha is an empire builder and covets all the land adjoining the Minton Mining zone."

He nodded towards a shop in the amphitheatre grounds, "I may as well show you in here too."

Once inside the shop, Goshawk caught a glimpse of more images of gladiators, but the faces looked too soft and civilised to be real fighters. Pointing at one of the images, Fenmor said, "A lot of tourists want to take back recordings of themselves involved in gladiatorial

combat. We just use CGI to substitute their faces so that they can brag about their gladiatorial prowess when they get home.”

After walking a few more steps, Goshawk heard a skittering sound and saw a small Arcadian wolf in a cage. As Goshawk had never seen an Arcadian Wolf in real life, the heavily armoured six-legged creature looked more menacing than the holograms had depicted.

Fenmor grinned and said, “Watch this.”

He reached into a box and pulled out a dead Arcadian scorpion and dropped it between the bars. The wolf dived on it and swallowed it whole. As if in explanation, Fenmor added, “Breeding Arcadian wolves and millipedes on a farm is another of my ideas.”

Fenmor then said, “So what are you going to do with Khan’s men once you’ve rounded them all up?”

“That is not in my hands,” Goshawk replied.

“Why not?”

“The decision will be made by the high command,” Goshawk said and added, “Well, thanks for the tour.”

He was about to walk away when one of his group came running over and said, “We’ve just had a message from Mick Tarmy. He’s on his way, and he should be here in about an hour.”

Fenmor said, “Who’s Mick Tarmy?”

“Tarmy owns the nursery that was attacked,” Goshawk replied and glanced at the fake gladiators. “Just a thought, and nothing to do with our previous conversations. If Mick Tarmy and his friends wanted

their faces CGI'd on to gladiators, does it cost much? And how long does it take?"

Fenmore shrugged, "It's a fairly quick process and doesn't cost that much. Have a word with Alund Gannon; he deals with the fake gladiatorial contests."

## Chapter Twenty-One

### **Tarmy Goes to Bottle Creek and Mih Valanson Speaks to Claire Hyndman**

Mick Tarmy was cautious. Although he'd received assurances from Goshawk that Bottle Creek was totally under his control, he still sent Alex into the small settlement fully cloaked.

As Alex entered Bottle creek, he began sending back images. Seeing a huddle of men guarded by ghost-like figures, Tarmy realised that it did look as if Goshawk *had* won the day. But as an added precaution, he instructed Alex to check out the wider area. After flying around the small township, Alex noted activity in one of the hotels and flew inside via the space above the swing doors.

Noting more ghost-like figures inside, Tarmy was satisfied they weren't heading into a trap and began moving towards Bottle Creek with two A10s taking the lead and the air-cars following a hundred metres behind.

Once they'd landed close to the hotel, Goshawk came striding over to greet them. Extending a hand to Allus Wren, he said, "Glad you made it here."

He turned to Alton Mygael and said, "Good to see you're okay, Mr Mygael."

The approach was rebuffed when Alton Mygael refused to shake, "You were supposed to protect us, but

we had to rely on Mr Tarmy to get us out. My life partner was shot in an attack."

Allus Wren moved in, "That's not exactly true, Alton. If you recall, you refused to pay for protection because you said it was extortionate."

Goshawk cut back in, "That is correct. I suggested that Mr Wren evacuate you all from Awis Oasis and join up with Mick Tarmy's people."

Wren added, "It was also agreed that Colonel Goshawk's men would deal with Khan's Group once they attacked ."

"Which we have," Goshawk replied. "They are now our prisoners."

Sensing that Alton Mygael was still in an unreceptive mood, Goshawk ignored him and moved on, "Which of you is Mick Tarmy?"

After pressing the flesh like a political hopeful, Goshawk said, "Great to meet you, at last, Mick." He added, "That was a cautious approach. Don't you trust me? We're supposed to be on the same side."

"I try only to take calculated risks," Tarmy replied. "If Khan had managed to get the drop on you and had forced you to send us a false signal, we could have been walking into a trap."

Goshawk half-smiled, "I suppose that's a fair comment," and pointed at Khan's men, "Unlike you, *they did walk into a trap.*"

"I hope you've got them under close guard," Tarmy replied. "They're a tricky bunch."

“So far, they haven’t caused any trouble. We have Khan and his son locked up in the hotel cellar. The only real question now is, what’s the next move?”

“His son?”

“Yes,” Goshawk shrugged. “For some reason, Samantha insisted that Zakit Khan went on the mission with his father.”

He pointed at the hotel, “Why don’t we discuss it in there?”

Once they’d crossed the dirt road and entered the bar, Goshawk glanced at Claire Hyndman and Nonie Tomio enquiringly, “By the way, which one of you is Claire?”

“That depends on why you want to know,” Mick Tarmy said.

“Very simple,” Goshawk said. “Claire’s father funded our rescue operation, and I’m sure he’d be pleased if I could report that his daughter was safe.”

Claire Hyndman stepped forwards, introduced herself and then said, “Please, thank my father, but for the avoidance of doubt, I’m staying on Arcadia. I’m not going home.”

Recalling his conversation with Claire’s father, Goshawk nodded, “Understood. Your father indicated that might be your decision and that I should accept it.”

He led the way to the bar and issued the same warning Glyfin Fenmor had given regarding the locally produced beverages.

Once they had all been served, Goshawk put a call into Alund Gannon. Gannon arrived a few minutes later, armed with a sophisticated-looking camera.

Before Tarmy could object, Alund took a swift series of photographs and retreated.

Glancing at Goshawk accusingly, Tarmy said, "What was all that about."

Goshawk said, "I'm going to interrogate Khan shortly; having your photographs might well help loosen his tongue."

"How?"

After telling Tarmy about the arena, "I anticipate that the movies will be back with me in a few minutes. Once you've finished your drinks, I'm going to ask you to leave while I carry out the interrogation?"

Claire Hyndman intervened, "My father is paying for your services. We want to hear what Khan has to say."

"Interrogation is not a spectator sport," Goshawk replied dismissively.

Tarmy cut in, "As Claire said, we want to hear what you say to him and his replies. We also want to make sure you don't resort to torture, and we have heard about Switzer methods."

When two of the Switzer guards raised their ghostly rifles threateningly, two of Tarmy's A10s floated into the room and aimed at the Switzer guards.

Goshawk bridled, "What is this?"

"I believe it's called power politics," Tarmy replied. "Our A10s outgun your men forty to one."

When Goshawk's face showed extreme displeasure, Tarmy added, "He who pays the piper calls the tune. We want to hear what Khan has to say, and we don't want your people beating it out of him."

The words had barely crossed Tarmy's lips before Alex spoke to Tarmy via a whisper probe, "Before Colonel Goshawk interrogates Khan, we need to speak privately."

Tarmy glanced at Goshawk and said, "Can you excuse me. I'll be back shortly. Don't attempt to interrogate Nenet Khan until I return. "

As Tarmy moved across the bar, the two A10s moved slightly and trained their guns on Goshawk.

~\*~

Once Mick Tarmy had left the room, Claire Hyndman shifted uneasily, and Nonie Tomio said, "Is there a problem?"

"Doesn't it annoy you when Mick just disappears and has private meetings?" Claire replied.

"I'm sure he has his reasons," Nonie said. "But I can tell there is something else eating at you. What is it?"

"That nerdy looking guy over there keeps on eyeing me up," Claire complained.

Nonie grinned, "You should be flattered."

"Well, I'm not," Claire growled.

"Just ignore him," Nonie replied.

Instead of taking her advice, Claire said, "I'm going over."

After manoeuvring the nerd to one side, Claire said, "Who are you, and why do you keep staring at me?"

The nerd smiled disarmingly, "My name is Valanson, Mih Valanson and I am sorry if I have caused offence."

Valanson moved away. Claire reacted badly, "Why are you walking away?"

"Because I don't think you'd want anyone in Mick Tarmy's group to hear what I have to say," Valanson said and carried on walking. Once well away from the rest, Claire said, "So what's this all about?"

"I used to work with Samantha," Valanson revealed, "I repaired a TK5 named Alex, your machine."

"Okay, so?"

"That's why I fell out with Samantha," Valanson said, "After I repaired Alex and armed him with a modern phaser system, he escaped."

Realising that Valanson knew a great deal about her, Claire went pale. "Where is this leading?"

"Before repairing Alex, one of my tasks was to look after Claire Hyndman, a woman who was in a suspension unit after being sprayed with Arcadian millipede venom."

Valanson added, "Claire Hyndman eventually died, and then you appeared. Shortly before you appeared, Samantha captured a terrorist called Zia Warmers. I believe that you are Zia Warmers in disguise."

Claire went very pale, "So what is this? Blackmail?"

"Don't worry; I will keep your secret," Valanson replied. "I've known for months, and I have kept silent."

"Then why have you brought this up now?"

"You came to me and demanded an explanation," Valanson replied. "I didn't come to you."

He added, "If Mick Tarmy and Alton Mygael hadn't helped me escape from Arden, I'd be dead. Samantha would either have had me executed or sent to a labour camp."

When Claire remained silent, Valanson added, "I also know that you and Mick Tarmy were sent to Arcadia to attack the Great Ones, and you only escaped by the skin of your teeth."

"Okay," Claire replied. "So you know a lot about me. What happens now? Cut to the chase!"

"Nothing happens now," Valanson replied. "The only comment that I would make is that if Goshawk and his men are going after Samantha, they are more likely to succeed if Mick and Alex support them."

"So this is blackmail!"

"Nothing of the sort," Valanson retorted. "Just a statement of fact. You are at liberty to ignore what I have just said, but you will never be rid of Samantha if you do, and she will keep on trying to attack you. *Now*, are we done?"

"You promise you won't say anything to Mick," Claire repeated.

"I promise," Valanson replied and then walked back to his group.

~\*~

Once Tarmy had entered the snug, Alex spoke freely. When Alex had finished, Tarmy re-entered the bar and said, "Before you interrogate Khan, we need to speak privately, and I have some important information."

"This better be good. I don't like people wasting my time," Goshawk replied.

"You won't be wasting your time," Tarmy assured him and then nodded towards the swing doors. Outside Tarmy moved down the boardwalk and carried on walking until he reached a location where no one could see them or overhear the conversation. Once he'd stopped, Goshawk snapped, "So what's this important information?"

"I believe that Khan has implants in his head and is communicating with Samantha.

"You believe!" Goshawk queried, obviously still smarting from the previous conversations they'd had, "Any evidence?"

"Before I was sent to Arcadia by Samantha, she had implants inserted into my skull," Tarmy replied and parted his hair to show the scars that the removal had left behind.

When Goshawk still looked slightly disbelieving, Tarmy said, "Claire also had implants fitted. Do you want to see her scars?"

Goshawk was still dismissive, "That won't be necessary. Just because you had implants, it doesn't mean that Khan has had implants fitted too."

"He has," Tarmy replied.

"You sound very certain of that."

"I'll prove it," Tarmy said.

A moment later, a power bubble formed. Instead of an image forming inside it, a note appeared showing a recording date. Then Khan's disembodied voice said, *"Thank you for being so understanding, Great Leader, but I am afraid that we have been captured by Switzers."*

*"Switzers!"*

*"Yes, ma'am," Khan said, "They ambushed us at Bottle Creek. I think they were the same people who were supposed to assist us, but they have switched sides."*

*Samantha said, "Switzers have the reputation of not taking prisoners. So they must have had orders not to kill you."*

*"Yes, Great Leader."*

*"You will not tell them that you can communicate with me," Samantha commanded. "They are planning something, and you will find out what it is and let me know."*

Goshawk gave Tarmy a sharp look, "Okay. Now I believe you, but how did you listen in?"

Tarmy said, "I'll introduce you to Alex."

He asked Alex to uncloak. Once Alex had done as instructed and revealed his simple bedframe structure, Goshawk let out a gasp of surprise, "You *have* got a TK5! Is it fully operational?"

As if to prove he was fully operational, Alex raised his cloaks again and then said, "I am an enhanced TK5, equipped with cloaking and InterRoC. I also have Oracle

and improved power systems which allow me to planet hop.”

After quizzing Alex concerning his enhancements for a few minutes, Goshawk glared at Tarmy, “Why didn’t you tell me about Alex before?”

‘It’s illegal to possess droids on Arcadia,” Tarmy replied. “So we don’t advertise the fact we have them. Also, a secret shared is no longer a secret.”

He added, “Strictly speaking, Alex belongs to Claire Hyndman, and I will need to get her approval if Alex is used.”

“Your TK5 could make all the difference if we decide to go after Samantha,” Goshawk said.

“If I was prepared to help you,” Tarmy replied icily. “And Claire agrees.”

“Of course,” Goshawk replied. “Always assuming you *were* prepared to help us, and Claire agrees,” He continued, “But if you don’t fight Samantha, she will probably order more attacks on you. Unless you help us get rid of Samantha, she will haunt all of you for the rest of your lives.”

Tarmy said, “Switzers don’t usually take prisoners. As you have kept Khan, his son and his men alive, am I right in thinking that you were hoping to do a deal with Khan?”

“I won’t know until I have interrogated him,” Goshawk replied. “I’m hoping that capturing his son might give me more leverage.”

“Were you hoping Khan might help you gain access to Minton Isolation Facility 1?”

"That's one possibility," Goshawk replied. "But your information about the implants might make that rather pointless. As Khan is already plotting with Samantha, hoping that he will assist is laughable, and he's obviously a died in the wool Samantharite."

"You could use the implants to feed Samantha false information," Tarmy said. "The other thing which might help you is that Alex can remove the implants and destroy them at any time you choose."

"Alex can remove the implants?"

"He removed mine, and he removed Claire's," Tarmy replied. "As you will be aware, Alex is an ex-military droid and is equipped to provide surgical aid to human battlefield wounded."

While Goshawk went quiet thinking hard, Tarmy said, "You had photographs taken of us. So what *was* your plan?"

Reluctantly Goshawk outlined the original idea.

Tarmy smiled, "Why don't you play Khan? Feed him your original idea and let him pass Samantha the false information while we work on my alternative plan."

"Alternative plan!" Goshawk said. "So, what is *your* plan?"

"*Always assuming that I agree to help you,*" Tarmy said. "We enter Minton Isolation Facility 1 in the same way that Alex escaped."

"Escaped?"

"At one stage, Alex was repaired at Minton Isolation Facility 1," Tarmy revealed. He added, "I'm not sure of the exact details, but I understand that Samantha

destroyed a rebel TK5, and Mih Valanson used the spare parts to repair Alex. Shortly after, Alex escaped. Why don't we let Alex explain? The plan was his idea."

Goshawk frowned, "Surely we should be doing the planning around here and not this machine."

Tarmy shrugged, "It can't harm hearing what Alex has to say."

"So, what's Alex's plan?" Goshawk said.

Tarmy instructed, "Tell him, Alex."

In response, Alex created a power bubble, and Mih Valanson's worried face appeared inside it. As the sequence continued, Valanson operated the airlock. After what seemed like an interminable wait, the outer door opened, and the power bubble filled with images of a grey pockmarked surface and swirling clouds of mining dust.

When Goshawk frowned, Alex explained, "There is an airlock to the rear of Minton Isolation Facility 1. It is rarely used."

"But can you gain access?"

"It may be difficult," Alex replied, and the image in the power bubble changed to show the landmass surrounding Minton Isolation Facility 1. Shading showed minefields, crosses showed robotic gun emplacement superimposed on the plan.

Alex said, "I have the necessary codes to open the airlock and deactivate parts of the minefield and gun emplacements."

"How have you obtained the codes?" Goshawk demanded.

Tarmy cut in, "Alex can hack into most computer systems."

Although Goshawk looked slightly sceptical, he said, "Go on."

Alex said, "The only problem I can foresee is reaching Arden."

"Why should reaching Arden prove to be a problem?" Goshawk asked, "Surely, the most logical approach would be to use the teleport at Pearl Crater."

"I believe that would cause problems," Alex replied. "It is unlikely that the Pearl Crater authorities would allow an attack on Samantha from SSIAT territories because they would fear reprisals."

"We could use shuttles," Goshawk said.

"Shuttle landings on Arcadia are very limited," Alex replied. "Because of sanctions imposed on Arden as a result of Samantha's excesses, you would only be able to land in one of the smaller settlements."

"Smaller settlements," Goshawk echoed.

"Other than SSIAT territories, the others are South Pole Basin colony and Piccolomini."

Alex then added, "If you agree to land at one of the smaller settlements, I have a plan."

You have a mobile teleport, and the Salus Transporter Nine will be arriving in two weeks. It will be delivering supplies to both the South Pole Basin colony and Piccolomini. As Corporal Tarmy knows Commander Krelling Lars, he may allow Corporal Tarmy to teleport up and discuss hiring shuttles for the landing."

Mick Tarmy cut in, "Before we get our hopes up, I still haven't said I'd help."

Goshawk said, "Of course, we would insist that you were paid for your services. I'm sure that Khan's attack on your property must have caused a great deal of damage, and it's unlikely an insurance company would pay for it."

"Okay, always assuming I am willing to help," Tarmy said. "The last time I involved Krelling Lars in my evacuation of Arden, Samantha caused him a great deal of trouble; for that reason, he may cold-shoulder me. Another problem, he may have retired and not even be the Commander anymore."

"He hasn't retired," Alex replied. "Maybe you could talk to him, Corporal Tarmy."

Goshawk cut in, "What was this evacuation of Arden?"

"Krelling Lars helped my daughter and some of my police colleagues escape to Midway a few months ago," Tarmy replied. "He was in command of the Salus Transporter Nine at the time. If Alex is right, he still is."

When Goshawk frowned, Tarmy said, "You must know about the Salus System transporters."

"Of course I do," Goshawk replied. "I know that at least a dozen heavy transporters are moving around the Salus System. They take on containerised cargoes and then distribute them throughout the system. Sometimes containers are transferred between passing transports or space stations. Many containers are

transferred several times before they reach their final destination. ”

After a long pause, Goshawk said, “Do you think you will be able to persuade Krelling Lars to help us?”

“As I said, I honestly don’t know,” Tarmy replied. “As Alex suggested, maybe if I teleport out to talk to him, I might be able to persuade him to help us.”

“Maybe I could come with you,” Goshawk said. “And possibly, Allus Wren.”

Tarmy nodded, “I think Allus Wren should come with us. He has worked for Samantha and can confirm her foibles.”

If Krelling Lars cooperates, I will make a report to my superiors.”

Tarmy said, “But by the way, there is one condition in all this.”

“What’s that?” Goshawk said.

Tarmy said, “There’s no mention of Alex in your reports or to anyone else. Alex is our ace in the hole.”

“Okay,” Goshawk replied. “No mention will be made of Alex.”

“Can I make another suggestion,” Tarmy said.

“What’s that?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Glyfin Fenmor is getting very upset that you’ve occupied Bottle Creek, and you’re not allowing his people to leave,” Tarmy replied. “Alex has discovered an abandoned settlement called Burlington about fifty kilometres from here, and it has a water supply. I think we should go there.”

“Why was it abandoned?”

Tarmy shrugged, "There's an old mine at Burlington. My guess is that when the mine closed, the town became surplus to requirements."

"Other than placating Fenmore, what does going to Burlington achieve?" Goshawk asked.

"If Samantha knows where Khan is," Tarmy replied, "She may send a rescue force. I'd rather not wait here and take the chance, and my thoughts are to stun all of Khan's people and get them to Burlington. If Krelling Lars agrees to let us have some shuttles, they will land at Burlington, out in the desert where no one can see them land or take off again."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### **Khan and His Men Are Moved to Burlington**

Five hours after being locked in the cellar, the hatch opened, and several of Goshawk's Switzers came down the stairs. Without bothering to speak, the NCO in charge shot Khan with a stun gun.

They unshackled him and took him out to one of the air-cars where the other Black-Clads were also being dumped unceremoniously into waiting vehicles.

Glyfin Fenmor was there to watch the departure, "So, where are you taking them?"

Goshawk told a half-truth, "We're taking them to a holding centre until the New Victorian authorities can have them extradited."

When Fenmor frowned, Goshawk added, " If we don't do this by the book, some smart lawyer will get them off."

Fenmor glanced at Mick Tarmy and Claire Hyndman, "Are you off too?"

"Once we've helped Colonel Goshawk take this scum to the holding facility, we'll be back. The hotel might not be five stars, but it's better than staying at the holding facility."

~\*~

After an hours flight, Burlington loomed up on the horizon. Although most houses looked very similar to

the clapboard houses in Bottle Creek, Burlington boasted a stone community hall and several abandoned processing buildings.

Once, the Switzers had dragged the still stunned Black-Clads over to one of the processing buildings they were locked in.

Khan and his son were then dragged into the community hall and locked in a cellar very similar to one he'd been in at Bottle Creek.

~\*~

When Khan awoke and glanced around, he saw Zakit, his son. He also realised that the Switzers had moved them, but where?

He became aware of a telltale tingling in his hands and feet and realised he'd been shot with a stun pistol. While he was relieving himself in the bucket

provided, the door to the basement was pulled open, and an NCO and three Switzers came down the steps.

The NCO barked out, "Colonel Goshawk wants to talk to you."

Despite the after-effects of the stun, Khan snapped, "About time."

Ignoring the comment, the NCO added, "We'll take your cuffs off, but if you try anything on, we will not be responsible for any injuries you may suffer as a consequence. Understood!"

Khan gave him an evil look but remained silent and didn't resist. Once Khan had climbed the stairs and stepped out into the community hall, he was tempted to ask where he was, but Khan resisted the temptation because he thought it showed fear. Instead, Khan began glancing around and saw Mick Tarmy, Claire Hyndman, Nonie Tomio with her pet pterodactyl perched on one shoulder. Glancing the other way, he saw Alton and Klairen Mygael and Allus Wren sitting around a table. There were also several other people in the room that he didn't recognise. More importantly, two A10s were floating in the background, and several shadowy Switzer mercenaries were dotted around the room.

Khan vaguely toyed with the idea of launching himself either at Alton Mygael or Mick Tarmy but realised it would be pointless because he'd be cut down before he's covered two metres and achieve nothing.

Goshawk waved him towards a table well away from the others and said, "Please be seated, SGL Khan."

This time, instead of refusing to sit, Khan slumped down in the chair. Goshawk said, "Have you been in contact with Samantha since you pulled off Wrighte Hill?"

"No comment, other to ask why have you arrested us and why are you here?"

"I'm asking the questions," Goshawk said.

"You are holding my comrades and myself here illegally," Khan growled.

“We don’t normally take prisoners,” Goshawk replied. “If you don’t cooperate, the high command may instruct me to have you taken out and shot.”

Ignoring the threat, Khan glanced at Mick Tarmy, Claire Hyndman, Nonie Tomio, and then over at Alton, Klairen Mygael and Allus Wren. He added, “You’re the Switzer group who was supposed to help us deal with these people. . You’re a turncoat, Colonel. You sold out to the highest bidder.”

Goshawk shrugged, “You may think that, but it's not true. We no longer want Samantha as a client, and Samantha’s enemies are obvious future clients for us.”

“You will regret this,” Kahn threatened. “I’ve no doubt Samantha will send more troops to rescue us. I wouldn’t like to be in your shoes when her forces get here.”

In response, Goshawk formed a power bubble which showed a portable teleport erected nearby. “And as you see, we have an exit strategy if we need it, but despite you bluster, I doubt if *you* have.”

Khan growled, “Switzers usually don’t take prisoners. You haven’t killed us, Colonel, which means you think we could be of use to you. What d’you want?”

“I’ll tell you that shortly,” Goshawk replied. “I hope you will indulge me. If you don’t mind, I thought we’d start by watching a few movies.”

“Movies? Are you joking?”

“No,” Goshawk replied. “ These are movies that might impress Samantha.”

He created another power bubble. A moment later, moving images started to flash up inside the bubble. Khan realised the pictures showed Alton and Klaien Mygael armed with swords and shields, gladiator style, being circled by four slaving Arcadian Wolves. After fending off the snapping six-legged wolves for several minutes, two wolves managed to attack Alton and Klaien from behind. Both Alton and Klaien let out horrific screams as they were grabbed by their necks and the life choked out of them.

A few seconds later, Mick Tarmy, Claire Hyndman and Nonie Tomio appeared in the bubble. Like Alton and Klaien, they carried swords and shields, but *their* adversary was four giant arcadian millipedes.

Unlike Alton and Klaien, Tarmy's group formed a circle and locked shields. After attacking for some time, the millipedes withdrew and fired a toxic poison at the group. Within seconds, all three dropped to the ground writhing in agony.

Once the power bubble images had evaporated, Goshawk said, "So what do you think?"

Glancing at Mick Tarmy, Claire Hyndman, Nonie Tomio and Alton and Klaien Mygael, Khan said, "Why have you gone to the trouble of creating these simulations?"

"With these simulations, you should be able to convince Samantha that you have completed your operation successfully and you have killed her enemies," Goshawk replied.

"And why would I want to do that?" Khan growled.

"We have your son in the basement," Goshawk reminded him. "If you don't cooperate, we could flog him and let you watch him suffer. Do you want me to do that?"

When Khan's mouth snapped shut, Goshawk rammed the message home, "You've recently lost one son. D'you want to lose another?"

Not wishing his son to be injured, Khan said, "What d'you want from me?"

"I've told you. If Samantha thinks your operation was successful, she's unlikely to send another attack force after my clients," Goshawk replied.

"I have to confess the simulations are very clever," Khan replied. "But they won't fool Samantha."

"Why not?"

"Because Samantha will have them analysed," Khan replied, "The simulations will have to be *very* good to fool her."

"We've checked the simulations, and we know they'll pass muster," Goshawk replied.

"Okay, always supposing I play along with you, and I convince Samantha we successfully completed our mission, you've missed an important point," Khan said, "I've read Samantha's files on Arcadia. Arcadian wolves and giant millipedes can't live outside the Fyfield Valley or the Altos Plateaux. For some unknown reason, they die if they leave their native lands. Samantha will take one look at your simulations, and she'll smell a rat. "

“You’re wrong,” Goshawk corrected. “ Arcadian wolves and giant millipedes can live outside the Fyfield Valley or the Altos Plateaux

Khan shook his head, “They can’t.”

“ Is that so?”

“Yes,” Khan said stubbornly.

In response, Goshawk spoke to one of the Switzer guards, “Bring Alund and Donc Gannon in here It with their charges.”

A moment later, Alund entered the community hall with a small Arcadian wolf on a stout plastimetal lead. Donc came in next with a giant Arcadian millipede on another leash.

Although the wolf and millipede had heavy muzzles fitted over their snapping jaws, Khan still pulled back, “It’s not possible. Animals born in the Fyfield Valley die if they leave it.”

Goshawk glanced at Alund and said, “Why don’t you put SGL Khan straight.”

Alund smiled, a gold tooth flashing, “This wolf is a sub-species of Arcadian wolves living in the Fyfield Valley. This type is only found on the Compass Islands. We brought some back from the islands about twelve years ago, and now we breed ‘em here.”

Alund nodded towards the giant Arcadian millipede, “The same’s true for the millipedes.”

“Breed ‘em?”

“Yeah,” Alund replied. “We do what the islanders do; remove their poison sacks before they become full grown. We’ve sold a few animals to the zoo in New

Melbourne; we also use them in the arena, but we mainly breed 'em here for the food. Wolf and millipede pie is a local delicacy and tastes like chicken and ham."

Being vegan, Khan looked shocked, "You eat them!"

Alund gave him another flash of his gold tooth, "In these parts, you'd starve if you don't eat meat. The same is true in most of New Victoria. We now sell a lot of our meat products to specialised outlets in New Victoria, and our sales go up year on year."

When Khan fell into stunned silence, Donc said, "Wolves and millipedes are cheap to keep and mature very quickly. More importantly, they will eat virtually anything, food scraps, fish heads, grass cuttings, sea and river weed, Arcadian Cactus, you name it. In the wild, they're scavengers."

Once the handlers had left, Goshawk said, "As I said, the movies are designed so that you can convince Samantha that you have completed your operation. Once you have convinced Samantha that you have killed your targets, then we will begin making arrangements for you to return to Arden."

"So you let us go," Khan sneered. "Just like that!"

"As I said, once the arrangements have been made to return you to Arden. Obviously, your son stays here," Goshawk said. "We release him once you get us into the Minton Isolation Facility 1."

When Khan went silent, Goshawk added, "Of course, if you don't want to cooperate, we could just hand you all over to the New Victoria authorities and let them try you for invading their country. Or, we could send you

back to Samantha with a failed note stapled to your forehead. But if you cooperate, the outcome will be better for you."

"Always assuming I agree," Khan said. "What's your plan?"

"Firstly, we need you to contact Samantha and convince her that you have completed your mission."

"And how would I do that?" Khan quibbled. "Our communication equipment was damaged by the anti-droid sweeps in New Victoria."

"We will obviously provide you with the means to contact Samantha, and we will also provide you with an agreed script," Goshawk replied.

"And then?"

"That would depend if you managed to convince Samantha that you completed your mission," Goshawk replied.

"You're forgetting an important issue," Khan said. "Samantha will want to see their bodies," Khan predicted. "And you haven't got any bodies." He glanced at Mick Tarmy, Claire Hyndman, Nonie Tomio and Alton and Klaien Mygael and said, "There aren't any bodies because they're still alive."

Goshawk opened up another power bubble. Inside the bubble, a row of bodies lay on a concrete floor. Mick Tarmy, Claire Hyndman, and Nonie Tomio grouped together at one end of the concrete floor. Separate but not far away, there was Alton and Klaien Mygael. All the bodies looked badly savaged but recognisable.

Khan half-smiled, "That looks very convincing, but Samantha will still want to see the real thing."

"The transportation of bodies between planets and moons is restricted. It's very challenging between Arcadia and the rest of the Salus System, and there are special coffins and quarantine regulations to comply with," Goshawk replied. "I'm sure it will take several weeks for all the paperwork to be cleared, and if all goes to plan, by that time, Samantha will have been removed. So let's cut to the chase. Are you going to help us?"

Once Khan had agreed, Goshawk instructed his Switzer guards to take the SGL back to the cellar.

~\*~

Two hours later, Samantha appeared in Khan's mind and asked for information. Once Khan had described his interview with Goshawk.

He added, "If I don't cooperate, they will probably kill my son."

"I won't let that happen," Samantha assured him.

~\*~

Once Samantha had cut her mental link with Khan, she turned to Paula, her senior praetorian and said, "It would appear that I am unlikely to be attacked until Khan returns."

As Paula had been listening in to Samantha's conversation with Khan, she said, "Will you really protect Khan's son, Great Leader?"

"I had to say to SGL Khan to keep him onside, but Zakit is of little importance," Samantha replied.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### A Trip to Salus Transporter Nine and Back

"We have a hyperlink from Arcadia, sir; Mick Tarmy would like to speak to you."

Krelling Lars' mind shot back to his past dealings with Tarmy. Although he had no regrets about helping Tarmy's daughter Amanda and Ord Morley and his group escape from Samantha's clutches, it had landed him in hot water.

Lars was suspicious, "What does he want?"

"He didn't say, sir."

"Well, find out what he wants," Lars snapped.

He'd barely said the words before a power bubble formed in one corner of his office with Mick Tarmy's face inside it.

Tarmy smiled, "Long time no see, Krelling."

Lars was tempted to ask how Tarmy had been able to power bubble him in his private office but let the issue slide, "What do you want, Mick?"

Tarmy ignored the hostile tone, "As your transporter is back in our neck of the woods, I was hoping to teleport up and personally thank you for saving Amanda, my daughter and all the others."

"You've just thanked me. Why do you need to teleport?"

"Because I'd like to have a chat with you as well," Tarmy replied. "I'd also like to bring a couple of friends up with me too."

Lars went very quiet for nearly twenty seconds. Finally, he replied, "Okay, you can teleport up but no weapons, understood!"

"No weapons," Tarmy agreed. "We estimate we'll be within safe teleport range in about six hours. Is that okay with you?"

"I look forward to seeing you," Krelling Lars lied.

~\*~

There was a slight shimmer, and three figures appeared in the teleport. Alpha 300s moved in and guided Tarmy, Goshawk and Wren to a recovery area, and food and drink were made available.

After they'd been in recovery for an hour, one of the Alpha 300s returned and said, "Are you feeling well enough to join Commander Lars?"

Tarmy took the lead. After glancing at the other two and receiving slight nods, he said, "Yes, we're ready."

The Alpha 300 led them to a large conference room. Tarmy was expecting to find Krelling Lars waiting for them, but he wasn't. Anticipating Tarmy's question, the Alpha 300 said, "The Commander will be with you in about fifteen minutes."

The machine then waved a spindly arm towards more food and drink, "Please, help yourselves."

Wren glanced around the room and swiftly picked out the cameras. Suspecting the worst, he moved towards Tarmy, placed a hand across his mouth and said, "We are being watched."

Tarmy copied Wren's example and said, "I realise that."

He passed the message onto Goshawk.

Following suit, Goshawk covered his lips too, "Then we don't say anything until Krelling Lars arrives." He pointed at the food and drink, "That spread looks good. I don't know about you, but I'm going to tuck in."

He picked up three plates, handed them around, grabbed two vol-au-vents and began eating.

Wren was more circumspect, "What's in them?"

Goshawk shrugged, "I'm not sure, but most food on transporters and non-Terran colonies is made from fungus cultures. I can guarantee there won't be any Arcadian wolf and millipede in these."

Reassured, Wren selected two vol-au-vents and began chewing. He walked towards a large blister window and stared out at the universe. After a few seconds, he said, "It's so beautiful."

Sensing Wren's surprise, Goshawk covered his mouth to prevent the cameras from lip reading and then broke their pact of silence, "I gather that you used to work with Khan before you left Minton Isolation Facility 1."

"I did," Wren replied. "I didn't like him then, and I don't like him now."

Changing tack, Goshawk said, "The stars are beautiful as seen from space."

Wren's reply was slightly acid, "Why do I get the feeling that this conversation is not just small talk and is leading somewhere?"

Instead of commenting, Goshawk said, "As Minton Isolation Facility 1 is largely underground, I don't suppose you saw much of the stars when you were there."

Still covering his lips, Wren said, "That's true. But there is another reason. Arden has a very thin atmosphere. Although it's unbreathable and someone would die if they weren't in an air-car or environmental suit, the atmosphere is thick enough to carry mining dust with it, and the sky is obscured most of the time."

Goshawk latched onto the comment, "Would the mining dust help us approach Minton Isolation Facility 1 without being seen?"

Wren thought about the idea and said, "It might do. It's a question of timing, and if the winds are blowing the right way, it would certainly help."

While they were still staring out, the doors to the conference room swished back, and an Alpha 300 came in and announced, "Commander Krelling Lars."

Lars walked in a second or two later. Tarmy was surprised just how much Lars had aged since he'd last seen him.

He recalled most transporter personnel avoided life extension drugs. Ever since the Ambronootrop panic fifteen years before, the entire transporter community came to a collective decision and banned all LEDs.

After Tarmy had introduced everyone, Lars then reversed Tarmy's thoughts by saying, "I didn't recognise you at first, Mick; you don't appear to have aged at all. In fact, you look younger than I remember."

After Tarmy had reminded Lars of all the drugs that Samantha had pumped into his system before sending him to Arcadia, Lars said, "Well, I'm glad to see you alive and well. When Ord Morley's people teleported up, I feared the worst, and I thought you were dead for sure."

"We managed to escape," Tarmy replied but did not attempt to amplify.

Lars waved them towards a small seating area. Once they were all seated, Tarmy said, "Before we start, Krelling, "I would like to thank you for helping my daughter and friends escape from Samantha's clutches."

"I'm glad I was able to help," Lars replied. "But I hope you realise that your last escapade caused me a great deal of trouble. Samantha demanded that we didn't grant political asylum and that we return your daughter and your friends to Arden to face criminal charges."

"I would apologise, but I couldn't think of another way," Tarmy replied. "If I hadn't managed to warn Ord Morley, my daughter would probably be dead by now, and most of my old friends and colleagues would have joined her. Samantha is a tyrant with bloodstained hands, and she rules by fear."

"Understood," Lars replied. "I realise you had little choice."

Lars' face then hardened as he ran his eyes over Goshawk and Wren. "I don't think we've been introduced."

Tarmy did the honours and then provided Lars with some basic information about his colleagues.

Lars went quiet for a second or two and said, "Naturally, after being dragged into one confrontation with Samantha, I would like to avoid another."

Goshawk spoke for the first time, "I will make sure that you are not politically embarrassed."

"And how will you do that?" Lars demanded.

Goshawk joined in, "No mention will be made of this transporter either in my reports or any media briefings."

Tarmy said, "Let's cut to the chase, Krelling; we need the use of a shuttlecraft. Perhaps two. Your transporter must have shuttlecraft for hire."

"Of course," Lars replied. "We hire them out when customers need them."

"I have been led to believe that you will be making deliveries to Arden's South Pole Basin colony and Piccolomini," Tarmy replied.

"I might be," Lars replied suspiciously.

"No supplies for Samantha, though?"

Lars said, "You must have heard that Midway has imposed embargos on Samantha ever since she sent mercenary forces to Midway and caused total chaos. Most of the Salus System has followed suit, but not that it will make much difference."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm fairly certain most of the supplies being dropped at the South Pole Basin colony and Piccolomini will be diverted to Samantha."

When Tarmy showed surprise, Lars added, "The South Pole Basin colony and Piccolomini have always feared that Samantha will invade their territory. One of

the reasons Samantha hasn't invaded surrounding territories is because they are useful to her. As she's been subjected to several embargoes over the years, having independent states on her borders gives her backdoor access to Salus System's resources."

Tarmy chanced his arm, "Any chance of hitching a ride on the shuttles going to Piccolomini?"

"Piccolomini!" Lars said, "Only eighty kilometres from Minton Isolation Facility 1. Only eighty kilometres from Samantha's lair."

"Purely a coincidence," Goshawk lied.

Tarmy ignored Goshawk's comment and repeated, "Any chance of hitching a ride on the shuttles going to Piccolomini?"

Lars shook his head, "I'm afraid that all the shuttles going to Piccolomini are full."

When Tarmy's face fell, Lars said, "But I could hire you other shuttles. Always assuming you are prepared to pay commercial rates." He created a bubble image displaying a medium-sized shuttle with cutaways to display the interior.

As he had no idea of scale, Tarmy said, "How many air-cars could the hold take?"

Lars activated overlay, and outlines of standard air-cars appeared inside.

Lars said, "Four standard air-cars with some space left for other cargo."

"What about passengers?"

Lars said, "The passenger section will take twenty people."

“Like I said before, I’ll probably need two shuttles then,” Tarmy replied. “The shuttles would have to land at Burlington near Bottle Creek Zeelandia to pick up and take us to Piccolomini crater.

Lars gave him an approximate costing and then said, “For the avoidance of doubt, it would be a one-way trip.”

“Understood.”

Lars said, “I presume you have cargo?”

“Yes.”

“I also presume your cargo will be containerised and that I will be provided with documentation to confirm it doesn’t contain arms.”

When Tarmy hesitated, Lars held his hands up and said, “Okay! Don’t tell me! I’m not a fool. I know you are up to something but the less I know, the better.”

Lars then handed Tarmy a plastimetal document, “Get that signed. I suggest you get a public official to certify there are no arms on the shuttles. I would also suggest they certify that the passengers are archaeologists returning from Bottle Creek. If you do that, there is a strong chance that you won’t be searched when you land at Piccolomini.”

“What about quarantine?”

“Are you going to remain in Piccolomini?”

“I doubt it.”

“Then you should be free to leave,” Lars replied. But, he added, “One other thing and I haven’t said this, understood?”

When the other three nodded, Lars added, "Bribing the officials at Piccolomini to look the other way would also be a sensible move. If you want me to pass over a bribe and you recompense me, I can do that."

"Yes, please," Tarmy said.

Lars added, "If what you are doing goes pear-shaped, don't drag me into it, understood?"

"Understood."

Lars double-checked, "Are you sure two shuttles will be enough?"

When his three guests nodded, Lars said, "Okay. Two shuttles it is."

He called one of the Alpha 300s back. Once the machine was in the room, Lars reached out and shook everyone's hands and said, "Best of luck for the future. This droid will be pleased to go through the order with you."

Once the Alpha 300 had completed the transaction, Tarmy, Goshawk and Wren were shown back to the teleport bay. Twenty seconds later, they arrived back at Burlington.

During recovery, Goshawk glanced at the plastimetal document Krelling Lars had given Tarmy and said, "See if you can get Glyfin Fenmor to sign it."

"Why me?"

Goshawk looked sheepish, "Fenmore is still miffed that we've been preventing his people from leaving Bottle Creek,"

"Why Glyfin Fenmor," Tarmy said.

"He's an SSIAT official," Goshawk replied. He added, "We need to find a public official to certify there are no arms on the shuttles and that the passengers are archaeologists returning from Bottle Creek. Surely he's your man."

"We're asking him to lie," Tarmy replied.

"Sometimes the occasional white lie is necessary," Goshawk said. "Go on try him out, and he might surprise you."

~\*~

After setting time aside for recovery, Tarmy returned to Bottle Creek and searched for Glyfin Fenmor. Eventually, he found Fenmor in the Arena shop with Alund and Donc Gannon.

As Tarmy entered, Fenmor glanced up from the chair he was sitting in and said, "Well, well. You look very well, far better than the last time I saw you."

"Eh?"

Fenmor elaborated, "The boys have just been showing me a few interesting mini-movies they've made recently." He then activated a power bubble and began displaying the fake gladiatorial fights that had supposedly terminated Mick Tarmy, Claire Hyndman, Nonie Tomio and Alton and Klaien Mygael's lives.

Once the mini-movies had finished, Fenmor said, "An interesting script. Goshawk ordered them. Most people have these movies made as a joke, but I've never seen movies that show them dying. What's going on?"

Tarmy shrugged, "Why don't you ask Colonel Goshawk?"

"I doubt if he'd tell me," Fenmor replied. "That's why I'm asking you."

Tarmy shrugged, "I'm sure that Colonel Goshawk had his reasons for having them made. Like I said, why don't you ask Colonel Goshawk."

Instead of pursuing the issue, Fenmor changed tack and said, "Are you going to stay in Bottle Creek for long?"

Tarmy shrugged again, "To be honest, I don't know."

He handed over the plastimetal document Krelling Lars had giving him and said, "I've been told that I need that signed by a public official. I was hoping you'd sign it for me."

Fenmore eyed it thoughtfully and then jumped on the most salient points, "This is for shuttle certification."

Cornered, Tarmy said, "It is. Is that a problem?"

One of Fenmore's eyebrows arched, "You're asking me to certify that the passengers on the shuttles I know nothing about are returning archaeologists and that the shuttles won't be transporting arms and ammunition."

While Tarmy searched for an answer, Fenmore handed the form, "I'm not a fool. You and Goshawk are planning to attack Samantha. SSIAT can't become involved in anything that could be construed as a military operation."

"Who says it's a military operation?"

“Now you’re lying,” Fenmore challenged. Then, he reassured Mick, “Don’t worry, we will keep quiet, but we can’t get involved.”

~\*~

When Tarmy returned to Burlington, Goshawk said, “Well, did Glyfin Fenmor sign?”

Tarmy shook his head, “He refused, and I’m not surprised.”

Goshawk gave him a sharp look, “You haven’t told him what we’re planning, have you!”

“No,” Tarmy snapped. “And the form doesn’t mention Piccolomini.”

“Then why did he refuse?”

“He said that SSIAT can’t become involved in anything that could be construed as a military operation,” Tarmy replied.

Goshawk grimaced, “I think that Glyfin Fenmor is risk-averse. With retirement not long off, he’s not going to stick his neck out for anyone. So what do we do now? Can we find another official?”

A fraction of a second later, the form was snatched out of Tarmy’s hands and disappeared. Tarmy guessed that Alex had grabbed it and had taken it beneath his invisibility cloak and snapped, “Give it back, Alex.”

“Certainly, Corporal Tarmy,” a quiet voice said, and then the form fluttered down.

Goshawk snatched it mid-air and then frowned, “This is signed and witnessed. Look!”

Tarmy glanced at the form and confirmed Goshawk's observations, and said, "Alex has forged Glyfin Fenmor's signature."

Goshawk shrugged and then began grinning from ear to ear, "Signed and witnessed. It looks genuine enough to me. Thank you, Alex."

"It will pass inspection," Alex predicted.

Goshawk's smile increased, "Let's send it to Krelling Lars and see if he accepts it."

Tarmy let out a sigh of disapproval, "You mean we lie to Krelling."

"He wants us to lie to him," Goshawk replied. "He is prepared to help us, but he doesn't want fingers pointing at him. If he was misled by a forged document, he has a cover story to protect him."

"Okay," Tarmy replied. "But if Krelling finds out, I don't want you telling him that I provided the forgery."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### A Trip to Piccolomini

Nonie Tomio was horrified, “When you said you were going to speak to Krelling Lars, I thought you were just doing your bit to help Goshawk finish off Samantha. Now you tell me you are going with him. Why?”

Claire Hyndman thought about the conversation she’d had with Mih Valanson and said, “Mick needs to do this and finish Samantha off. If he doesn’t, Samantha will just keep on trying to kill us.”

Nonie gave Claire a sharp look, “You shouldn’t be encouraging him.”

Tarmy said, “To my way of thinking, the only way Goshawk will succeed is if he has Alex and our A10s to support him.”

“And what about us?” Nonie snapped.

“You two will go back to the nursery,” Tarmy replied. “For once, I’m the only one taking risks.”

Claire was about to argue, but Alex said, “It would be foolish if we all went. If things go wrong, Samantha could capture us all.”

Claire snapped, “What’s most likely to go wrong?”

“We are indulging in warfare,” Alex replied. “In war, the outcome is never guaranteed.”

“What about Khan?” Nonie said. “I heard talk that you were taking him with you.”

Tarmy cut in, "We are not taking Khan or his men with us because we don't trust them."

Goshawk added, "Nothing must be said to alert Khan about this operation."

"Why not?" Claire demanded.

"Because we are reasonably sure that Khan has been communicating with Samantha," Tarmy replied. "We believe he has implants similar to the ones we had."

~\*~

The two shuttles landed at Bottle Creek a week later. Once the dust had settled and the cargo bays had opened, one of the shuttle's attendants appeared and began organising the loading of the air-cars and arms containers, Alex and Tarmy's four A10 droids. An hour later, both shuttles took off and headed for Piccolomini Crater, Arden.

As the shuttles left Arcadia, Tarmy began having doubts.

Glancing at Goshawk, he said, "You do realise this operation could go badly wrong if Samantha catches a whiff of what we're doing."

Goshawk frowned, "Not getting the willies are you?"

"No," Tarmy snapped, "But Samantha has spies everywhere."

"And so do we," Goshawk countered. "Although the Piccolomini Crater administration complies with most of Samantha's demands, she's generally loathed. Although Krelling Lars help was beneficial, we have our own

influence at Piccolomini Crater, which goes back many years. When we land, no one will prevent us from heading towards the border.”

“You sound very confident about that,” Tarmy replied.

Goshawk’s smile widened, “Rule number one in life. It’s not what you know; it’s knowing who to bribe. We won’t be stopped.”

Goshawk cranked the seat he was in until it was virtually horizontal and said, “Shuttle flights seem to take forever. I don’t know about you, Mick, but I’m going to get some shut-eye.”

Within seconds, a hibernation canopy formed around Goshawk. Although Tarmy’s mind was buzzing with ‘what ifs’, he eventually levelled his seat and then allowed himself to fall into hibernation too.

~\*~

When the two shuttles landed at Piccolomini, Tarmy’s worst fears erupted. Within minutes of landing at Piccolomini, vehicles moved in on them. Strangely, Goshawk appeared unperturbed.

Eventually, Tarmy said, “Okay, what’s going on?”

“One of our best earners is training smaller nations like Piccolomini to defend themselves,” Goshawk said. “These are our guys, and they are going to act as our guides. They will also help us with the assault.”

Once the shuttles had been unloaded, they immediately took off again. As the shuttles disappeared

from view, Tarmy said, "This reminds me of history lessons I had when I was a kid. Old Earth kings used to burn their boats on the beach so that their troops wouldn't be tempted to desert and try to go back."

Goshawk gave him an icy look, "You've become an optimistic soul, haven't you?"

"I know Samantha," Tarmy replied. "If we're unlucky, she will have something up her sleeve."

"Then why did you volunteer to come along?"

"I know you won't stand a chance of taking her without our droids," Tarmy replied. "And I do want her gone. If we don't get rid of her, she will keep on attacking us."

Once the air-cars reached the crater rim, Goshawk issued instructions to keep low to avoid radar detection, and all the air-cars then rose en-masse and began hovering. Then, noting the mining dust clouds swirling around, Goshawk let out a sigh of relief and ordered an advance with Alex and the four A10s a hundred metres ahead as a skirmish line.

After what seemed like an eternity, Alex indicated he'd reached the minefield surrounding Minton Isolation Facility 1. After confirming that the minefield section had been deactivated, one of the A10s led two air-cars towards the airlock. Alex then opened the outer airlock and allowed a small team of Switzer troops in.

A few seconds later, the airlock opened again, and more combined forces moved in. Tarmy was tempted to say it was all too easy when lights began pulsing out in the minefield.

A moment later, the four A10s sank to the ground.

Goshawk's face drained of blood, "Samantha has reactivated the minefield, and the A10s have been deactivated."

A moment later, the whole area was flooded with light as small flying droids moved in on them, their spindly arms holding phasers.

A power bubble formed, and Samantha's image formed inside it. Samantha gave Tarmy and Goshawk an icy smile and then said, "Half your force is trapped inside, and your A10 droids have been de-activated. You can't win; you have twenty seconds to surrender, and if you don't, my droids will wipe you out."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### The Attack Continues

Goshawk swore, but before he could give any orders, there were a series of flashes, and Samantha's advancing droids began to disintegrate; one or two mines exploded as the damaged droids hit the ground. Then the A10s reactivated and joined in the barrage.

Twenty seconds later, the whole of Samantha's droid force had been annihilated. Tarmy glanced up, but Samantha's image and the power bubble no longer existed.

As Goshawk still seemed in shock at the speed of Samantha's attack and Alex's counter-attack, Tarmy began issuing orders.

After placing two A10s to guard against any other sneak attacks, he sent Alex and the other two A10s to support the Switzers already inside Minton Isolation Facility 1.

As the Switzers began moving deeper inside, they came upon closed bulkhead doors, but Alex's phaser cut through them in seconds.

~\*~

As the Switzer advance continued, Paula glanced at Samantha and said, "It is time for you to activate Lebensborn, Great Leader."

Instead of arguing, Samantha moved towards the safety of the large room with a Faraday cage built into the floor ceiling and walls. Once inside, she deactivated the cloak and moved into the workshop area.

Noting that the five boxes had gone, Samantha said, "I presume there have not been any hitches."

Paula said, "Your Lebensborn boxes have been distributed as instructed, Great Leader; the last two were up-shuttled from South Pole Basin colony to Salus Transporter Nine two days ago. The rest of your Lebensborn boxes have been placed in secret bunkers here on Arden."

"Good," Samantha replied. "Time to activate the rest of the plan."

A female humanoid emerged from behind a screen and joined Samantha and Paula. They went out into the corridor and joined the rest of Samantha's praetorian guard and worried-looking human technicians.

As smoke was noticeable in the surrounding air, Samantha realised that the Switzer forces weren't far away, and she began urging more speed. Once by the teleport, Samantha and her humanoid avatar instructed the technician to activate the teleport.

As Samantha and her avatar disappeared into the ether, Paula instructed the technician to wipe the teleports records. Once he'd done as required, she shot him dead and then advanced on the approaching Switzers.

~\*~

Ten seconds later, Unnan Vardis glanced at the two semi-developed images in his teleport and smiled at Marci, "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

He added smugly, "Well, well, well, if it isn't Samantha. You had us kidnapped, and now it's our turn to kidnap you."

When the two images remained silent, Unnan began checking his instruments. He grabbed a stun gun and passed it to Marci. He allowed the two figures to solidify, and the humanoid collapsed.

Moving forwards, he inspected Samantha and cursed.

Still keeping the stun gun trained on the two figures, Marci said, "What's the matter?"

"They're dummies," Unnan replied. "The bitch must have realised why we wanted to be teleported back, and she must have realised you'd record her teleport settings."

"So, where has she gone?"

Unnan Vardis shrugged, "That's the million ACU question."

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### Cormere, Midway

As Anna Maytell pulled on her coat and picked up Idrain's air-car fob, Sedra appeared as if by magic, "Were you planning to borrow Mr Idrain's air-car?"

Anna's hackles rose; Sedra had taken to referring to Idrain as "Mr Idrain" and not bothering to address her by any name at all. Controlling her instincts to give Sedra a tongue lashing, Anna just said, "Yes, why?"

"You are not insured to fly it," Sedra replied.

Annoyed, Anna walked back into the lounge and said, "Sedra says I can't use your air-car because I'm not insured."

Idrain frowned, "I'm not sure. As the offices are closed, I can't check it out."

Anna tossed the fob in his direction and said, "You'll have to come with me then."

Sedra stepped forwards, "If I was in the air-car, you would be insured."

Anna felt her anger getting close to flashpoint but deliberately suppressed it because she could sense that Sedra was deliberately winding her up in the hope she'd blow her top and could be labelled *unreasonable*.

Instead, Anna said, "Idrain's taking me because you have things to do - like housework."

Once out on the rooftop car park, Anna finally exploded, "You do realise that Sedra is doing my head in."

~\*~

As Idrain's air-car took off, Sedra moved toward Idrain's award statute and looked at it expectantly. Very soon, the RuniTrU would give her her orders.