

# **The Second Misadventure of Fragger Sparks: A Ranger Loses His Way**

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A Ranger Loses His Way

by Steven Fisher

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For Gary  
Childhood friend and blood brother

## Chapter 1

"How many men have we lost in the month since we captured this ship, Iso?"

Fragger Sparks asked his question of his second-in-command from the healing table of the dropship's sick bay. Around him in the cool darkness, a quietly whirring machine worked at repairing the injury to his ruined face. The Ranger didn't like to admit it, but he'd enjoyed the rest. The air conditioning was a relief from the heat of the steaming Jivaron jungle and the nasty swarmbugs hatched in its hell. He didn't miss the smell, either. Fragger sighed. Of all the planets in the universe, he'd managed to land on one that had a giant fart for an atmosphere.

The Ranger glanced at the surgical repair device, willing it to repair his damaged face but not holding out a great deal of hope for the treatment. To the energy weapons of the future in which he'd found himself, flesh had little more resistance than the thinnest sheet of paper. His left eye had never stood a chance against the power blade of Lord Lesto's officer in the battle for the ship. It was gone for good.

He turned his head to try to get a better look at Isoruku Watanabe. The movement sent a ripple of pain up the side of his head.

"Damn it, Iso, haven't you learned by now to stand on my good side? Come around here where I can see you with my remaining eye! It's damned maddening to keep talking to people I can't see. All I can hear is that heavy breathing of yours. Why don't you ask Dr. Lesto if she can give you a new nose?"

The sergeant's underslung jaw jutted itself into the Ranger's view. Underneath the rocky cleft Iso Watanabe called a brow, two brown eyes fixed an amused gaze on Fragger as a finger rubbed unconsciously at the pug nose that seemed perpetually plugged. It was a joke among the men that when Sergeant Watanabe snored, planets moved out of their orbits.

"What's so damned funny?" Fragger demanded.

"You want to deliver me into the hands of Lord Lesto's daughter? She's been trying to kill you ever since you took this ship and drove her father into the jungle. Since she hasn't succeeded yet, she'll settle for me just to get at you. Before that Aiforian woman would fix my nose, she'd cut it off and shove it up my rear end. And that's only if she couldn't get at my balls first. I have no idea of why you've kept that woman alive."

"Killing unarmed women isn't part of my job description."

"It's not part of mine, either," Iso said. "But when even a woman is trying to kill you, you get rid of her. Especially one as deadly as Lord Lesto's daughter. It's simple preservation."

Unwilling to admit that Iso might be right, Fragger countered, "She's fixing me, isn't she?"

Iso snorted. "She's not fixing a damned thing. The machine's doing all the work, and it's repairing everything but your attitude. You didn't find my breathing that irritating before you lost the eye."

A flare of pain in his cheek made Fragger snap out his words. "That's true. It was all the rest of you I found annoying. Now, I asked you a question. Give me an answer without *your* attitude. How many men have we lost since I've been cooped up in here?"

"I'll remind you, colonel, that you're the one with the attitude."

"Sergeant!"

"Twenty."

"And how have we lost them?"

"As far as I can tell, we've lost most of them to Tyco Radmuller's creatures, particularly the slipsnakes. The damned things are fast and deadly because they're so damned hard to see. The hellhounds are nasty but easier to avoid."

"You said 'most', Iso."

"Yes. Others were likely killed by Lord Lesto and his troopers. Lesto's not happy that we took his ship *and* his daughter. We thwarted his plans to make use of your hyperspace ability and humiliated him, all at the same time. And we certainly underestimated his ability to survive in the Jivaron jungle. The situation is aggravating."

"And dangerous," Fragger added. "Do you think Radmuller and Lesto have formed some sort of alliance so they can overcome our defenses?"

"It's possible, colonel, but I don't think so. Radmuller's megalomania prevents him from taking on partners, even ones who might benefit him. If Lesto forms an alliance with anyone, it will be with the Corpse and Ricer forces blockading Jivaro as part of the Great Powers fleet. My guess is that, at the moment, he's simply piggybacking on top of Radmuller's attacks so as to make the most of the opportunity to get his daughter and his ship back."

"You're probably right," Fragger admitted. "Shit! What are you doing to counter Lesto's and Radmuller's tactics?"

"I've sent Bucaram out with his headhunters to disrupt their attacks. The Shuar know the jungle better than anyone."

"And what are the results?"

Watanabe shrugged. "The usual tit-for-tat in jungle warfare. They kill a few of us. We kill a few of them. Radmuller is the one with the advantage in this situation. Apparently, he has an unlimited supply of his genetically modified abominations."

Fragger raised a brow at Watanabe's tone of indignation, wincing at the pain the movement caused. "Abominations?" I've never heard you use a term like that before. I didn't know these creatures bothered you that much."

"They didn't before," Iso said, "but that lunatic Radmuller has added something new to his mix of slipsnakes and hellhounds."

Fragger cursed at this news. "Jesus, now what?"

"Baboons and gorillas. Silverbacks. We're now facing pissed-off 400-pound beasts with the intelligence to plan attacks and the dogged persistence of Salinsky."

Fragger managed a grin at the mention of Corporal Salinsky. "I don't think Red would appreciate the association with apes, even if Radmuller has given them homicidal tendencies."

Watanabe returned the grin. "It's a promotion for Red to be compared to Jivaron primates."

"What duties have you assigned him?" Fragger asked

"The organization and maintenance of position defense."

"And he's doing it well, I'll bet."

Watanabe offered a nod of admiration for Salinsky's efforts. "Red was born for defensive warfare. It suits his plodding personality. Most of our losses have been on patrols. We've had a few incursions into the perimeter, but nothing bad."

Fragger asked, "Who got inside the perimeter?"

"Not who, colonel, what. Three of Radmuller's genmod baboons broke through and made it inside the ship. They got their teeth into a couple of troopers before we took them out."

"How'd they break through?"

"Sheer numbers," Iso answered. "And speed. Those little bastards can move fast."

"Attrition, That's Radmuller's strategy then?"

"That's as good a description I can think of," Iso answered. "And it's working too damned well. We've about exhausted the supplies from Lesto's dropship. He and his men weren't planning to stay on Jivaro long, so they didn't provision heavily. We get provisions from Shuar villages and supplement it with game from the jungle. But that means we lose people in the process."

"Well," Fragger said, thinking out loud, "in our attack, we killed the pilot for this ship, and we don't have one handy, so escape from Jivaro is impossible at the moment. And even if we could, our odds are not great at breaking through the planetary blockade. But we can't sit here and wait for Lesto and Radmuller to wear us down, either. So, the only solution is to go on the offensive."

"How?" Iso asked.

"Find Radmuller first and eliminate him. He's the greater threat with all those damned beasts of his. We have Lesto's daughter, so he'll eventually have to come to us."

"Eliminating Radmuller is easier said than done," Watanabe cautioned. "Bucaram has gotten close to him on a couple of occasions, but he sends those berserker gorillas and baboons swarming out of the jungle to launch assaults that allow him to escape."

"Well, there's a good way to counter that tactic, Iso."

"Which is?"

"Get me up and off this table and back into action. Radmuller and his creatures have never seen anyone with my abilities. I'll get that sonuvabitch, and I'll feed him to one of those damned snakes of his."

Fragger attempted to sit up and ran up against Iso's hand on his shoulder. He strained against the pressure, got nowhere, and collapsed back onto the table.

"I don't think so, colonel," Iso said. "You're in no condition to take on that lunatic and his army of beasts, even with your MASER abilities. You don't have the strength to tackle the jungle. You'd be exhausted before you even got close to them. The problem of Radmuller can wait until you fully recover. You're the one person we can't afford to lose."

"Damnit, I'm sick of being cooped up in here, Iso! At least get me outside so I can get some fresh air!"

Iso grinned down at him. "This is Jivaro, colonel. There is no fresh air. With all the rotting vegetation, the whole place smells like Salinsky and that damned *gark* leaf he chews."

"Very funny, Iso. Get me outside, anyway."

"I don't think you're ready yet," Iso said. "Not without a stim or pain pill, anyway. The troops need to see you in good health. It'll boost their morale."

"Then get me a damned pill!"

"I don't have access to them, you know that. We need to get the Martian in here. He and Dr. Lesto are the only ones who have access to the pharmacy."

Fragger sat up, ignoring the flash of pain in his head, and looked about the sickbay. "Where are they?"

"They're both tending to the men on sick call."

"Dr. Lesto's not trying to kill them as hard as she's trying to kill me, is she?"

Iso laughed. "No, as long as you're not a Rerun, you're in good hands with her."

"How are the men overall?"

"Tired of this planet, but otherwise fine. Except for Private Smedner."

"Smedner? Who's he?"

"A good jungle fighter, but insubordinate," Iso answered. "I've had to discipline him several times."

"What's his problem?"

"He was trying to force a Shuar wife and caught a curare dart in the ass. Unfortunately, she's one of Bucaram's wives."

Fragger groaned. "Smedner went after one of the *uwishin's* wives? Haven't you called the men together and briefed them on the Shuar tribal structure, Iso? You don't mess with the headhunters, much less the shaman's women."

Watanabe gave him an exasperated look. "Of course, I briefed them. Twice, in fact. But stupid is stupid, and testosterone is testosterone. The combination of the two means trouble."

"The idiot! When did this happen?"

"Two weeks ago."

"Bring him here," Fragger said. "I'll kick his ass right up into his throat."

"I can't do that, colonel. He deserted soon after Dr. Lesto treated him. He knew his life wasn't worth spit if the Shuar caught him alone."

Fragger swore. "Not only do I have to take on EarthCorp, your Ricer buddies and every other major power in the system, but I have to keep my own men from getting themselves killed before they even engage the enemy!"

"Relax, colonel. It's likely he's already dead," Iso said. "If Radmuller's creatures got hold of him, they tore him to pieces. Few people could survive out there alone. Besides, as you continually tell me, dealing

with these problems is all part of command."

Fragger glowered at Iso. "Do you always have to make so much damned sense?"

"Isn't that what you're paying me the high creds for?"

"Fuck you!"

"Quaint profanity from 600 years ago doesn't get the job done," Watanabe pointed out.

"This isn't fair, you know, Iso."

"What isn't fair?"

"*You're* the one with the rash temper. *You're* the one who rides off on his horse in all directions at once, especially when somebody gets your goat about your *buraku* background of being an untouchable in the society of the Royal and Imperial Commonwealth of Nipponese Empires. *I'm* the one who's supposed to be cool, calm and collected, not a Ricer like you."

"And so you are," Watanabe said. "Most of the time. However, the fact that you're snapping and snarling at everyone who comes into sick bay proves two things. One, you're on the mend, and, two, you're not completely healthy yet. So, take it easy outside. We're going to need you in good shape because one of our scouting parties reports a landing by an Aiforian party that's been hopping about the planet trying to contact us. They're about a week away, should we want to let them find us. If that's the case, you'll want to be in shape to deal with them."

"They haven't spotted our location, have they?" Fragger asked in alarm.

"Not in my opinion. As I said, they've hopscotched around Jivaro, landing in sectors they consider likely spots to find us. Plus, they've been slowed down by tropical storms. I've been monitoring weather forecasts from the blockade ships in orbit. Apparently, the Jivaron hurricane season is expected to be unusually active this year. But, the Aiforians were bound to get close sooner or later, storms or no storms. They're broadcasting openly, trying to get our attention"

"What do they want?" Fragger asked.

"To talk about the release of Lord Lesto's daughter, of course."

"Talk the usual way, I suppose—with energy weapons."

"Could be," Iso said. "What's different this time is that they've let a vidman do most of the talking in delivering their requests to meet with us."

"What's a vidman?"

"Someone who reports the news. His name is Watrun Wik. He says he's been brought along by the Aiforian ambassador, one Heisst Wenghorn, to hear your side of the story. Wik's made a point of calling himself an independent vidman."

"More likely a government propagandist hack," Fragger said. "Still..."

Iso raised an eyebrow. "This Wik interests you? It's likely just another ploy."

"More than likely," Fragger agreed, "however, if this journalist really is what he says he is, then maybe we can use him to our advantage. A sympathetic eyewitness can be a valuable asset. Everybody loves an



underdog and guess who that is on this planet?"

"Don't remind me," Iso grumbled.

"Iso, here's a cold, hard fact. We need the truth to get out more than we need more weapons. EarthCorp, the Ricers, everyone will always outgun us. Maybe we can outgun them with the truth. It's the one edge we're lacking."

"Soldiers don't talk, they fight, colonel."

"Leaders do both," Fragger countered. "But enough talk about vidmen. We'll let Wenghorn and Wik stew for a while and decide later whether to contact them. Continue monitoring their communications. Right now, commlink the doctor and Buurk and get them here so I can get out of this place. It's about time you do something useful for a change besides harassing your commander."

"What do you need Dr. Lesto for?" Iso asked.

"She can get the pill for me."

Iso frowned. "Buurk can do that. You simply want to aggravate her again, don't you? You find it amusing to have an Aiforian noblewoman tending to someone she considers inferior."

"Call it a lesson in humility."

"Humility, my ass! Colonel, you've got to stop provoking her. She keeps looking for ways to kill you, and your actions just make her redouble her efforts."

"I know, but I can't help myself. That attitude of hers just pisses me off no end."

"And yours pisses *me* off no end," Iso said. "You two are like scorpions in a bottle. One of you is going to end up dead. I'd just as soon it wasn't you."

"Iso, my head hurts, and you're making it hurt worse. Now, do as I ordered and get those two in here."

Iso growled and reached for his commlink with one hand while with the other he gave Fragger the finger.

## Chapter 2

Ten minutes later, Buurk and the doctor entered the sick bay. Andriana Lesto came in with the same expression as she always did, a look of disgust at the fact she was being forced to treat an inferior from the past, a Rerun. Fragger blew a kiss at the slim physician from the bed, causing the ice-hard blue eyes to narrow. Fragger grinned at her response. Aggravating Lord Lesto's daughter was one of the few pleasures he'd had during his recovery.

*But, Iso is right, irritating her is a dangerous game, he admitted, but I hate racists. I ran into enough of them back on Old Earth. Now, the present time has added aristocratic snobbery. It's a toxic mix, especially for me.*

He studied her as she approached, admiring her beauty. In their time together, he'd also come to appreciate her tough competence and love of family. He wished that love extended beyond the Aiforian nobility of which she was part. But, beyond the aristocracy, people were objects to be despised and used as suited her whims.

*And that rankles me no end.*

"What do you want?" she demanded as she reached his bed and looked down at him.

"You have a terrible bedside manner, doctor. No wonder few of your patients survive your treatment."

Her reply was acid. "All of my normal patients do just fine, thank you."

"Well, fortunately, I'm a Rerun," Fragger said, irked as always by her condescension. "And we're made of tougher stuff than 'normal' humans. I'll remind you that this piece of re-awakened 'garbage' from the past took this ship from your father, drove him into the jungle, and captured you."

The doctor reddened at his jab and asked again in a frigid tone, "What do you want?"

"What I want is to get outside."

"I'm not stopping you. Go wherever you want."

"I need a stim/pain pill. Get me one, doctor."

She went to the pharmacy and unlocked it, giving the Ranger time to check out her figure.

*It was a good sign I have interest again in the female form. It means I'm definitely recovering. And Lord Lesto's daughter has a fine shape, I have to admit.*

Beneath the rough, dark crew fatigues, the breasts and hips still managed to assert their shape despite her thinness. A ram-rod straight bearing helped the effect. It was the aristocratic arrogance on the face that ruined it for Fragger. Andriana Lesto had the expression of a golden-skinned, hard-hearted angel who was pissed off because they were letting riff-raff like him into heaven.

She returned from the pharmacy with two pills and a glass of water and offered them. The Ranger squinted his good eye at the medication, then arched an eyebrow at her.

"I asked for one, not two."

"They're a smaller dosage. You'll need two."

Fragger turned his head to the medic, "Buurk, check the medication out for me, would you? I'm still not seeing small things well, and I don't think I trust the lady."

The doctor stepped back as Buurk took the pills from her hand, and Fragger suppressed a grin at her reaction to the Martian. The medic's size intimidated everyone, but there was a large and gentle soul inside the man that revealed itself once you got to know him, something Andriana Lesto would never realize with her contempt for beings she considered inferior.

Buurk stood seven feet tall. The genetic adaptation to the thin Martian atmosphere made his chest look nearly as wide. With a splayed nose, eyes set back under ledge-like brows, and a broad mouth, Buurk looked like the genetic engineers had used Abraham Lincoln as a model and not quite gotten things right.

As he watched the medic examine the pills, Fragger was happy to see that the Martian no longer seemed morose. After their landing on Jivaro, Buurk had felt lost and useless in a climate that was unbearable to him. A jungle planet was as alien to the medic as the deserts of Mars would be to the head-hunting Shuar of Jivaro. Depression had set in, and Fragger was afraid the medic would kill himself by simply wasting away in the jungle heat. But, the attacks by the Lesto's men, Radmuller's creatures, and the jungle itself had given Buurk back his purpose in treating the wounded and ill. He was useful again, and that was all any man could ask.

*Plus, he's a handy check on Andriana Lesto. He despises her as much as she despises him.*

Buurk scowled and spoke in a voice deep as a pipe organ. "They're not the standard stim/pain pill, colonel. They look like hyper-stimulants. The doctor's been busy, doing some cooking on the side. Users call it the "white bitch."

"How appropriate," Fragger said.

Buurk glared at Dr. Lesto. "One pill would cause heart damage and a stroke at a minimum. Two would kill the colonel. I'll get the right medication."

Fragger wagged a finger at the physician. "Shame on you."

"I'd have given you the whole bottle if I could have, Rerun!"

"I'm not talking about you're trying to kill me. I'm talking about the fact that you're so obvious about it. Are Aiforian nobles naturally stupid or do they have to work hard to achieve such a high level of incompetence? Perhaps it's the product of inbreeding."

The doctor flushed red. "It's not a good idea to insult your physician!"

"Even one who keeps trying to murder me?"

Fragger turned to the sergeant. "Iso, what's a suitable punishment for a woman who is incapable of learning?"

"I recommend latrine duty," Iso answered as Buurk returned with the medication.

"Sounds suitable to me," Fragger said as he downed the pills.

The doctor's face shaded from red to purple. "I will never, ever haul shit for you people! Never!"

"A pain goad will change your mind quickly," Fragger said. "You've seen how effective they are on Reruns."

The doctor paled and put a hand on the bed to steady herself. After a moment, she straightened and spat at him.

Fragger wiped the spit from his face, suppressing his own rage at her action. "Iso, she won't want to mess up her uniform, so bring her some Rerun rags and dress her in them. When she's suitably clothed, we'll head outside. You can put her to work, and I can check our defenses while I finally get some fresh air."

"Yes, sir. There's only one problem."

"Which is?" Fragger prompted.

"This is Jivaro, colonel. There is no fresh air."

### Chapter 3

The rotten-egg smell of the Jivaron swamp slapped Fragger across the face as he came out through the main hatch with Iso and Andriana Lesto—struggling between two burly guards -into a gusty wind smelling of future rain. Nonetheless, he was grateful to be outside the ship and equally grateful the pill had kicked in and relieved him of the pain in his face. The fierceness of the noonday sun startled the Ranger for a moment until he realized that the normally thick junglewood canopy forest had been leveled for a hundred meters around the ship to provide a clear field of fire. The dropship was now surrounded by red, muddy soil pockmarked with craters of standing water. A sudden fear that the site was easily visible from space was eased when he glanced up at the sky and saw the faint blur of the chameleon shield generated by the ship. The sensors of the ships orbiting the planet would pick up nothing but jungle signatures. He dropped his gaze and watched Iso and the guards lead the cursing doctor away toward the latrine area, admiring her shape again even though most of it was obscured by the Rerun rags. It had taken three troopers to strip her and get her into the clothes.

"Why don't you just bed her, colonel?"

Red Salinsky's shouted question startled Fragger out of his appreciation of Andriana Lesto's body. The big corporal slopped through the muck to reach Fragger's side. Salinsky's muscled shoulders made it look as if they'd torn holes in his camo uniform instead of the trek through the jungle to capture the ship. As always, Red reminded him of the comic book hero, the Incredible Hulk. The skin wasn't green, though. It wasn't brown either from the Jivaron sun. Red was so fair-skinned his tan approximated that of a lobster boiled far too long. The bullet-shaped head was the same color, except for the pale skull that showed through red hair when Salinsky lifted a cap to swear and slap a whining bug near his raptor nose.

"What the hell was that?" Fragger asked.

"The bug, you mean?"

"Yeah. It didn't sound like a swarmbug."

"We call them 'drillbits', colonel. Another Jivaron surprise. They don't have the nasty hornet's sting of a swarmbug, but they'll drive you crazy with the noise when you get into a cloud of them. Sounds just like what we call them."

"Did the drillbits put that shit-eating grin on your face as well?" Fragger asked.

"Nope, put it there all by myself. I was just wondering when you'd teach the doctor *your* bedside manner."

The corporal offered a one-man-to-another leer to emphasize his suggestion.

"Red, I'd sooner get into bed with a slipsnake. I'd have a better chance of surviving."

Red pointed at Fragger's head and then at his crotch. "Your brain is saying one thing, but your dick is saying another."

"She keeps trying to kill me, Red."

"Who isn't? You might as well die with a smile on your face."

Fragger matched Red's chuckle with one of his own, then said, "Let's stick to business, shall we? I came out here to survey the defenses, not trade jokes. I see you cleared the trees for good fields of fire, but

why so far out?"

Red sighed as he rubbed at an insect bite on one of his cauliflower ears. "It's those baboons of Radmuller's. They were launching themselves out of the trees in packs and chewing up our men. Two even managed to get inside the ship and take down two troopers before we got powerblades into them—"

"Yeah, Iso told me that," Fragger interrupted.

"—so, I created a perimeter large enough to keep them at a safe distance. I'd have set out mines, but Lesto didn't stock the ship with any. To compensate, I've got extra men on watch."

Fragger clapped a hand on the corporal's iron-muscled shoulder. "Well done. Show me the rest of your defenses now, so I'm up to speed on the tactical situation."

Red led Fragger away from the main hatch and along the hull of the dropship. He stabbed a thick, scarred finger at positions as they walked.

"I've set up interlocking fields of fire around the ship, colonel, although there are gaps due to battle damage and losses. Sprayguns are in double keyhole positions and manned by my men. The spraygun squads are protected with defilade positions manned by Iso's Ricer troops. They're better marksmen and love going one on one with the enemy."

Fragger smiled. "It looks as if you've finally gained some respect for Watanabe's Imperial Commonwealth troopers, Red."

The corporal shrugged. "I always had respect for the Ricers even if I said otherwise. They killed too many of my buddies on other worlds to think otherwise. Anyway, Bucaram and his Shuar are in charge of recon. It's their territory, and they know the jungle better than either my men or Iso's ever could."

"They're doing a good job?" Fragger asked, although he was sure he already knew the answer.

"Never seen people better at it," Red answered. "They can blend into the jungle like chameleons. See that pile over there?"

Fragger saw a smoking heap at the edge of the clearing. The stink of burned fur blew in on the wind. "Radmuller's creatures?"

"About 20 or 30 of them, colonel. Baboons, those damned hellhounds, a slipsnake or two. Bucaram's men spotted them and warned us before they could mount an effective assault."

"An assault? You're telling me Radmuller organized those creatures into an assault team?"

"Of sorts," Red answered. "It wasn't really an organized rush. They just came boiling out of the jungle intent on killing everything in sight. One cannon burst blew them apart. But, without Bucaram's warning, they might have breached the perimeter before the big gun was zeroed in."

Fragger shook his head. "I still can't believe Radmuller made those animals that smart."

"Just smart enough to come after us in any way he wants them to, colonel. Radmuller keeps probing our defenses with them. And why not? He doesn't care how many he loses, he gains information all the time, and he's wearing the men down."

Fragger swore. "Wearing people down seems to be a specialty of everybody and everything on this

planet."

"We're going to have to take care of Radmuller or get offworld," Red said. "We ain't got as many soldiers as he has creatures, that's for sure."

Fragger stifled a sigh. Under the artificial energy of the stim pill, there was still a weariness deep in his mind borne of his long journey across time, stars, and the Jivaron jungle. But he didn't want Red or any of his men to sense the fatigue that ate at the borders of his confidence.

*Still, he admitted to himself, at the moment, there's nothing I want more than to go back inside the ship and lie down.*

"Are you all right?" he heard Red ask.

Fragger forced a grin. "Haven't been up in a while, Red. I guess I overestimated how much strength I'd lost. Let's finish the tour, then I can get back inside."

*Better that you think me physically weak than mentally weak, Red...*

"Let me help you."

"No!" Fragger said. "This is no time for the men to see me needing help. Just take it slow, and I'll make it."

The corporal nodded and led the way around the hull of the dropship, pointing out defensive positions as they went. Fragger greeted the men, joking that they were the best looking troopers within a 100 meters of the ship, but smelled worse than the swamp. They returned his greeting as soldiers should, with good-natured profanity. Their actions cheered and depressed the Ranger at the same time. It meant that they were heartened by his first appearance outside the ship. But, it also meant that they expected him to extract them from danger.

*And, at the moment, I have no clue of how to do that.*

Fragger felt his shoulders sag, and he admonished himself back into a Ranger's ramrod-straight posture by telling himself, *By God, Rangers lead the way even if it's only into proper military bearing!*

Red leaned close to his ear and whispered, "It's time to cut the inspection short, Colonel. You're looking pale."

"No!" Fragger said. "We *will* continue this inspection, and we *will* make it all the way around this dropship!"

"You're sure?"

"You're damned right, I am. Just get me to the latrine area. The sight of Andriana Lesto hauling shit will give me the boost I need."

Red led the way, shouldering aside a detail of three troopers who cursed until they saw who it was. Fragger was sure they'd learned fast that an irritated Red Salinsky was best not provoked. He followed the mountainous back of the corporal until Salinsky halted in the shade of the dropship's aft.

"There she is," Red said, pointing a finger to the north.

Bent under a crude junglewood yoke with a bucket dangling at each end, Andriana Lesto toiled through the mud toward smoking fuel drums. The smell of burning shit blew toward the ship on a steady breeze.

Fragger enjoyed the sight of a humbled Aiforian noblewoman until he noticed a cluster of troopers parking their behinds against the hull of the ship.

"What the hell are all these men doing here, Red?" Fragger demanded. "They shouldn't be bunching up like that even if the doctor is a sight worth watching."

"They're not here for the doctor, colonel, not most of them, anyway. It's the smoke. It keeps the swarmbugs and drillbits down to a minimum."

"Well, goddamn it, tell them to—"

An inhuman shrieking drowned out his command. Heads snapped toward the jungle as troopers shot to their feet, weapons at the ready. Fifty meters beyond the shit cans, junglewood trees shook frenzied leaves, but nothing appeared out of the bloodgrass at the base of their trunks.

"Radmuller likes his psychological games," Red said. "A whole lot of screaming baboons jangles the nerves, but we haven't had any attacks in a while."

"Call Dr. Lesto back, anyway," Fragger ordered. "We can't afford to lose her."

Red started to call to the doctor, then stopped. A puzzled look came over his face. "What the hell? What's she doing?"

Andriana Lesto had dropped the yoke and buckets. She pointed toward the jungle, back at the ship, and then broke into a frantic run.

Red straightened in alarm. "Slipsnakes! Gunners, lay down fire behind Dr. Lesto!"

The staccato burst of spray guns, interspersed with the sharper crack of rifle, cut the air. A shit can toppled over, and Fragger saw the yellow-ochre spots of a gen-mod anaconda's side sliding by it through the muck. The snake slithered at a speed he wouldn't have thought possible if he hadn't experienced an attack himself.

"Run faster, Andriana!" he heard himself shout.

It was unneeded advice. The doctor put on a burst of speed just as the snub nose of the snake's head struck. It caught her pants leg and pulled. The doctor yanked hard against the reptile's grip, and Fragger heard cloth rip free. She fell and then clambered forward on all fours as weapons fire tore into the snake. The beast writhed under the impact of concentrated volleys and was shredded into chunks of flesh. Andriana Lesto scrambled toward the ship until she dropped behind Fragger, panting from the effort. The ice-blue eyes glared at him from a mask of mud and shit.

Fragger twisted about to grin down at her. "You never looked better."

"You ... you ... you Rerun bastard!" she said, cursing at him between gasps for air.

"Doesn't she look good?" Fragger asked Red, expecting the corporal to join in the needling. Red Salinsky had the rough-and-ready sense of humor typical of infantrymen of any age. But there was no return grin, only a frown directed toward the jungle.

"What's the matter, Red?"

"The attack, colonel, it doesn't make any sense."

"Why not?"



"Why go after Dr. Lesto? She's of no strategic or tactical importance to Radmuller."

Fragger shrugged. "Target of opportunity, I suppose. After all, they're still just animals even if Radmuller has modified them for increased intelligence. They're smart, but they're not so smart that they could pick individuals out."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Red said. "Radmuller keeps on changing them, and they keep on getting better at what they do."

A trooper's warning cut off the exchange. "Snakes! More snakes! Apes! More goddamned everything!"

Fragger snapped his head in the direction the soldier was pointing and saw the mud hump itself into dozens of slithering snakes headed toward the dropship. Among them, primates—chimpanzees, baboons, and silverback gorillas—laid their knuckles into the mud and propelled themselves forward, howling out challenges.

"Engage them!" Red shouted as he sprinted toward the defensive emplacements to direct the engagement.

Fragger stood where he was to observe the action. He was pleased to see Red's troopers lay down fire with devastating effect. The weaponry chopped reptiles and primates into bloody lumps of flesh.

"Some fun, huh?" Fragger turned about to ask Andriana. A strangely satisfied and smug smile played on her lips as her eyes focused on something behind him. The Ranger whirled, ready to accelerate, but a powerful hand gripped his ankle and jerked him onto his back. Before he could move, a weight jumped onto his chest, and he stared into the slaving jaws of large male baboon. It thrust its dog-like snout toward his face. The smell of dead meat rolled out of the beast's mouth. The Ranger fought back, clutching its throat. It broke his grip and leaped over his head. Fragger scrambled on to his hands and knees to see if the male was attacking the doctor, but another jerk on his ankle dropped him face-first into the mud. The Ranger swore, rolled onto back, and stared into the faces of a troop of snarling baboons. Two of them grabbed his ankles and pulled, dragging him over the ground and away from the ship.

"Red!" he shouted. "Red, goddamn it, give me some help here!"

Hairy fists clubbed him across the jaw once, then twice.

After the second blow, it was a pleasure to sink into blackness.

## Chapter 4

Rain dripped pleasantly on Fragger's face. It was a soothing counterpoint to the throbbing in his jaw. He didn't really want to open his one good eye, but the growling of thunder overhead prompted him to check his surroundings. Jivaro's violent downpours could drown a man if he found himself lying in a low spot.

The Ranger looked up and sucked in his breath.

The rain wasn't rain.

It was slobber, straight from the snarling mouth of a silverback mountain gorilla bent close to his face. The thunder he'd heard didn't come from the sodden sky above the animal's enormous head. It rumbled from the male's furry throat as it glared down at him with reddened, enraged eyes. Fragger raised his head to get a better look at the beast and make sure he wasn't dreaming a very bad dream. The motion forced the gorilla erect into a chest-pounding, roaring display of fury that echoed through the jungle. The musky, rank smell of primate hair roiled the air.

Fragger estimated the great ape had to weigh 500 pounds. It was clear that, with its massive arms, it could toss him like a Frisbee if it decided to do so.

*Or kill me with one swipe of those giant hands of his,* Fragger thought. *But it hasn't done so yet. It's one of Radmuller's creatures so I think it just wants to intimidate me. And he's doing a damned good job of it! Christ, Radmuller took a gentle, vegetarian primate and turned it into a snarling terror.*

A deep, commanding voice cut through the great ape's chest-pounding. "Bellisarius! Back off. That's enough, boy. You did your job just fine. Just stay close to him"

The gorilla dropped its head and gave Fragger a snarl of contempt before digging its knuckles into the ground and swinging itself behind the Ranger. The animal's movement revealed the owner of the voice, hands on his knees, sitting on a rotted junglewood stump. The stump might as well have been a king's throne, Fragger decided, after seeing the entourage that fanned out in a vee from the man's position.

*But it's the oddest entourage a king ever had!*

It was a mixture of baboons and gorillas, some of which had hellhounds on strong leashes. The air filled with grunts, screeches, growls, the snapping of jaws, and a restless yearning to kill something.

Fragger knew only one man could be holding them in check.

Tyco Radmuller.

Dr. Shaper.

The voice was much bigger than the man. Radmuller wore a khaki shirt, shorts, and calf-high white socks that rose neatly out of jungle boots. He was a short man with a fussy air about his posture as if he were annoyed by the intractable messiness of the jungle environment in which he found himself. Fragger guessed him to be around five-foot-four tall, exactly as Iso had described him back on the Gulag dropship they'd used to escape the Ricer HELOT vessel and get to Jivaro. Next to the burly Corpse soldier standing by him, Radmuller looked like an extremely malevolent schoolboy.

Fragger started to laugh at the contrast between the two men, then cut it short. Despite his small size, Radmuller radiated an aura of authority and the expression on his face was anything but childish. The

grey-blue eyes set above prominent cheek bones seemed to regard everything about them as potential specimens to be dissected. The arched eyebrow, the precisely parted blond hair and a patrician nose above a tautly-drawn mouth, all spoke of an ancestry of German aristocracy.

*Decadent German aristocracy*, Fragger decided. *He carries the same diseased attitude of the EarthCorp Interrogators who worked me over while in orbit over Khanwat. It's the objective mind-set of an entomologist studying a particularly interesting bug.*

"Dr. Shaper," Fragger said as he stood.

Radmuller frowned. "That's not my name, Rerun. It's Dr. Radmuller, and you will address me as such."

"It's Colonel Sparks, not Rerun," Fragger shot back. His jaw and head still pounded, and he was thirsty but he was determined not to let the little man gain an edge on him.

Radmuller's frown turned into a smile of contempt. "Unlike you, I earned my title, Sparks. I didn't bestow it upon myself."

"My men gave the rank, Radmuller, and, unlike you, I haven't betrayed my title."

"Advanced it, you mean," the doctor said.

Fragger's head swam with sudden nausea from the beating he'd received from the primates, and he couldn't focus his thoughts to the point necessary for acceleration. Seeking to buy time until his mind cleared, he changed the direction of a fruitless conversation, "Are we through fencing with words? I see now how you managed to capture me. I had a traitor in my midst."

Radmuller glanced up at the soldier next to him. "Private Smedner is a man of practicality. He had no wish to have his head shrunk by the barbarian Shuar."

Smedner smirked at Fragger. Holding a PPC rifle at waist level and trained squarely on Fragger, the private was a beefy man with buzz-cut brown hair and a ski-slope nose. His posture held the false arrogance of a man who'd cheated death and thought it was due to his own cleverness. The Ranger was sure all the cleverness had come from someone else. A memory popped into his head—Andriana Lesto pointing in his direction when she ran from Radmuller's creatures back at the ship—and he suddenly knew the source of the cleverness.

"He's a man of expedience, that's for sure," Fragger said, "but no brains. He tried to rape one of the Shuar wives, a wife of the *uwishin*. He's lucky he's still got his balls, small though they may be."

Bristling at the remark, the private raised his rifle.

"Smedner, keep your position!" Radmuller ordered. "Your former commander is just trying to goad you into another stupid act."

Smedner lowered the weapon and shrugged. "Dr. Lesto and I were smart enough to get you here."

"She pointed me out to them, and you directed the attack," Fragger said.

Smedner nodded.

"Private, you nearly got Dr. Lesto killed in the process. I don't think she'll forget that."

"Everyone takes their chances in combat, Rerun, you know that as well as I do."

"Yes, private, I do. Of course, I also know that deserters happen to die particularly nasty deaths."

Smedner smirked again. "That may be, but once Dr. Radmuller is through with you, you won't be around to see it."

Fragger turned his attention back to the little man. "I won't waste any more words on a coward, so, Radmuller, I'll tell you the same thing I've told everybody else. You're after my MASER abilities. I don't know how my abilities work. I only know that they do."

"I've no doubt of that," Radmuller said. "Trash like you wouldn't possess the knowledge of how to slip in and out of hyperspace in such an extraordinary way. And even if you did possess the knowledge, your Rerun brain couldn't comprehend it."

"And yet here I am in spite of the best efforts of Corpse and Ricer interrogators."

"Indeed," Radmuller acknowledged before adding a sly sneer to his agreement. "But up until now you've been in the custody of amateurs. You're in my expert hands now. Look around you, Rerun. Do you think you're much of a challenge compared to my creations? Your brain is less than a step beyond that of a gorilla."

"Well, this brain is going to accelerate me out of here. Then you'll find out how much of a challenge I can be."

"Rerun, if you could do that, you would have done it by now. At this point, I don't know how your MASER abilities work, but I suspect they call for a clear mind and full concentration, and that's something you don't have right now. And won't have."

Radmuller motioned at Bellisarius. Fragger caught a glimpse of the gorilla's fist before it slammed into his cheek and drove him into the ground. Ears ringing, he struggled back up, determined not to show weakness in the face of the enemy.

"I'm an animal, then, less than human?" Fragger asked. "Times change little, Radmuller. Back on old Earth, we had a man, Dr. Joseph Mengele, called the Angel of Death. He was a sadistic torturer and murderer of men, women and children, all in the name of bogus science and racial purity."

"I kill no one unless they attack me," Radmuller said. "Look around. None of my creatures are dead, are they?"

Fragger stared at the beasts lining the clearing. The primates snarled, sharing a red-eyed purposeless hunger. Among them, hellhounds growled at each other in unfocused anger.

*They've all been brought to the edge of rage, and then left there until Radmuller gives a command. It has to be an endless frustration. No wonder they're ready to kill on the spot.*

The Ranger found unexpected pity welling up inside him despite the fact that the creatures would rip him apart upon word from the doctor. He wished the nausea would subside so he could accelerate and get his hands on Radmuller's throat.

"No, they're not dead, Radmuller, but they might as well be."

"I give them the gift of augmented intelligence, and you say they'd be better off dead, Rerun?"

"That kind of intelligence isn't in their nature, and you know it."

The answer was met with a shrug. "Their old inferior natures are not my concern, Sparks, only their new and superior natures. It will translate eventually into augmented intelligence for all human beings."

"Except Reruns, of course."

"They will serve an important part in the advancement of humanity," Radmuller said. "Especially you."

"I'm sure," Fragger said. "Why are we having this conversation? You want only one thing from me. So, why waste time in talk?"

"A civilized chat in the midst of all this unruly jungle, is that too much to ask, Rerun? My pets are my wonderful creations, but conversation is not their strong point, I admit. Besides, it's all to your advantage."

"What do you mean?"

"The longer you talk, the longer you live."

"I've heard that from every interrogator the Ricers and Corpses have thrown at me. I'll outlive you, Radmuller, I promise you that."

"Perhaps you will, Rerun, but what will your mental state be after I've finished extracting the secret from your mind?"

"It couldn't be any worse than sitting here listening to your bullshit."

"Very well. It's time to get back to base, anyway."

Radmuller stood and brushed debris from his shorts. He reached behind the tree stump and hoisted a bag on top of it. He rummaged in the bag and pulled out a pair of odd-looking hand cuffs.

At the sight of them, Fragger strained to focus his concentration on engaging his MASER abilities.

Radmuller barked a sharp order. "Bellisarius, hold the prisoner."

The Ranger winced as a massive hand gripped the back of his neck.

"Hold out your hands, Rerun," Radmuller ordered.

Fragger obeyed, and the doctor snapped the cuffs around his wrists. The Ranger inspected them closely as Radmuller punched in a code on the digital array on the left cuff.

"What's that for?" Fragger asked.

"Try the shift to hyperspace, and you'll find out, Rerun."

Bellisarius cuffed Fragger behind the back of the head as an added warning shot against escape.

"Easy," the doctor cautioned the silverback. "I need the Rerun in one piece for now. Don't hit him or hurt him in any way."

The gorilla snarled, showing sharp canines, and obeyed, but the glint in primate's eyes showed Fragger the obedience was temporary.

"Form a line behind me, all of you," Radmuller ordered the gorillas and baboons. "Unleash the hounds. Let them range about us in case the enemy has followed."

Hellhounds howled and quivered with excitement as the gorillas snapped leashes off the thick necks of the genetically-modified dogs. The hounds bounded into the jungle and were out of sight within seconds.

The remaining animals fell obediently into line behind Radmuller. Fragger, jabbed in the kidneys by Bellisarius, gasped at the pain and started forward.

Two days later, his kidneys were even sorer, and the afternoon heat made him snap when Bellisarius poked a thick finger into his side again. He swung around and belted the gorilla full in the face with his cuffed fists. The silverback howled in rage and backhanded the Ranger ten feet into a puddle off the trail. Fragger scrambled to get up out of the water for another go at the beast. A searing bolt of energy shot through his body. It dropped him back to ground and left him jerking spasmodically. When the seizure passed, he collapsed, as liquid as the puddle into which he'd fallen. His vision blurred.

When it returned, he saw Radmuller standing above him with Bellisarius by his side. The gorilla wore the same smirk on his face as did his master.

"My variation on pain goad technology," the doctor said. "Effective, isn't it?"

Fragger didn't answer.

Radmuller shoved a toe into his ribs. "Isn't it?"

"Ye-yes!" the Ranger gasped.

"Care to try to escape again?"

"I-I wasn't trying to escape. That damned gorilla keeps poking me. He's been doing it for two days."

Radmuller turned with a frown to the silverback. "Bellisarius, you disappoint me. You've disobeyed my orders. I have another pair of cuffs. They'll fit you well. Do you want to end up like this Rerun, writhing on the ground in excruciating pain?"

The silverback snarled in defiance.

"Do you?" Radmuller demanded.

The gorilla snapped its head from side to side to indicate it didn't.

"Well, then, behave yourself. You're slowing us down with this ridiculous behavior."

Fragger lost track of the next few days, knowing only that Bellisarius was content with an occasional trip that sent him sprawling into the muddy soil. The weather had dampened the ape's enthusiasm for torture. A wind had sprung up from the southwest and steadily gained intensity, driving rain before it until it seemed to Fragger that a horizontal flood was in the air.

*Damn, this is just a tropical storm according to what Iso told me earlier. I'd hate to see what a full-blown hurricane is like on this planet.*

The idea of more rain and mud sapped his strength further, and he stumbled through the jungle, too tired to care about his eventual fate at Radmuller's hands. Hours later, he was ready to flop to the ground no matter what Bellisarius did when excited shouts and grunts shook him out of his exhaustion. Ahead, the white spire of a tower, festooned with communications dishes, poked above the jungle canopy. Around him, the doctor's primates danced and gibbered in a complete loss of discipline. For a moment, hope surged in Fragger at the thought of an opportunity for escape. Then, he remembered the cuffs and sank

back into despair.

"Get back in line!" he heard Radmuller shout. "You'll be fed soon enough, but you won't get fed at all if you don't maintain order!"

Grumbling snarls and barks met the order, and discipline was nearly restored when one of the baboons broke ranks and ran toward the base. A mob of primates ran after him and disappeared into the rain, leaving a red-faced Radmuller shouting futilely into the air.

A grunt of surprise sounded behind Fragger. He turned and saw Bellisarius falling forward. The full weight of the silverback dropped on the Ranger, squeezing the air from his lungs and knocking his head hard against the ground. Galaxies of pain wheeled about his brain as he looked into the open jaws of the silverback. Blood spurted out the throat and coated the gorilla's fangs. It trickled down onto the ground and spread under Fragger's head. Dimly, he heard shouts and the screaming of hellhounds mesh with the sizzling bolts of energy weapons.

Fragger smiled.

Radmuller had been ambushed.

The Ranger didn't know if it was Lesto or some of his own men, and he didn't really care. Under several hundred pounds of gorilla, it was getting very hard to breathe.

*But, I'm more than glad to die if Radmuller got what he deserved. One less psychopath for the world to deal with.*

Consciousness came and went. It came again as he felt the weight of the great ape lifted off his body. His lungs sucked in air. Fragger coughed, gagged, and drew in oxygen until he could breathe normally again. He looked up to find out who his rescuers, or new captors, were.

"Bucaram!"

The headhunter and several of his men stood above Fragger, rain pattering hard on their golden brown skin. The Shuar *uwishin* had the high cheekbones of all Shuar. The jet black hair was cut straight so that it hung just below the jaw. Bangs hung down over the forehead close to bushy black eyebrows. Thick eyelashes covered slitted eyes, giving the impression that Bucaram peered at the world from a hairy thicket. The nose flared like the blade of a plow. Beneath the nose, a full mouth curled upward in a grin above the strong chin.

"I'm disappointed, colonel. I find you in the arms of a gorilla when I have plenty of women for you. It's an insult to the Shuar."

"Bastard," Fragger laughed. "How did you find me?"

"Luck, mostly," Bucaram admitted. "We were out on patrol when Red got on the commlink and told us what had happened. We followed, keeping our distance until he caught up with us."

"Red? What the hell is he doing out here?"

Bucaram raised an amused eyebrow. "You expected us to take on Radmuller's creatures without someone in a power suit?"

"That's not what I mean. He should have stayed to command the defenses. Iso should have come."

"According to Iso, Red insisted on coming after you. Wouldn't take no for an answer. You know how bullheaded he can be. He took it as a personal insult that Radmuller's creatures were able to grab you."

Fragger grabbed the Shuar's offered hand and pulled himself up from the soggy, bloody ground. His head swam, and Bucaram caught him before he could fall.

"Take it easy, colonel."

"I'm fine. I haven't eaten in several days, and my brains are scrambled but no loss there."

Bucaram handed Fragger a skin of water and said, "Drink this, and we'll get you some food. After that, we should get moving. We need to get you out of danger. This storm is slow-moving, and the rain hasn't reached its peak yet."

Fragger took a deep drink from the skin, then shook his head. "Not until you take these cuffs off, Bucaram. Radmuller's got some sort of pain goad circuitry in them. If I get off the path, I get a full blast."

"Red!" the Shuar shouted. "Over here."

A second later, the corporal hove into sight through the rain. He held the helmet of his power suit under a thick arm. The other hand gripped a power sword, still coated with blood. Another sword hung from his side. The bullet-shaped head poked out of the suit neck like a belligerent turtle seeking more action.

"Hey, colonel. You look like the bottom of a latrine."

"And you look like you always do, Red, only uglier. Can you unlock these cuffs for me?"

Red bent close to examine the restraints, then answered, "Nope. Don't know the code."

"Shit!"

"But I can get them off another way. I brought along your blade. I thought you might need it. Hold your hands out, colonel," the sergeant ordered as he pulled the sword free and powered it up.

"Now, wait a minute, Red. You're pretty good at hacking with a blade, but this requires a little more delicate touch."

"That's why I'm using your sword. It has better balance than mine. Stand still, damn it. Some hero you are. Take on Lesto, Radmuller and half the galaxy and you're sniveling at a little lock picking?"

"I'm not snivel—"

Red's blade flicked down, cutting through the bar holding the cuffs together.

"Thanks, you great ugly—"

"I'm not finished yet. Hold up the hand with the input pad."

Fragger obeyed, and Red poked the tip of the sword into the pad. The spot where it touched melted and smoked. With a "snick," the cuff popped open and dropped to the ground.

"The other one's still on," Fragger said.

"I got eyes," Red replied. He applied the blade again, and the cuff joined its mate on the jungle floor. A big grin creased the corporal's face.



Rubbing his wrists, Fragger said, "You look entirely too pleased with yourself. You've been taking lessons from Iso, haven't you?"

"Yup, the little Ricer can handle a sword. Of course, I taught him a thing or two myself."

Fragger took the blade offered to him by Red. "The ship, it's safe?"

"It is."

"Where's Smedner? He was working with Dr. Lesto, you know."

"I figured that out when I found him here," the corporal said. "He's dead."

"You killed him? Bucaram won't be happy about that. He wanted his head for the attempted rape of his wife."

"He wouldn't want him without a face. I didn't kill Smedner, colonel. When we attacked, Radmuller's baboons panicked and went after the first thing in their path."

Fragger nodded with satisfaction. "A good end for a traitor. Where's Radmuller?"

"Gone. His creatures fought us off long enough for him to escape into his base."

"At least, we know where he is, Red. Let's go get him."

"Not going to happen, colonel. In the first place, you're in no shape for it. Second, I just finished reconnoitering his base. He's got several defensible buildings in there, and the whole area is crawling with his creatures. We haven't got enough men to take them on. Our first priority is to get you back to the ship and safety before Radmuller gets his beasts back under control and comes after us. Besides, this tropical storm hasn't finished dropping its rain on us. According to forecasts, it's going to get heavier before the storm passes."

Fragger swore, then calmed himself down and said, "We know where he is, that's the main thing. We'll come back and get the sonuvabitch."

"All in good time, colonel. Right now, go with Bucaram and his men. I'll stay behind to keep them busy so we can put some distance between you and the doctor."

"You're sure?" Fragger asked.

Red patted the hilt of his sword. "Colonel, I've been cooped up inside the ship's perimeter and haven't seen much action. It's time I rid myself of the rust that's been building up. Besides, I want to prove to Iso I'm not the clumsy clod in the jungle that he thinks I am."

"Okay, Red, but don't get cute and try to take on all of Radmuller's beasts. I need you in one piece. We've got bigger and better things to do than slice up a few silverbacks. Do you understand me?"

"I hear you, colonel."

"Good. Too bad you won't be with me when I get back. I've got a few choice words for Dr. Andriana Lesto."

"I'll bet you do," Red said. "I'll bet you do."

## Chapter 5

Spraygun bursts greeted Fragger and the Shuar as they approached the tree line close to the dropship. Cursing, they dropped to the muddy ground amidst another downpour.

"Goddamnit, Iso!" the Ranger shouted into his commlink. "I told you we were coming in! Get your men's fingers off those triggers!"

Fragger heard orders delivered in a blistering tone, and the guns went silent. Iso's raspy voice broke from the commlink. "Sorry, colonel. It's safe now. Come ahead."

"You're sure of that?"

"Absolutely. I told the men I'm coming out to meet you."

Fragger led the Shuar cautiously out of the jungle and into the sodden, blackened perimeter. The rain was so heavy he didn't see Iso until he stumbled into the barrel of a leveled particle weapon.

"Do I look like the enemy to you?" Fragger said as he pushed the barrel aside.

Lowering the weapon, Iso grinned. "No, you look more like one of Radmuller's baboons, a starved one."

Fragger started to bark back at his next-in-command, then looked down at the mess his body had become and laughed. His filthy clothes hung soddenly on a frame that had become more bones than skin.

"I *do* look like one, don't I?"

"Let's get inside before we drown," Iso said. "This damned rain never quits."

Fragger turned to Bucaram as the Shuar appeared next to him. "All your men accounted for?"

Bucaram nodded.

"Let them know they've done an outstanding job and earned extra rations. When we've all had a rest, I'll thank them personally before all the Rangers."

Even through the rain, Fragger could see Bucaram's face brighten beneath its usual stoic mask. The *uwishin* covered his embarrassment at revealing so much emotion by brushing away the remark.

"Colonel, if you don't stop making speeches, we'll all be washed away before you have a chance to thank anyone. Get inside."

"As always, you make good sense," Fragger said and followed Iso through the muck and into the ship.

"God, what a relief to be out of the rain," he told the sergeant as they made their way away from the main hatch and into the interior. "I'm going to my cabin to clean up. Bring Dr. Lesto to me. We're going to have a talk."

Fragger's movement toward his cabin was stopped by a hand clapped on his shoulder. "No, colonel. Sickbay first"

"I need dry clothes, Iso, and I need sleep, that's all. I don't need to go to—"

He turned to leave, but Iso's grip tightened and held him in place. "Sickbay first. I insist. I'll have dry clothes brought while Buurk gets you cleaned up and checked out."

"Damn it, Iso!"

"Colonel, doesn't the fact that you can't escape my hold tell you anything about your condition?"

Fragger tried to jerk out of the grip and got nowhere. "Oh hell, all right."

"How is Buurk?" he asked as they walked through the ship.

"Worried sick over you."

"Good. He's never happier than when he's worrying."

Buurk met them at the sickbay door. Deep in their sockets, the eyes of the towering Martian showed concern.

"Are you all right, colonel?" he asked in his deep, rumbling voice.

"I'm fine, Buurk, I'm fine," Fragger assured him. "Let's get this done while Iso briefs me."

"Colonel, nothing's happened while you were gone. Nothing important, anyway, so your health is first priority."

"Get on with it then," Fragger said as he entered sickbay. "Iso, is what he says true? Nothing's happened?"

"Absolutely."

The tone said it was a lie, but Buurk slipped a needle into the Ranger's arm before Fragger could upbraid Iso about it.

"There'll be plenty of time to talk," the sergeant said as he slipped an arm around Fragger and guided him on to a healing table. "The tropical storm has brought all enemy activity to a stop in this area. Buurk's right. You need to rest."

"Bastards," Fragger said as drowsiness stole over his body. He managed an order before sleep overtook him. "When I'm awake, bring Dr. Lesto to me."

"For what?"

"For what? What the hell do you think, Iso? Punishment, that's what."

It was a pleasing thought that guided him down into the comforting darkness.

## Chapter 6

When Fragger woke on the healing table, the pleasing thought had been replaced with a foul mood. His kidneys still throbbed from the jabs of Radmuller's gorilla, Bellisarius. He'd expected pain in that area, but now all of his joints had decided to join in a chorus of aches. Groaning, he opened his eyes and looked up into the face of Buurk.

"Oh, crap! I wake up and the first thing I see is an uglier version of Abraham Lincoln—who was ugly to begin with."

"Screw you, too," the Martian replied cheerfully. "I believe that's the phrase from your ancient time. Who is Abraham Lincoln?"

"He was a leader of my country. And, unlike you, he was much revered."

A pleased grin split the face of the medic. The effect was unsettling to Fragger as always, as if Lincoln had had his head transplanted onto the body of a seven-foot tall, deeply bronzed gentle Frankenstein with a chest the size of a refrigerator door.

"You're making jokes," Buurk said. "That's good, and a tribute to my unappreciated medical skills."

"What skills? All you did was stick a needle in my arm and put me out."

"But it was that very skill that got you the rest you needed and set you on the path to recovery."

"If you're so good, why do I feel like the bottom of a Jivaron swamp?" Fragger grumbled.

"It's your body's way of letting you know you shouldn't abuse it, colonel. Do you want something for the pain?"

"No, damn it, I don't. I need to get moving, that's what I need to do. Action will get the kinks out. And I need to deal with Dr. Lesto."

Fragger swung his legs over the side of the healing table and stood up. The room yawed as if it were drunk. He sat back down quickly.

"Got up a little too fast, huh, colonel?" Buurk chided. "Dr. Lesto can wait. She's not going anywhere. You need to take it easy for a while."

Fragger rubbed at the scars near where his eye used to be. The injured skin contracted painfully at his touch, providing an aggravating reminder of the loss of half his sight.

"You sound like my wife. She was always fussing—"

Fragger tried to quash the thought of his family. Six hundred years in the past, Amanda still combed her silken black hair in front of the mirror atop the cheap Wal-Mart dresser. Their son, John—Fragger shook his head at this—probably still had a shaved head and a goatee that looked like an ill-cared-for paint brush. College freshmen were nothing but aggravation in Fragger's book. But, Libby, their 15-year-old daughter, was no better. She'd cussed him out for being an unfair parent when it came to boys. He could still hear her voice rising into the universal reproach of teenaged girls everywhere, "But, Daaaaad!" Tears welled in Fragger's eyes at the memory.

*Stop it!* he ordered himself. *There's nothing you can do about it. Your whole family is nothing but*

*dust and ashes now. It's time to move on. Rangers lead the way!*

"Colonel, are you well?"

Buurk's bass voice cut through the remembrance, and Fragger was grateful for the interruption.

"I'm fine. How long will it take for me to recover?"

Buurk shrugged. "A week, two weeks."

"Meaning half the time. Medical people are always covering their asses. And you've got a big one to cover."

"Perhaps it would be better for you not worry about the size of my ass but rather worry about why you're so focused on it," Buurk said.

Fragger laughed. "Okay, okay, I'll rest. Is it still raining?"

"Yes."

"I haven't been out that long then?"

"About 12 hours."

"Shouldn't the rain be abating by now?"

"So we thought, but the storm obviously doesn't care what we think. It decided to stall over us."

"Shit, how long is the rain supposed to last?"

"Current forecasts say approximately 10 days."

"That's a depressing thought."

"Not really, colonel. Look on the bright side."

"Which is?"

"You can recuperate without fear of an attack on the ship since nobody's going to be out in this weather. So, lay back down and enjoy yourself"

Fragger obeyed. "Shut up, Buurk. You're interrupting my sleep."

A week later, the Ranger felt fine. The healing table and Buurk's ministrations had restored his health. Confined by the storm to the interior of the ship, Fragger spent his time with Iso getting briefed on the readiness and mood of the troops. To his relief, morale had risen due to the storm. There'd been no worries about attacks from Radmuller's creatures, from Lord Lesto, or from the fleets orbiting above the planet. Fragger had only one concern on his mind.

"Have we heard from Red again?" he asked Iso. They sat in the mess, finishing up the remains of a Jivaron stew filled with chunks of monkey meat.

"Of course. He checks in on a regular basis, colonel, you know that." Iso added in exasperation. "He's in a power suit, colonel. He'll be fine."

"He'd better be. I'll kill him myself if he isn't."

"Hardly logical."

"Don't bullshit me, Iso. You're as worried about him as I am."

"I don't have time to worry."

"More bullshit."

"Colonel, you've recovered your health. Perhaps too much of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at you. You sit down, get up immediately, pace, sit down, and then do it all over again."

"There's nothing I can do during this storm."

"That's not true."

Fragger rose from the mess table, ready to pace some more, then stopped and asked, "What do you mean?"

"Have you forgotten the request you made of me when you returned to the ship?"

"To bring Dr. Lesto to me."

"Yes," Iso confirmed. "I threw her in the brig when Radmuller's animals dragged you off. Do you want her brought to you now?"

Anger surged through Fragger's body as he replied, "Yes, I *do* want her brought to me."

"Here?"

"No. To my cabin."

"If I may ask, what do you plan to do with her, colonel?"

"The worst thing possible."

Iso raised a thick brow. "You're going to execute her?"

"No, something much worse than that."

"What's worse than death?"

"Me."

## Chapter 7

"Enter," Fragger called when the intercom buzzed. The door to his cabin opened and Iso stepped through with Andriana Lesto in tow between two burly guards. They pushed her forward, then stepped back outside and positioned themselves against the far bulkhead as the door closed.

Fragger smiled at the Mutt and Jeff contrast between the two people before him. The stocky, coarse-featured sergeant was a head shorter than Lord Lesto's thin, elegant daughter.

"Leave us, Iso," he ordered.

He studied Andriana Lesto as the sergeant left. The doctor's normally close-cropped black hair had grown until it reached her shoulders. Her military discipline had made her keep it neat and clean, but there'd been no attempt to style it into a more attractive fashion. There was also nothing attractive about the cold blue eyes. They radiated their usual hatred toward him.

He said, "You've tried to kill me several times now, Dr. Lesto. I—"

"And I'll try again until I succeed!"

"I've no doubt about that. As I was about to say, I can't let your behavior stand. It's bad for discipline, not to mention my health. So, I've decided upon your punishment."

"More hauling shit, I suppose."

"No."

The golden skin of the Aiforian woman blanched slightly. "You're going to murder me."

"It's a thought, believe me," Fragger said. "But it isn't going to happen. You're too valuable a bargaining chip to waste."

"Then what?"

"Something worse than death. In your eyes, anyway," Fragger replied. "Strip."

"Wha—what?"

"I said, 'Strip.'"

The doctor drew herself up into a ramrod straight posture. "I will not."

"Then, I'll do it for you."

"Touch me, and I'll kill you."

"With what?" Fragger asked.

Dr. Lesto grabbed a chair and thrust it toward Fragger. It didn't hide small breasts holding firm over the taut, sleek body. Even in a crouch, the Aiforian woman had the bearing of an aristocrat. Fragger admired the attitude and, at the same time, found it annoying. He knocked the chair from her hands, and it clattered on the deck. She grabbed the chair quickly and thrust it at him again.

"No time for games, Andriana."

Her words came out in a hiss. "Don't you dare call me by my given name! You have no right to speak that way to your betters."

"You forget yourself, woman. Nobility is based on power, nothing more, nothing less, and I'm the one who has the power right now. Guess what? That makes me nobility."

A laugh, halfway between contempt and hysteria, escaped the Aiforian woman's mouth. "You, nobility? You have no manners, no breeding, no—"

"You've got that right. I'm a soldier, plain and simple. But, unlike aristocracy, it's an honest profession. I'm not a parasite on society."

"What do you know about my society?"

"I've seen you and your father in action, and that's enough for me. I'd say you're murderous thieves calling yourself aristocrats."

The chair flew by Fragger's ear and smashed against the bulkhead.

"Enough talk," he said and accelerated. In an instant, he'd stripped her uniform off and had her wide-eyed with fear on his bunk. He decelerated and enjoyed the sight of her slim, naked body as he slowly took off his own uniform. When he was free of clothing, he moved toward her. Long legs lashed out at him.

"Stay where you are!" he warned as he danced away from the kicks.

"I'm not staying anywhere where filth like you can touch me!" she screamed and launched herself off the bed. Fragger accelerated out of her way. A fist intended for his chin struck thin air, and the doctor landed hard on the deck. Fragger picked her up and threw her back on the bed. He was on top of her before she could react. He decelerated and pinned her arms to the bed. She spit in his face.

"I haven't had a woman in 600 years," he said, wiping the spittle from his jaw. "A little thing like your contempt isn't going to stop me now."

"You garbage! Get off me!"

"Not a chance," Fragger said as he held the struggling woman flat. Her head snapped up and teeth sank into his injured cheek. Pain seared through his face. Fragger ignored it and drove a knee between her legs and forced them apart. He thrust his cock in hard. The doctor screamed.

Fragger thrust harder and harder, the mix of fear, hatred and lust driving him to punish the woman who'd tried so hard to kill him. She squirmed, trying to force him out, but he held her tight until the climax came. He collapsed onto the doctor and then rolled off. She lay limp and sobbing.

"You ba-bastard ... you son of a bitch ... you bastard!"

The crying transformed suddenly into a hysterical laugh. "You've lost your bargaining chip, Rerun. My father will disown me now. No Aiforian woman can be touched by your sort. I'm contaminated beyond all measure. He will kill me, as is his right. And if he doesn't do it, I'll do it myself."

Fragger slowed his breathing before he gave an answer. "You're still valuable, woman, because your father doesn't know you were screwed by me. To him, you're still his virginal little girl."

He laughed. "Those are probably three words that never described you—'virginal little girl'."



Andriana turned away from him, burying her face in the pillow and said something Fragger couldn't understand.

"What?"

"I...I ... was a virgin."

Triumph welled up inside Fragger, only to be overwhelmed by a rush of shame at his actions.

*Christ, I've lost my way. Rangers don't rape. And yet I still want her.*

He extended his arm to place a hand on the shoulder of the sobbing woman to comfort her. Caution jerked the hand back.

*She's tried to kill me so many times. She may be just biding her time.*

He hardened his heart, rose, dressed and told her to do the same. She sat on the edge of the bed, drew the uniform on slowly and raised a hate-filled face to him. "I *will* kill you, Rerun."

"So, what else is new?"

"Before I just wanted you dead. Now I will kill you as slowly as the glaciers move on my home planet. I will stretch your death out until every last one of your nerve endings screams with ultimate agony. I will—"

"Save it for next time," Fragger interrupted as anger flared at the memory of the mental and physical pain inflicted on him by enemy interrogators.

The blue eyes widened. "Next time?"

"That's right. There will be a next time. You and your kind love torture. You might as well experience it from the other side. Maybe it'll teach you some humility."

The doctor went rigid. "I will kill myself before I let you touch me again."

"If you do that, then you won't be able to torture and murder me. You can't have it both ways, Andriana."

"Stop using my name!"

Fragger hit the commlink and called for Iso. A few minutes later, the sergeant came through the door with the same two guards flanking him.

"Iso, have the guards return the doctor to the brig. Guards, my orders are these: One, she will continue on latrine duty but under guard at all times. Two, all personnel will refer to her as 'Andriana.' There will be no exceptions. Three, she's to be returned to my cabin at my pleasure upon my order. Four, she's to have no visitors whatsoever without my approval. Five, make sure everything is out of her cell that she could use to hurt herself. Consider it a suicide watch. Now, take her out of here. Iso, you stay."

The doctor spat at him again before stalking out of the cabin between the guards.

Iso grinned at him as the door closed. "You survived."

"You were betting on her?"

"I was betting on you missing your balls."

"If I didn't have my MASER abilities, that might well have happened," Fragger admitted as he sat behind his desk. He motioned for Iso to take a chair of his own.

"Well, you certainly look more relaxed, colonel."

"A man finally shoots his wad after six hundred years, he's bound to be relaxed. But enough about my lack-of-love life. What's the weather doing?"

"It's still raining like hell out there, but it's finally winding down."

"Any word from Red?"

"Yes."

"Is he okay?"

"You think a little thing like a tropical storm could kill that thick-headed slummer?"

"Where is he?"

"Why don't you ask himself yourself, colonel? I just talked to him. Hit your commlink."

Fragger keyed the link open. "Red, you big dumb sonuvabitch, where have you been?"

"Treading water like everybody else in the storm, colonel."

"You're in one piece, then? No injuries?"

"Obviously, I'm in one piece or I wouldn't be talking to you. Radmuller's Hellhounds have learned to give me and my suit wide berth. No injuries either, except to my appetite. I haven't had any decent food for a while."

"You wouldn't recognize decent food even if I hit you upside the head with a filet mignon."

"A what?"

"Never mind. It's good to hear from you. Where are you?"

"About 30 clicks north."

"What the hell are you doing in that position?"

"Partly, it was Radmuller's creatures. After we got you away from Radmuller, I decoyed them away and then knocked them off when they chased after me. Those gorillas put up a good fight."

"You said 'partly', Red. What's the other reason?"

"Remember that Aiforian ship trying to contact us? I decided I should check it out."

"You haven't made contact, have you?"

Red's voice was indignant. "Of course not! I've just been keeping an eye on them."

A chuckle sounded over the commlink.

"What's so funny?" Fragger asked

"There are four people, and they seem none too happy with each other. The woman keeps snapping at a short, bald guy, and there's some really skinny idiot who starts crying at the drop of hat. Another man, short as a low-cut stump, keeps trying to film everything."

"No troops with them?"

"None, colonel. The ship's not big enough. It looks like a corvette class of ship, built for speed and evasion. What are your orders? I can take the Aiforians out easily, if that's what you want?"

"No, Red, I think we can use them."

"How?"

"Leave that to me. Are you okay with staying out there a little longer?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I'll send out Bucaram and a party of men immediately. A little trip through the jungle in the company of you and the headhunters ought to put them in the proper frame of mind for negotiations."

"Negotiate? We're really going to negotiate with them?"

"Yeah, Red, we'll negotiate them right into our way of thinking."

The corporal laughed. "Now, that's my kind of parleying."

"Good job, Red. You've earned yourself two weeks of leave on the pleasure planet of your choice."

A snort came over the commlink. "As if that's ever going to happen."

"In the meantime," Fragger continued, "keep the group under observation and reconnoiter the area to see if they've got an assault force hidden somewhere in the jungle. We don't want any nasty surprises. If you find a force, alert me immediately and then get yourself out of there. Understood?"

"Yes, sir. Tell Iso this shithole of a spot still looks better than he does."

Red signed off.

"He's definitely in good shape," Iso said.

"And right too. You *are* ugly."

"Looked in the mirror lately, colonel? I don't frighten old ladies."

"There aren't any old ladies on this planet. So, I haven't scared anyone."

"These Aiforians get a look at you, they will be. That what you plan to do, put the fear of Fragger Sparks into them?"

Fragger shook his head as he stood. "Iso, we're going to be the very model of decorum when Red brings them here."

"Us? We're a ragtag bunch if I ever saw one. Headhunters, a mixed bag of Corpses and Ricers, and one Martian. The only manners in this camp are in the brig in the person of Andriana Lesto. How are we

going to impress anyone with respectability? And why?"

"Red mentioned one of them is trying film everything. The reporter, obviously."

"Yeah. So?"

"Image is everything, Iso. I'll bet you a fortune in credits that enemy propaganda has us painted as a bunch of dirty, wild-eyed, raving bunch of killers, thieves, rapists and degenerates. Well, we're going to be the best-dressed, best-behaved bunch of degenerates the Renowned Systems have ever seen."

"And I suppose you expect me to perform this miracle?"

"I do," Fragger replied. "Get your squad leaders in here, and I'll brief them."

Iso Watanabe rose with a sigh. "You taught me an Old Earth expression that describes you and this situation."

"I'm a pain in the ass?"

"That's it."

## Chapter 8

The argument from the jungle was so loud it overpowered the incessant, rasping chatter of *duwudu* birds cutting through the soggy heat of the Jivaron afternoon. As Fragger settled into a field chair, the whine of weapons powering up broke out and barrels swung toward the source of the noise.

"Hold your fire," he commanded. "No enemy's that stupid, so it must be our Aiforian guests."

A few minutes later, the party broke into the clearing, led by a sweat-drenched Salinsky. The helmet was off, and Red looked as if he'd been boiled in his power armor. Behind him came Bucaram wearing an exasperated scowl on his face. Four tired Aiforians were behind them. A short, stocky broad-shouldered man with an air of authority led the party toward the ship. His body was topped by a large bald head fringed with sweaty brown hair plastered to his scalp by the heat. The dark eyes held an opaque gaze, letting nothing in and nothing out. He strode with an economical, purposeful stride that spoke of military service at some time in the past, but it was his manner of dress that made him stand out from the others. Despite the mud, dirt and sweat staining it, the peacock-blue jumpsuit held sharp creases in the pant legs, and there didn't appear to be a single wrinkle in any part of the fabric. Iso had told him about such suits once. It was called a *Feynman* suit and was as close to sentience as an inanimate object could possibly be. At the molecular level, the suit continuously adjusted its shape, repelled moisture, and modified the weave to keep heat or cold out. Fragger didn't pretend to understand the technology, but he knew that it meant expensive and soldiers couldn't afford that kind of clothing.

*So, this man may have been military in the past, but he's something else now. That practiced bland expression of infinite patience says diplomat. Apparently he needs all the patience he can get.*

A tall woman hectored the diplomat as he trudged forward through the mud. Her annoyed expression said that the man was too stupid to even be talking to. A full head higher than the diplomat and dressed in the same type of jumpsuit, she was extremely thin and pale with white hair cropped close to yellowish flesh and a pointed skull. Her head looked like a very sour fuzzy lemon stuck atop a dark blue straw.

A moan erupted from behind the pair, causing both to turn about in impatience. Fragger saw that their irritation was focused on a quivering young man who seemed to be on the verge of tears. He was medium-height with a military-style buzz cut of blonde hair. Faded indigo Jivaron fatigues hung on a wiry frame close to gauntness. It seemed as if all fat had been stripped from the man's body and left only muscle and tendon. Even the face lacked flesh. It looked like one of the Shuar's shrunken heads, the skin taut over the cheeks and a chin blunt as a dull chisel. Fearful, watery blue eyes darted about the clearing as if they expected to find a Jivaron predator behind every tree.

"Tat, for God's sake, shut up, would you?" the diplomat snapped. "We're just having an argument. It's not the end of the world."

"Ambassador Wenghorn, you know I can't stand too much emotion," Tat complained. Fragger's contempt rose quickly at the sniveling tone of voice. He suppressed an urge to go out and slap Tat into a semblance of manhood.

Wenghorn clenched and unclenched his fists in frustration. "How I wish your father and I had never been friends. If we weren't, I'd leave you in the middle of this damnable jungle."

Tat's voice squeaked out from lips as thin as his body. "Nooooooooooooo!"

"Oh, for the sake of all our gods, relax," Wenghorn said. "I'm not abandoning you anywhere. I'd have to

answer to your father if I did. I know you can't help yourself, but—"

This statement brought a snicker from the man standing next to Tat and barely coming up to his waist. He was a dwarf with walnut skin and outsized, stubby hands that hung past his knees. The nose drew Fragger's attention immediately. At first, he wasn't sure it was a nose at all. It looked as if a small potato had grown out of the man's face.

*A small, drunken potato. Look at the gin blossoms. He likes his booze.*

Fragger checked the deep brown eyes and was surprised at what he found. Instead of the stuporous fog he'd seen in so many alcoholics, he saw a direct gaze that spoke of a strong inner will. The Ranger guessed it was borne of a lifetime of dealing with men twice his size.

The sense of toughness was backed up by a jaw that rivaled Iso's. It jutted from the dwarf's face like a badly-hewn chunk of granite. Unlike the others in the party, he seemed to be happy to be in the middle of the Jivaron jungle.

"He's an idiot," the little man said in a bass voice that surprised Fragger. He'd been expecting a high, squeaky tone typical of a little person. But the dwarf had a voice that was as loud as the yellow shirt he wore over black cargo-style pants and leather sandals. "That's what he can't help."

Fragger was amused at the dwarf, but the amusement ended when he saw a vidcam and an epad being pulled from a large hip pocket.

"I wouldn't turn either that camera or the epad on unless you'd like to film the inside of your fundament," he warned. "And you don't look big enough to accommodate an entire camera up your scrawny ass."

"Put it away, Wik," the diplomat ordered. "I told you, no visuals without my permission."

The dwarf reluctantly stuffed the camera back into his pocket and said, "Sorry. Journalist's force of habit."

The tall woman sniffed in contempt. "Journalist!"

"That's right, Lady Alissma," Wik said. "Someone who works for a living."

Red's bellow cut through the bickering. "That's it! All of you shut the fuck up! He'll do the talking from now on."

"Been having fun, Red?" Fragger asked.

"I've never wanted to cut four throats so much in my life, colonel! Anything to shut them up. If this is the Aiforian idea of diplomacy, it's no wonder their enemies stomp them every chance they get."

"Now, just a minute! You can't—" the tall woman began.

Fragger got ready to hold Red in check. He'd never seen Salinsky belt a woman, but the corporal had a short fuse at the best of times.

"Red!" he warned. "Don't even think of hitting her."

Salinsky clenched and unclenched his fists, struggling to keep his temper under control.

"He won't have to, colonel," Wenghorn said. "I'll do it for him."

A backhand slap from the ambassador sat Lady Alissma down hard into the swampy ground. Tat cried out at the same time as the woman did, and Fragger could see Wenghorn resist the temptation to knock him down as well. Instead, he turned away and locked eyes with the Ranger.

"I don't make it a habit to hit women, Colonel Sparks, but Lady Alissma Turnwaite has, shall we say, managed to alienate every Shuar we've met on this planet. I didn't want to start that way with you. I'm Heisst Wenghorn, Special Ambassador for Aifor. I've been appointed to negotiate with you."

"I'm listening, ambassador. What is it specifically you've come to negotiate?"

"For the release of Lady Andriana Lesto. You still have her, don't you?" he asked, then added anxiously, "She's still alive, isn't she?"

"Despite my reputation, I don't make it a habit to kill women, ambassador. She's alive and well."

"May we see her?"

"Not at this time."

"May I ask why not?"

"For the obvious reasons."

"Which are?"

"I need proof that you are who you say you are."

From the ground, Lady Alissma's voice broke out in shrill indignation, "Us, prove who we are? You're the one who needs to prove who he is!"

"Shut up!" the ambassador ordered.

"Wenghorn, just because he says he's the Rerun doesn't mean he is. He could be a stand-in."

"Don't be ridiculous. This is Colonel Sparks."

"We need proof!" she insisted.

Fragger accelerated out of the camp chair, grabbed the annoying woman by the jumpsuit, jerked her upright and was back in the chair before the look of astonishment left her face.

"Well, does that satisfy you as to who he is, Lady?" Wenghorn demanded.

The woman swallowed and nodded.

The ambassador turned his attention back to Fragger. "Colonel, our trip through the jungle has exhausted us all. May we go into the ship and get out of the sun?"

"None of you goes in the ship, ambassador. We negotiate right here and now."

"Hardly hospitable."

"I'm not in a hospitable mood."

"May we at least have some chairs and water? This planet dehydrates us fast. We're not used to the climate."

Fragger gave the order for camp chairs and food and water. The Aiforians sat when the chairs arrived and drank thirstily from skins of *chicha*, the Shuar's manioc beer, as a meal was placed on a table before them on a table hauled from the mess.

Lady Alissma sniffed suspiciously at the steaming bowls of meat. "What is this?"

"A stew of slipsnake and monkey meat," Fragger answered. "It's the Shuars' traditional fare."

The Aiforian noblewoman wrinkled her face and pushed the bowl away.

Fragger suppressed an urge to smack the woman. Through great effort, the Shuar villages scattered about Jivaro had supplied the meat, the vegetables and the beer. It was not easy to negotiate the jungle and stay alive with Radmuller's creatures roaming the jungle. Many Shuar had died, but they kept the supply line intact.

*And a good thing too*, Fragger thought as he watched the strangers eat. *Without their supplies, we'd all be in tough shape.*

The ambassador showed no reluctance to eat the food. He worked methodically through the stew, slipsnake slices, plantains, and squash, washing it all down with beer. Lady Alissma confined herself to the vegetables while Tat looked as if he were going to faint at the sight of a Shuar placing more food on the table in front of him. Two shrunken heads dangled from the warrior's waist. The reporter, Wik, dug into the stew with relish and seemed delighted at the taste of the *chicha*. The little man had an appetite disproportionate to his size and a thirst for the beer that seemed endless.

The Ranger waited until everyone's appetite was satisfied and then asked Wenghorn, "You're here for negotiations. At the same time, your fellow Aiforian, Lord Lesto, is trying to kill me. Care to explain?"

With a pained expression, the ambassador put down a skin of *chicha*. "After he, ah, lost the ship to you, he informed us that his daughter had been taken. Since then, we've lost contact with him."

"So, you have no authority from him to negotiate."

"I don't need his authority, colonel. I do have authority from the *Althing*."

"Which is?"

"Our democracy of Lords. It's the governing body of Aifor."

"And what part does Lesto play in this *Althing*?"

"He is current head."

"Current? And he has no authority?"

"It's a rotating position, Colonel Sparks, and he is but one vote among many. But you're not really interested in Aiforian government, are you? You're more interested in the matter at hand."

"I'm most interested in survival, ambassador."

"Aren't we all, sir?"

"I assume you have a proposal. What is it?"

The ambassador answered with unexpected directness. "Safe passage off Jivaro and a planet of your



choice in exchange for the return of Lady Lesto, colonel."

"And I suppose all the blockading fleets are going to magically part for us?"

The ambassador offered a wry smile. "Let me rephrase. We offer you a *relatively* safe passage off the planet. Naturally, running a blockade has its risks."

"You Aiforians certainly seem to be able to penetrate it at will."

"Ah, you're suspicious that we're in league with our enemies. No, colonel, we're not, I assure you of that. It's simply that, well, diversions and stealth help our evasion of the *cordon sanitaire*."

"As I recall, ambassador, that French phrase was coined to indicate a quarantine of a dangerous ideology. Is that what I represent, a dangerous idea?"

"You know you do. Let's not be coy."

"And how many of us are you extending this offer to?"

"To you alone."

"You must have mistaken me for an Aiforian, and think I feel my men count for nothing, ambassador."

Lady Alissma colored at this remark, but remained silent when Wenghorn clamped a hand on her shoulder.

"You do me an injustice, colonel. I'm not being callous, simply realistic. The ship we have available can't accommodate more."

"An Evader-class ship?"

The ambassador's brow rose in surprise. "You know it?"

"I had a ride down in one to Mars courtesy of Lord Lesto."

"Ah, yes, I heard the tale of your adventure. If even half of it is true, you're an incredibly resourceful Rerun ... sorry ... a very resourceful man."

"Your skill at flattery tells me you're well chosen for a diplomatic mission, ambassador, but the offer means nothing to me because it doesn't extend to my men. It also doesn't include any guarantee that the Shuar won't be punished for their assistance to me."

"Colonel, you can't expect me to speak for our mutual enemies?"

"Mutual?"

"Yes, mutual. Strange as it may seem, we *are* bedfellows in this conflict. The Royal and Imperial Commonwealth of Nipponese Empires and the EarthCorp forces would love to smash Aifor. That makes your interests our interests."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, ambassador, my interests are my own, and you still haven't put anything on the table that interests me."

"What would interest you?"

"One, a ship and safe passage off Jivaro for all my men, including any Shuar who want to go. Two,

elimination of Tyco Radmuller."

"Who?"

"Now, who's being coy, ambassador? Tyco Radmuller. Dr. Shaper. The man whose name is synonymous with the devil in this time."

"So, he *is* here."

"Wenghorn, I don't like playing diplomatic ga—"

"—I'm not playing games, colonel. You don't understand. There are always reports of Radmuller being everywhere. He's on Mars. He's on Jivaro. He's back on Earth. It's hard to separate fact from fiction where Dr. Radmuller is concerned. But, he's actually here?"

"Believe me, he's here. I've met the man."

Wenghorn frowned. "Perhaps that's why Lord Lesto hasn't contacted us. Is it possible that Radmuller killed him?"

"Unfortunately," Fragger said. "I can assure you that Lesto's still alive. Several of my men have paid the price for that fact."

Wenghorn raised an eyebrow. "So, you've been fighting both Radmuller and Lord Lesto while escaping the grasp of the EarthCorp and the Ricers? Colonel, you have my admiration."

"Keep it and offer me something real."

"I'm only authorized to make my original offer," the ambassador said. "Any other options will have to be presented first to the *Althing* for consideration. May I use the ship's communication system?"

"And here I thought you had a high opinion of my abilities, ambassador. Apparently, you now consider me a big enough fool to allow you to reveal our position."

"I have to have some way to talk to them, colonel. What do you suggest?"

"I suggest you're buying time. I'm betting you have complete authority to negotiate."

"And why do you think that?"

"Because, as I've learned repeatedly, I'm one valuable human being. So far, from what I've seen, people will do anything they can to get hold of my abilities or kill me in the process."

"That's very true, I'm sure," Wenghorn said. "Except in my case. You fail to account for the simple fact of bureaucracy and the nature of Aiforian government. The *Althing* is made up of independent noblemen. Ceding too much power to any one man is not in their nature. I do not have complete authority, much to my regret."

Fragger offered the man a skeptical smile. "Maybe. No communications will be allowed from this site, however."

Wenghorn sighed. "We get nothing done without communication, colonel. Do you have an alternative?"

"Yes, when and if we reach an agreement, I'll provide a commlink and send you or one of your party into the jungle with Bucaram."

A squeak of fear escaped Kendlan Tat's thin, quivering lips.

"Quiet, Tat!" the ambassador ordered. "I'm certainly not going to send you, of all people, out there."

Annoyed by the incessant trembling in Tat's voice and body, Fragger asked the ambassador, "What's his problem?"

Wenghorn answered with another sigh. "My apologies, colonel. Mr. Tat is a victim of the Emotional Enhancement movement. After his military service, he attended university and got caught up in the fad."

"Drugs?"

"In a sense. The slang term for it is 'jacking' as in jacking the nervous system to maximum, constant sensory input through neuro-electronic means. It was supposed to heighten the senses temporarily without harm. Unfortunately, thousands found out the hard way that enhancement was permanent. Jacking is now banned."

Fragger was blunt. "He's useless so why bring him along?"

"He's my diplomatic secretary," Wenghorn answered. "Never do favors for old and powerful friends, colonel. It's not worth having Ban Tat's son's exposed nerve endings around for how ever many hours this sinkhole of a planet has in its daily rotation."

"You have my sympathies. Who's Ban Tat?"

"A very large force in our society. And a formidable warrior."

"And he produced this?" Fragger asked, glancing at Tat.

"Kendlan Tat was a bright, promising boy before he engaged in jacking."

"Too bad," Fragger said. "But let's get back to the subject at hand. Are we agreed that you'll convey my terms to your government?"

"We are, but I have to tell you that the *Althing* is not likely to accept those terms."

"Then you and I will have nothing to talk about, ambassador."

"There is always something to talk about, colonel. That's the nature of diplomacy." Wenghorn wiped sweat from his brow. "Are you really going to keep us out in this heat?"

"You'll be as comfortable as my men are."

The ambassador watched a squad march by toward the jungle. Fragger was pleased that Iso had done such a good job with the uniforms. For as long as they were in sight of the ship, the soldiers' uniforms would remain creased and pressed. Once they were among the trees, the humid atmosphere would turn them into the usual limp state. It was always good to impress your enemies.

*As long as they don't know those soldiers are wearing the few uniforms still intact. The damned jungle eats through everything.*

"I must say, you've done marvels with a motley bunch of soldiers, colonel."

"They *were* motley. They're now a disciplined unit."

Lady Alissma sniffed her contempt, annoying Fragger again. As far as he could tell, the tall woman's sole purpose in life was to provoke irritation in all those around her.

"Perhaps the lady has forgotten the result of the battle at Yacuambi Triangle," he said. "And the fact that Lord Lesto is eating bugs in the jungle as we sit here."

"Simple luck, Rerun."

"Funny how it always seems to be on my side."

"Luck," she repeated. "Your kind are not capable of—"

"Alissma!" the ambassador said sharply. "There's no need to abuse the colonel's hospitality!"

Color rose on the pale cheeks of the Aiforian noblewoman. "We're abusing him, Wenghorn? You must be joking. He's abusing us. That's what he's doing by not allowing us to get out of this bloody heat and into *our* ship."

"I'm curious, ambassador," Fragger said. "What purpose does this woman serve in your party, other to provide a constant source of aggravation?"

"She's an ethnologist. Another favor, I'm afraid, colonel."

"You seem to have done a lot of those."

"It started out as a simple diplomatic mission, I assure you, but things have gotten out of hand where you're concerned."

"How so?"

The ambassador hesitated as if afraid to give out valuable information, then shrugged. "Despite the best efforts of the governments within the Renowned Systems to suppress the facts, your story has become well-known, at least the sketchy outline of it. From all sides, people are clamoring for more information. Alissma doesn't care about you, but she saw an opportunity to rise within the Aiforian Academy of Sciences by studying the primitive culture of the Shuar."

"She's a tag along?"

Wenghorn nodded. "I did not want her as a member of my party, but her father is nobility, and I'm sure you know the rule there."

"He gets what he wants."

"Yes," Wenghorn said, then jerked a thumb at the vidman. "Lord Turnwaite ordered me to take Wik along as well, and the damnable little man was only too happy to comply. Like all of us, Lord Turnwaite wants as much information about you as possible. Wik does too, but not for Aiforian purposes. He wants a journalistic coup, and that's an interview with you. You're welcome to him. He's like a Jivaron swarmbug, constantly irritating. He peppered me with questions all across space. The man simply wouldn't leave me alone."

Wik grinned around a mouthful of squash.

"Despite his diminutive stature, colonel, this Terran vidman has a remarkable talent for survival not unlike your own. To Earthcorp, independent journalists are like cockroaches; they're to be stepped on at the first opportunity."

"And I suppose the Aiforian government treats them as heroes," Fragger responded.

"They, ah, reflect the government position."

"So, if he's Terran, how did he end up on Aifor?"

"That's a story I'll let him tell you, colonel."

"I'll be sure to ask him. He doesn't seem that independent to me, more like a government propagandist."

The ambassador's silence spoke volumes, so Fragger turned his attention back to Alissma Turnwaite.  
"You're an ethnologist?"

"Yes, I study the beliefs and practices of many primitive peoples."

"Meaning anyone who's not Aiforian?"

"Meaning anyone who are not members of the advanced societies."

"Or anyone from the past, I assume. You have remarkable scientific objectivity, Lady Alissma."

"I try to keep an open—" The ethnologist's lips pursed into a tight line as she recognized the sarcasm behind Fragger's remark. "Very sly, Rerun. Typical cunning."

"Of a lower form of life, you mean."

Eyebrows arched into arrogant confirmation.

"You know, I've met one of your relatives, Lady."

The eyebrows transformed themselves into question marks. "What do you mean? That's impossible. You haven't been off the planet."

"True, but I met him right here on Jivaro."

"I have no relatives here!"

"Oh, I'm sure you know him well. Tyco Radmuller."

The ethnologist's face purpled as she jerked up from her chair. "Radmuller? Dr. Radmuller? You're comparing me to that monster! You insolent Rerun! How dare you! How—!"

The ethnologist grabbed a bowl of monkey stew, rose and cocked her arm.

"Alissma, sit! Now!" Wenghorn ordered.

The arm quivered but held the bowl high.

"Alissma, have you already forgotten the colonel's speed? He'll have that bowl out of your hand before you can blink."

The ethnologist dropped the bowl onto the table in disgust and marched off. Monkey stew dripped off the side of the table and onto the ground.

"Do all Aiforians have such short tempers?" Fragger asked the ambassador.

"It's a regrettable trait, I admit, colonel. It was useful in our colonization of the planet when quick rage kept many a person from disappearing into the jaws of Aiforian predators. Still, you'd assume a scientist would have better self-control, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Fragger answered as he thought, *Typical diplomatic answer. Agreeing with me, attempting to build trust.* "Perhaps it'd be best for your party to get some rest now. It's time for a siesta, anyway, to escape the heat."

"An excellent idea, colonel."

Fragger asked an orderly to direct the off-worlders to a shady and secure spot. As they left, Watrun Wik hung back and said, "I'd like the opportunity to talk to you, colonel."

"You'll get that opportunity, Wik, I promise you, but not right now. Get some rest with the others."

Wik nodded and trotted after the others, looking like a tough, waddling toddler trying to keep up with the adults.

When the Aiforian party was out of earshot, Fragger signaled Iso and Red to his side and asked, "What do you think?"

"Smells like a setup to me," Iso answered.

Red nodded and added, "I don't know much about diplomatic delegations, but I don't think they'd send a bunch of crazies to do the job."

"Lady Alissma's a real piece of work, isn't she?" Fragger said. "Not to mention Tat."

Red gave a contemptuous laugh. "On the way back here, he shrieked like a girl at every noise. Worthless. Absolutely worthless."

"Exactly," Fragger said. "So, why bring him along? I don't buy Wenghorn's explanation. Keep an eye on Tat. He goes nowhere without a guard. Now, what do you think of their offer of a planet?"

Iso answered this time. "Worthless, also."

"They couldn't mount an operation that would take us off the planet?"

"Oh, they could pull off an extraction. They have enough men and resources. But, so what? They're definitely not going to let you go. The rest of us they'd just throw out the airlocks. It's the same old story."

"So, when that ploy doesn't work, what are their alternatives?"

Iso thought for a moment. "Only one, as far as I can see. Wenghorn and his party reveal our position somehow and bring in shock troops to capture or kill you."

Red bristled. "I searched them before we came, and the security squad did it again once we got here. They're clean of any comm devices. How the hell are they going to get at the colonel?"

"Relax, Red," Iso said. "I don't know the answer to your question, but be on your toes. Keep the Aiforians under watch at all times and, as the colonel instructed, make sure all your men understand that no Aiforian is to get inside the ship without permission from Fragger or me."

"Those are their options," Fragger said. "What are ours?"

Iso shrugged. "The simplest would be to eliminate them right here and now."

"That's an option I like too," Red said.

"No," Fragger said. "That would just bring another world of hurt down on us. The Aiforians are pissed at us enough already. There's no sense in inflaming them further. Give me another one."

"Keep them as bargaining chips, I suppose," Iso suggested. "A drain on our resources, though. More mouths to feed and guard."

"Red, what's your option?"

"Take them back to their ship or lose them in the jungle. Either way, they're out of our hair. Problem solved."

Fragger considered their suggestions, then said, "Good solutions, but they don't really get us out of the jungle and off the planet, do they? There must be some other way we can turn the situation to our advantage."

Iso's heavy underjaw jutted out in exasperation. "Colonel, you already had something in mind before you asked for our opinions, didn't you? Why did you waste time asking us if you weren't—"

"Calm down, Iso! I asked because I was hoping you two might have better ideas than I did. And I'll still consider them. The time for action will come, but, right now, we've got the upper hand over Wenghorn. He and his party aren't going anywhere so we have time to think things through. Now, think about the Aiforians. Who's the one member of Wenghorn's group that could be of most use to us?"

Red gave a short, contemptuous snort. "Except for the ambassador, none of them. They're pretty much useless."

"Not quite," Iso said suddenly. "It's the vidman, Wik, you're thinking of, isn't it, colonel? You showed interest in him when I briefed you in sickbay some time ago."

Fragger nodded. "Wenghorn says the little man wants a story badly."

"He's also in the pay of the Aiforians, colonel."

"I know, Iso, but the ambassador gave me the impression that Wik's not completely under their thumb. We need to find out. Maybe there's some part of an independent journalist left in him, and we can exploit that. Give him our side of story. Besides, the little man has a giant taste for Shuar beer. That weakness could be useful in turning him to our side."

"He does have a thirst, doesn't he?" Red said. "If rain were beer, Wik would be drunk all the time."

"Even if we could turn him, that doesn't mean he'll get our story out," Iso objected. "He still has to uplink it through the ships in orbit, and they'll either kill it or vet the hell out of it so they can twist the story their way."

"Well, we'll have to take that chance," Fragger said. "Wik strikes me as pretty shrewd and tough despite his size. If he's smart enough to survive both EarthCorp and the Aiforians, then he may be smart enough to get his story past the censors. So, our task is to build some trust with this guy."

"How are we going to do that?" Iso asked.

"The first thing we'll give him access that we won't give to others," Fragger answered. "That way we can

feel him out and see if we can turn him into an ally."

"And the second?" Red asked.

"Treat him with respect, treat him as an equal. I'm willing to bet that on the social scale, he's damned near as low as a Rerun."

"As you pointed out, colonel, he's no fool," Iso said. "What makes you think he'll buy into our efforts?"

"He's human," Fragger answered. "And he's a dwarf. I imagine he's spent his whole life battling for respect. It's got to be a deep-seated need, one that we can fulfill."

"But enough talk," he said as he rose from the field chair. "In the meantime, once our guests have rested, find them a spot amongst the inner defenses where they'll have a ringside seat when Radmuller's creatures attack again."

"You sure about that, colonel?" Red asked. "There's always a chance those animals could break through and attack Wenghorn and the others. Look at what happened to you."

"Red, I'm counting on you to keep them safe and on Radmuller to throw the fear of God into them. I have a feeling that after an up close look a raging silverback or baboon, Wenghorn will find a softer position in his negotiations. Let them experience what we've been experiencing for a few days. Then, when I give the word, I want to see Wik. Nobody else, understood?"

"Understood, colonel," both men said.

"And, once I give that word, make sure Wenghorn and the others know that Wik will be going inside the ship where it's nice and cool. Now, let's get inside ourselves. We need to go over the latest situation reports."

As the three men headed toward the ship, Iso asked, "Colonel, were all Re—old Earthmen always so devious?"

"You ain't seen nothing yet," Fragger assured him.



## Chapter 9

Four days later, Watrun Wik entered Fragger's ready room between two brawny guards who towered nearly a meter above the diminutive vidman. It was obvious his shortened legs had had trouble keeping stride with the soldiers. He was out of breath and still sweating from the jungle heat despite the cool temperature of the ship's interior. A mop of coarse matted brown hair sat atop a head far too large for the small body. With the vidcam dangling from his neck, he looked to Fragger like a tiny, tired tourist who'd found himself upon a vacation he hadn't at all expected. A wave of sour sweat traveled across the desk, causing Fragger's nose to wrinkle.

"Vidman, you stink," he said. "I think—"

"And your treatment of us stinks worse," Wik interrupted. "Keeping us outside in the heat while Radmuller's animals threaten us while you sit inside as comfortable as can be. I thought you were supposed to be the tough—"

One guard cuffed the vidman into silence.

Fragger glanced at the guard's name patch and warned, "Private Liel, don't hit Mr. Watrun again or ever. He's our guest."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, Wik, as I was about to say, I think you deserve a shower and some fresh clothes. When you're finished, we'll talk."

The expression on Wik's face dissolved quickly from irritation into a transparent longing to be clean then back again into one of suspicion. "Why am I getting such special treatment?"

"I want to talk to you, Wik, and I'd just as soon not let the smell get in the way of our conversation."

"I want your story, colonel, but not bad enough to be bribed!"

"No bribes, Wik. Just a talk. And some beer." Fragger nodded toward a pitcher and two frosty glasses. "You must be thirsty."

The vidman's eyes fixed greedily on the pitcher. "If that's not a bribe, I don't what is. Still, I am thirsty from the oppressive heat of this planet."

Fragger put on a sympathetic smile and ordered the guards, "Escort him to a shower, nowhere else, then bring him back here straight away. See if you can find some clothes that will fit him while we get his washed. Wik, your vidcam stays here."

The vidman's stubby hands clutched at the camera. "You won't mess with it?"

"I won't. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't know how to do it. I'm a Rerun, remember? It's beyond my intellectual capacity."

"Hah, and I'm three meters tall."

"You have my word as an officer," Fragger said. "Leave it on the desk."

Wik obeyed and walked out of the room with the guards. Thirty minutes later, he was back, wearing an Aiforian-issue sleeveless undershirt and shorts. The shorts drooped over his knees. Black hair sprouted

from the shortened forearms.

"You surprise me, Wik. You're clean now, but you don't look very happy about it."

The vidman tugged at the undershirt with stubby fingers. "These are women's clothes!"

Fragger looked at Private Liel who shrugged and said, "Sir, it's the only thing we could find that came close to his size."

As he dismissed the guards, Fragger said to Wik, "My apologies. We'll get your own clothes back as soon as possible. In the meantime, sit down and have the beer I promised you."

Wik sat and eagerly accepted the glass Fragger handed him. He drank thirstily before saying, "Making nice with the vidman, huh, colonel?"

"I admit it."

"I'm after the facts. I'm not interested in propaganda."

"I hope so."

Wik gulped again at the beer and wiped foam from his upper lip. "You're making this very easy."

"Did you want me to make it hard?"

"No, but so far it seems like you're making it much too painless."

"Disappointed, Wik? Expecting the Rerun to go berserk and gut you?"

"The thought had occurred to me," the vidman admitted.

"Can't help you in that regard, then. You listen to too much propaganda. If you're truly interested in my story, I can supply you with the facts."

"As you see them."

"Of course."

"Is it all right if I take notes? I'll need my epad back. It was confiscated."

Fragger opened a drawer and pulled the pad out. "Before I give it to you, I want to hear *your* story."

"What? Why?"

"We both have our suspicions of each other, don't we? You're from Earth originally, right? But now, as far as I can tell, you're in the pay of the Aiforians. That spells character assassination to me."

"Colonel, I assure you—"

"Save the reassurances. Tell me about you."

"What do you want to know?"

"Why are you here? How did you end up with the Aiforians? That kind of thing."

"As the saying goes, it's a long story."

"I've got time."

Wik's chocolate-brown eyes grew shrewd. "How about we do an even-up trade? I tell you a little about myself, you tell me a little bit about yourself, and so on."

"No bargaining here, Wik. My terms or nothing."

"And if I don't accept them?"

"You don't get my story."

"That's all? There aren't any other consequences?"

"What are you expecting? Think I'm going to kill you eat you, and shrink your head?"

Wik's silence prompted a laugh from Fragger. "I'm not a cannibal. And I don't shrink heads, either, except through my military actions. I presume a few enemy egos are considerably smaller now since I arrived on the scene."

Wik laughed, wiping at beer foam that leaked from the corner of his mouth. "Dry wit, colonel. I never expected that."

"Opinions to the contrary, soldiers are capable of a joke or two."

"So I see. Still, the Shuar still shrink heads. Why do they continue the practice?"

"In this modern era, you mean? Mostly for ceremonial purposes and to strike terror in the hearts of enemies. Besides, what are a few shrunken heads compared to bombing entire populations and planets out of existence as I hear the members of the Renowned System do? If you're here to lecture me on morality, you're standing on quicksand."

"Touche."

"*Your* story," Fragger reminded Wik.

"Sorry, it's just that I'm so curious about this planet and its peop—"

Fragger sighed. "Wik, you're very adept at slipping away from the purpose of this conversation. However, it's going to end right now unless you comply with my request, and that means you're going to be out in the heat and humidity far sooner than you'd like. Have another beer and talk to me."

"All right, all right!" the vidman said.

Fragger refilled his glass, and Wik drained half of it before speaking.

"Colonel, I'm not in the employ of Earthcorp, as I said before. Not anymore, anyway. I'm an investigative vidman. I've worked for the major hourlies including the *Orbital Universe*, the *Mars Olympus Mons*, and my last outlet, the *Asteroid Belter*. That's where the trouble started."

"What kind of trouble and where?"

"Ganymede. The government union didn't appreciate my exposure of kickbacks in the silicate mining industry. I found it would be better for my health if I left that moon quickly. So, I found myself between jobs and low on money. The prospect of hunger makes you take stupid actions."

"And what was your stupid action?"

"The Terran Educational Research Foundation dangled a large number of credits in front of my nose."

"An educational foundation?"

"Colonel, it was as much an educational foundation as I am three meters tall. "It was a front for the Disinformation Arm of the Earthcorp Interrogation Forces. Only after I'd accepted the assignment was I told of the specific task I needed to accomplish."

"Which was?"

"Are you familiar with Professor V. W. Vanderford?"

"In the middle of the Jivaron jungle, I'm not likely to possess that kind of knowledge."

"More dry wit. Sorry, colonel, I'm making assumptions I shouldn't make. Vanderford was the Provost of the University of Terra, Chair of Planetary Systems Management. A famous man. His task was to write a rebuttal to an article written by a man named Dom Kleem."

"Who is?"

"Another professor."

"What was the article about?"

"You, colonel."

"What did it say?"

"If you'll give me my epad, I'll call it up for you, and you can read it yourself."

Fragger handed the pad over. Wik opened it up and uttered a voice command. Then, he turned it around so the screen could be viewed. Fragger leaned forward and read:

*The Story of an Improbable Hero*

By Professor Dom Kleem,

Chair of the Department of Sociological Capitalism

N'gallo University

Well, of course, as the title states, this is the story of a hero. What other kind of story is there, really? We change the names or change the sex or change the time, location and circumstances, but it's all about one sentient being overcoming himself, his environment, or somebody else. That's all there's ever been to story telling, and that's all there'll ever be.

So, you say to me, you've stripped your tale down to its basic components and eliminated its glamour. In other words, you've rendered your story boring before you've even started telling it. Why should I continue reading? Tell me that, Mr. Egghead Professor, tell me that! Or are you hiding something?

Yes, I am hiding something. The subject of my piece—Fragger Sparks.

Now you want to continue reading, don't you?

Yes, I'm talking about that Fragger Sparks, the Rerun whose name you use to threaten your children when they misbehave.

So, why do I want to write about a man who frightens your offspring (and, admit it, you as well) and whom, in spite of his reputation for murder and ruthlessness, I call a 'hero'?

It's the truth I'm after. Whatever the cost. That's my job as an academic.

In this case, the truth of Fragger Sparks.

A Rerun who is often described in official documents and in the popular press as nasty-smelling, vicious, unprincipled, sadistic, egotistic, and, worst of all, a headhunter and a cannibal.

It's reported that Sparks claims he was none of those things in the 20th Century. He claims we've taught him every one of those vices, even the bad smell. Reportedly, Fragger Sparks said, "If you deal with skunks, the smell is going to rub off sooner or later."

The reference is clear. Skunks were black and white-striped members of the now-extinct Terran weasel family (Mustelidae). Although apparently good-natured until provoked, this mammal sprayed a noxious sulfur compound at its enemies called N-bulymercaptan. It was ejected in a fanlike pattern from two small openings near the animal's rectum. The glands that produce the chemical held enough for five or six full-powered sprays (with a range up to 15 feet). The spray resulted in a bitter, acrid smell that apparently was very difficult to wash off. To be called "a skunk" was to suggest that the offending party's actions were so odious as to cause a bad smell.

Fragger looked up from the screen and asked Wik. "Where do they get this stuff? It sounds like something I might say, but I never said it."

"You have friends."

"I do?"

"More correctly, you have enemies of the government. They've done their research on you."

"I had no idea I was so popular."

"You're being sarcastic, colonel, but despite the obvious self-interest, they *are* helping you. The government wants the story to go away, and the critics just won't let it die."

Fragger made a noncommittal noise and went back to reading.

...Critics have written off Sparks' comments as the ravings of a madman re-awakened in a future he couldn't possibly understand. Or, they've taken the opposite tack, and claimed that, as a Rerun, he's a typical slow-witted revival who's happened to get improbably lucky. This author has agreed with both sides at times. Should the reader think I sway with the winds of opinion, let me assert here I have indeed been guilty of that crime.

But it was the very commission of this offense that finally woke me up. After considering both opinions, a fact suddenly (and belatedly) dawned upon me. Fragger Sparks could neither be a madman, nor could he be a lucky half-wit.

My proof? The man has repeatedly escaped the dominant forces within the Renowned Systems—EarthCorp and the Royal and Imperial Commonwealth of Nipponese Empires (the "Ricers", as they're commonly called). Not to mention the lesser forces like the Spartans, the Ursus Combine, and

the Celestial Warriors of God. A madman might possibly accomplish this, but not a half-wit. But if Sparks is a madman, he's the coolest and calmest one on record. Not satisfied with escape, he's commandeered an entire planet, Jivaro, in the Gulag Archipelago. Jivaro is the sole supplier of headroot, the only plant known to mitigate or cure the deleterious effects of alcohol and most drugs. We all know the inconvenience Sparks' de facto monopoly of headroot has caused throughout the Renowned Systems."

Fragger laughed at this statement. "I haven't got a monopoly on anything. It's the quarantine forces cutting off the supply of headroot."

"But you *are* the cause of the quarantine so—"

"I get scapegoated. It seems to be a favorite pastime of your age."

"Self-pity, colonel? Doesn't fit your image."

"Screw my image!"

Fragger resumed reading:

...In some ways even more impressive than the taking over of a world is the Rerun's ability to attract oathbound elite warriors. Do you, dear citizen, have any idea what it takes to make a Ricer samurai warrior break his oath? Or that of an elite Earthcorp trooper? Both types of warriors agree to loyalty conditioning before they join service. Most such men would rather die than betray their loyalty—and many do. Can you imagine a madman or a halfwit breaking that conditioning and bringing such stalwart men over to his side? Not a chance, I'm sure you'll agree with me.

So, if Fragger Sparks is not a madman or a dull-witted fool, what is he? That's the question you want me to answer, isn't it? Well, here's my response: Colonel Jonathan "Fragger" Sparks, a member of the ancient, elite military force, the U.S. of A. Rangers, is the most dangerous man alive today.

As a knowledgeable citizen, you've already noticed I call this Rerun a "man." A lapse in manners? A mistake in proofreading? Not a chance. Most Reruns are not qualified for the respect due one citizen to another. But Fragger Sparks is the definite exception.

Lest revulsion overcome you at my claim and make you want to hurl the epad across the room, let me assert this mathematical point: We've revived millions of Reruns from the past. Ninety-eight percent are beyond redemption, useless for anything beyond common labor. But, statistically, there is still that final two percent to account for. Aberrations were bound to occur sooner or later.

Fragger Sparks is that aberration.

He represent—"

The story broke in mid-sentence to be replaced by the admonition:

#### EARTHCORP WARNING!

*This is an illegal publication. Because of the egregiously open nature of galactic communications systems, it is impossible to block such propaganda inserts. However, any copying and further transmission of this information is dangerous to the well-being of EarthCorp citizenry, and, thus, is proscribed under Article 10, Section 8 of the Interplanetary Legal Code. Be sure to read the following factual and absolutely true history of the renegade Rerun by Professor Emeritus V.W. Vanderford, Provost of the University of Terra and holder of the prestigious Chair of Planetary Systems Management.*

"What did the rest of the story say?" Fragger asked Wik.

"No one knows."

"So, how does all this fit in with you and Vanderford?"

"As I said, the government had asked the professor to write a rebuttal. They wanted someone—me—to clean up his prose for public consumption. Frankly, the man's writing was so dry it would make a desert thirsty. Needless to say, I was at first grateful I'd been called in. I needed the creds badly, plus it was an opportunity to work with a noted academic. All in all, I saw it as a prestigious addition to my resume. But—"

Wik's voice trailed off. His body shuddered as if a sudden chill had gone through it.

"Things didn't go as you planned," Fragger prompted.

The vidman nodded. "Unfortunately, Professor Vanderford and I loathed each other on sight. He had the arrogance of an academic who'd never been outside the ivory tower. He resented my presence and saw nothing wrong with his prose, citing numerous academic honors at me as proof of his ability at the craft of writing. I took one look at what he'd written and wept at the thought of getting anything usable out of his drafts. To make matters worse, I was supposed to help him write the rebuttal, but he wouldn't give me access to Kleem's article. I was supposed to rebut something I hadn't even read!"

"Typical thinking for a fascist-style government," Fragger said.

"Yes, definitely, colonel. Well, we argued for a week about that, about his writing, and just about anything you can name, getting nowhere until an Interrogator visited to check on our progress."

Wik shuddered again. "You already know what they're like, colonel."

"In spades."

"In what? I don't recognize that expression."

"It means I know their techniques all too well. Go on."

"Well, you know I'm a small man. The professor was short too. Not as short as me, but short. Compared to us, the Interrogator was a giant who weighed at least 110 kilos to my eyes, and had those ... those eyes."

"Dead."

"That's as good a description as any," Wik agreed. "Dead. When he found out we'd made no progress, he whipped out a pain goad, powered it up, and applied it to both of us. I'd never felt agony like that before and hope to never feel it again! To add insult to injury, the Interrogator ordered us to get up off the floor and coldly informed us he'd applied only minimum force. Then, he added that if we didn't get the article completed within two days, we'd get a full charge in the testicles! The poor sheltered professor dissolved into uselessness. I was in a panic myself, but I was used to the pressure of deadlines and set to work while Professor Vanderford paced and fretted and drank great quantities of alcohol without taking headroot to cure the hangover. It was while the poor man was passed out on the floor of his study, and I was attempting to make sense of his research that I inadvertently accessed the file of Professor Kleem. To my surprise, Dom Kleem told a story about you that was the opposite of everything Vanderford had written so far."

Wik paused to take another sip of beer. "You can imagine my confusion, colonel. I had the same low opinions of Reruns as everyone else and thought of you as a monster. Here was Kleem presenting an entirely different story. So, who to believe? That was the first question I had to answer. The second one was, Would I survive if the Interrogator returned and found out I had knowledge of Kleem's 'seditious' writings? The answer to the second question was easy. I didn't have a chance of survival. Therefore, my choice was made for me. I had to escape. And I had to find out the truth. That's why I'm here in this hellhole of a planet."

"What happened to Vanderford and to Kleem?"

"Officially, Vanderford died in a fire in his home library on the Terran island-nation of Sri Lanka while indulging in the archaic and filthy habit of smoking a cigarette. A lie, of course. Vanderford was a pompous ass in many respects, but he didn't smoke. In fact, he was such a prig he lectured everybody on every deficiency they had. Kleem, I have no idea of what happened to him. Dead, probably."

"Well, it's very noble of you to pursue the truth beyond Vanderford's death."

Wik raised an eyebrow at Fragger's tone. "Colonel, you're very cynical. Were you always this way?"

"No. The future has given me that attitude."

"I can appreciate that," Wik said and took another swallow of beer. "The Ricers and EarthCorp haven't treated you well, to put it mildly. Perhaps you can tell me more what of they've done to you?"

"All in good time, Wik. You still haven't told me how you linked up with the Aiforians."

"I called in many favors to get off Earth. That was the hard part, colonel. I'm not exactly inconspicuous, but the fact that I'm a small man worked in my favor. No one wants to hand anyone over to the security apparatus, but turning in a dwarf, well, that's akin to handing over a child in most people's minds. Once I was off-world, it was a simple matter of planet-hopping until I got to Aifor."

"Where they welcomed you with open arms?"

"Of course not. They jailed me immediately. I was interrogated for two months before Wenghorn showed up and invited me along."

"Why you? Why not invite a government propagandist vidman?"

"He told me he wanted someone along who was objective and could tell the real story."

"What a load of crap!"

"I agree, colonel. To be honest, I don't know what the real reason is. I have my suspicions though."

"Which are?"

"What do you know about the Aiforian government?"

"Little."

"Well, it's straight out of Earth's Viking period in many ways. You have a collection of noblemen forming the government, the *Althing*, the so-called Democracy of Lords. Now, there's a misnomer if there ever was one. Not at all like the original *Althing*, according to my research. Basically, it's a collection of thugs ruling their fiefdoms and trying to destroy each other. That's why EarthCorp and the Ricers have been able to keep them at bay. They squabble among themselves and can't agree on anything."



"What does this have to do with Wenghorn bringing you along?"

"He didn't want a spy from his enemies in his midst. It's as simple as that, I believe. Aiforian journalists are notorious for their undercover espionage activities. I also believe he wants to use me as a more credible source. No one believes government propagandists so the nobles will expect truth from my reports and a realistic assessment of the situation. You may not believe this, colonel, but my name is linked with credible journalism."

"Maybe, but it sounds to me you've run across half the galaxy only to end up in the pay of another government."

"Colonel, I'm not going to deny I'm not a completely objective source. But, from my point of view, it's very nice to still be breathing. And, from your point of view, I'm probably as objective a source as you're going to get, if you'll let me talk to you."

"You'll get your opportunity. However, I'm certainly not going to let Wenghorn censor it."

"If he doesn't get the story out the way the *Althing* wants, he'll be dead too," Wik said

"So, how about you do two stories—one for me, one for him?" Fragger suggested. "Could you do that? Get them off-world independently?"

Wik squirmed in his chair. "That's suicide for me. With two versions of the story out, he'd know I was the only possible source."

"I'll tell him that I ordered you to do it. It'd be the truth."

"Truth? The truth doesn't matter, colonel. He'd see it as a betrayal, and I'd be dead sooner or later."

"You have my protection as long as you're on Jivaro," Fragger said. "You might not be a match for Wenghorn, but he's certainly no match for me."

The vidman shrugged. "That might not matter. Aiforian noblemen and women have subtle ways of getting rid of their enemies. 'Accidents.' Poison."

"Once the story is out, we'll keep you separate from the Aiforian party. You'll have complete safety."

"Nobody has complete safety on Jivaro," Wik staring into his beer as if it had suddenly soured on him.

"Well, as close to complete safety as possible then."

Wik raised his eyes to Fragger. "It's not like I have any choice, is it?"

"None," the Ranger agreed.

The vidman leaned forward in his chair. "Colonel, I thought it was dangerous out there on Earth and Aifor, but this planet is something else. Everything and everybody is trying to kill you."

"Welcome to my world, Wik."

## Chapter 10

"Colonel, we've been talking a long time, and you still haven't told me anything about yourself," Wik protested. "I really must object. It's been nothing but a one-way street so far."

"Patience, Wik," Fragger said. "Did Vanderford's article ever come out, whoever wrote it?"

"Of course, but—"

"Is it on this epad?"

"Yes."

"Good. I want to read it now. Always know what your enemies think of you. I'll have some food brought in. Enjoy while I read."

"Colonel!"

"It's your choice," Fragger reminded him. "A nice meal and more *chicha* or back out into the Jivaron sweatbox."

The vidman grumbled but sagged back into the chair, looking like a prematurely aged child who'd just been denied his favorite toy.

Fragger ordered food. When it arrived, he accessed the file Wik identified for him and read:

### *A Rebuttal to "The Story of an Improbable Hero"*

By Professor Emeritus V.W. Vanderford

Provost of the University of Terra

Chair of Planetary Systems Management

Normally, one does not concern oneself with the history of a mere Rerun's family; however, I have been asked by respected members of EarthCorporation officialdom to provide a counterpoint to the malicious writings of Professor Dom Kleem regarding Fragger Sparks ("improbable" hero, indeed) and am glad to do so. Why am I happy to attempt such an undertaking? For the real truth, of course. The search for truth is at the core of all honest professors' efforts in the academic arena.

That said, let me make one point clear before I outline the history of the Sparks family and, thus, cite various reasons for the Rerun's disruption of the workings of civilized life. Here is that point: Although Dom Kleem had the title "Professor" before his name, it was widely known among scholars that he had little aptitude for serious research and was little more than a thief and popularizer of other scholars' work. Add to that the fact he'd been banished to a second-rate university located on a backwater planet, and you can see how little importance should be attached to any of his statements.

Now that this bit of unpleasantness is out of the way, let's move on to the Sparks family.

What is one to say about it? On the one hand, disaster has knocked on its door throughout the ages with the tenacity of a bill collector due thousands of credits. On the other, the Sparks family opened that door time and again, accepted the calamities served upon them, and still survived all—every one of those catastrophes—not always in one piece, but still living and breathing and capable of carrying on the family tradition of producing heirs until the next misfortune arrived.

How is it we are aware of such specifics of a mentally simple Rerun's family history? Records of revivals are usually spotty at best and also irrelevant for our purposes. Well, we are cognizant of the Sparks' family history for two reasons: One, the Sparks family had an obsessive-compulsive desire to record their unimportant doings. To accomplish this task, they had an astounding devotion to and preservation of all sorts of ancient documentation—paper letters, photos, videotapes, digital images, etc., much of which survived and was recovered after much diligent work from myself and my team, from the ruins of the ancient “Net.” Two, the family history is augmented by a decided knack for embellishment. At least part of the Sparks line was of Irish descent, an ancient people who were known for their tall tale telling and, ironically enough, for their luck (more on this “luck” later). Why is the gift for story telling important? To be frank, we're not absolutely sure, but we postulate that everyone likes a good story (whether it's true or not), and this quality led to the dissemination of Sparks files far and wide and, thus, the survival of extensive records. Also, due to this peculiar tradition, it is not always easy for an investigator to separate fact from fantastic fiction. Having delivered this warning, I will go out on a limb and venture to say that I and my magnificent team—

Fragger looked up from the screen and said, “It mentions a magnificent team. You said it was only you and him.”

“It *was* only him and me, colonel,” Wik responded. “It's just puffery from the Disinformation Arm of the security forces.”

Fragger read on:

“—have assembled the most accurate picture possible of a generation that preceded and produced the singular and odious Fragger Sparks.

Briefly, it's clear that the father, William, started the dubious family tradition during Terra's World War II in the 20th Century. The U. S. of A. pilot of a propeller-driven (!) attack aircraft named a Dauntless torpedo bomber, he attacked an enemy naval warship designated a “cruiser” and was blown out of the sky for his efforts. Adrift in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean and with no hope of rescue, Captain Sparks clung to a piece of his aircraft's wing for 15 days and nights and was rescued, in effect, by a large Terran seabird called an albatross! According to the story (fanciful, indeed!), the curious bird plucked a torn piece of khaki shirt from the captain's emaciated frame and got the sleeve caught around his neck. When the newly fashionable albatross departed and subsequently landed on the outrigger of a native canoe, the sleeve was noted by its occupant, one Nimu, an islander apparently famed for his uncanny navigational skills. In short order, Nimu located the downed pilot, rescued Sparks and re-united him with his fellow soldiers. Captain Sparks survived the remainder of the war, returned to farming life and produced four sons and two daughters with his wife, Megan.

Approximately 20 years later, those three sons were involved in a conflict with a country called Vietnam. The eldest (Jonathan “Fragger” Sparks, of course), was a Sergeant, an elite Ranger soldier in the U.S. of A. Army. During a battle, he was shot between the eyes and lived to tell about it! His one misfortune was to get shot by a sniper. However, his “fortune” was twofold. One, he was getting up on his knees to mark a landing zone for an evacuation aircraft designated a “helicopter” so the bullet entered at a downward angle, missing his brain. Two, it was a “clean” bullet; that is, it spun due to rifling and did not tumble which causes maximum physical damage.

Sparks's middle brother, Sam, was in Vietnam at approximately the same time that Fragger was getting his sinuses bullet-drilled. Sam had joined the same branch of the U.S. of A. military forces as his father, the Marines. Apparently more of an amphibious fighting force, it's not clear what units of this army were doing in the jungles of Vietnam. However, Sam Sparks was as unfortunate as his brother—and just as lucky. Taking shelter from a probing enemy attack, he hid in a bunker. A rifle round entered that bunker,

ricocheted about and caught Sam in the knee, shattering the joint. Sam Sparks was evacuated four hours before the compound was overrun and all members of his unit annihilated. He returned to the U.S. of A. with a limp and an addiction to painkillers but otherwise intact.

The next brother, Edward, was apparently the most rebellious of the four boys but still had the same firm commitment to duty as the others. Although he also became a pilot, he expressed his rebellion by joining the Air Force instead of his father's beloved Marine branch of the service. After 25 missions, Edward suffered the same fate as his father. He was apparently shot down by a surface-to-air missile. Suffering a broken leg, collarbone and arm upon parachuting into enemy territory, he was held prisoner for five years and, astonishingly, endured severe physical torture, poor medical care, and extreme psychological pressures with a sense of humor. But, even more astonishing, the plane carrying Ed Sparks out of captivity upon cessation of hostilities crashed on landing due to engine failure. Lieutenant Sparks not only survived the ensuing fire but dragged two of his fellow soldiers to safety while 97 others perished in the blaze.

The youngest brother, Reed, was the only Sparks boy not to join military service. We found little material about him, other than some reference to drugs and poetry. This may be because he was the "black sheep" of the family and the less said, the better as far as the family was concerned.

One last example (on the male side) is necessary to underline the startling "Irish luck" of the Sparks. All the Sparks boys produced many children, but Edward led the pack with six boys and one girl. Twenty-two years after his service in Vietnam, Ed Sparks's eldest son went to war for his country in a different part of Terra's geography (Fragger also fought in this war). This was a place then called the Mideast, largely a desert region. The war was fought over an energy source, oil. Daniel Sparks had followed in the pilot tradition of his father and grandfather and flew a jet-powered, ground-attack type of aircraft with the odd name of "Warthog." Dan Sparks's task was to attack enemy tank forces (old-style, gasoline or diesel-driven type, ancient precursors to the modern fusion-powered armored behemoths). The U. S. of A's war effort was extremely successful with few casualties in the air or on the ground. Only five Warthogs were shot down. Of course, Daniel Sparks's aircraft was one of them. Afflicted with the bad luck/good luck curse peculiar to the Sparks family, Captain Sparks ran into one of the enemy's few coordinated anti-aircraft efforts and was shot down. He struggled with the damaged aircraft and managed to guide it away from the targeted enemy positions into the middle of the desert, only to land within range of a different enemy tank force. Dan Sparks survived an enemy tank commander's efforts to grind him into hamburger with a multi-ton vehicle by diving into a trench. Then, apparently armed only with a hand weapon called a Beretta, he fought enemy troops until an extraction team arrived via helicopter. In the trench, they found Daniel Sparks under a pile of bodies, barely alive and, legend has it, bullet holes in his chest and a bayonet pinning his leg to the ground while he had his hands around an enemy soldier's throat still trying to choke the life out of a man who was already dead. (Obviously, there are elements of the typical Sparks embellishment in this story.)

The "Sparks luck" was not limited to the male members of the clan. There are many other incidents to relate concerning the Sparks women; however, I believe I've provided anecdotal information to buttress the main point of my thesis: That the Sparks family was not lucky at all. If, as reported, Fragger Sparks has the ability to tap into hyperspace on a personal level, then his lineage simply carried the now-coveted and mis-named "MASER-gene." Unfortunately, as we have all ruefully discovered, the fact that individuals possess enhanced MASER capabilities doesn't guarantee that the moral or ethical dimension will be concomitantly enhanced as well. People will be people, after all, even Reruns. Hand most of them an advantage, and they will use it to increase their wealth, position, and reproductive possibilities while, at the same time, they compensate for this self-interest by giving back to society in the form of charity, grants, public service and the like. Being a Rerun, Sparks lacks the concept of public service, of course. Hand him an advantage, and he'll simply beat you over the head with it.

However, whatever our personal animosities toward Sparks, there is no denying his impact upon our times. Were I a superstitious man, I would say he is the fulfillment of the ancient Terran Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times."

Such is the nature of lethal individuals and tyrants and the admixture of each that they tend to originate in obscure spots and, thus, escape the notice of authorities until mischief is already under way. That's why it is important that Sparks' story be told. Enterprising individuals and governments with the survival of civilization in mind must come up with a method of detecting and eradicating not only the present Fragger Sparks, but future ones as well before they can wreak havoc on our societies.

*Note: Unfortunately, it is the current trend for reader-viewers, both academic and otherwise, to prefer personal history over objective presentation. I am assured by my publisher that my article will not be read if it is presented in a traditional format. Therefore, I employed the services of a so-called ghost writer. Frankly, if the story were not so important, I would never have stooped to this "popular" level. I assure my esteemed colleagues that this will be the first and last time I will employ such a service.*

—Professor V.W. Vanderford

"Well, at least he gave you some credit," Fragger said as he closed the file.

Wik's lips smiled around a banana he'd stuck into his mouth. "And it *was* the last time he ever employed a ghost writer."

The vidman swallowed the last bit of banana and flipped the peel onto a plate. "What did you think?"

"Of the writing? Obviously, you helped the man out."

"No, not the style! The content. Was it accurate?"

"Remarkably so," Fragger answered. "I have to tell you, it's unnerving to read about my family in the past tense. My question is, why do you want to know more about me and my past? You already know a great deal."

"There are holes though, aren't there, colonel? Such as your brother, Reed. What made him the black sheep of the family?"

Fragger scowled at the mention of his brother. "I'm tempted to cut this conversation short, Wik, because Reed is a sore point with me. But I made a promise to you, and I always keep my promises. Reed used meth, a form of amphetamine. He became heavily addicted and ended up with a psychotic break. He killed his girlfriend and his child and was sentenced to life in prison."

"Surely there would be a record of that," the vidman said. "Vanderford wouldn't have missed it. As dull a writer as he was, he was an academic and thorough in his research."

"Of course, there was a record, Wik. But he never made it to prison, so it was probably deleted from the article by your Disinformation buddies."

"I don't understand. Why didn't he make it to prison and why would EarthCorp delete that information?"

"Simply put, Reed disappeared."

"You mean he escaped and went into hiding?"

"No, I mean he disappeared from the courtroom right after the judge imposed the life sentence. Poof! 'Like magic,' they said. Amidst all the noise and clatter of the press rushing out to get their stories in, Reed simply vanished."

"The MASER gene?"

"I suppose."

"But why didn't he activate it before to escape?"

"Don't be stupid, Wik. He didn't know he had it any more than I did. I can only theorize that fear caused it to kick in."

"Fear of inmates killing him because he murdered a child?"

"That and fear of confinement. Reed always was claustrophobic. I suppose the meth psychosis intensified that fear."

"Was he ever found?"

"No. A large manhunt was held, but he never turned up."

"Any ideas where he went?"

"No."

"You think he jumped into hyperspace and never came back?"

"Knowing what I know now, it's as good an explanation as any. At the time, I—and everybody else—thought the police were simply incompetent and let him escape. If I'd known where he was, I probably would have killed him myself."

"You're serious?"

"Oh, yes," Fragger answered with an anger that was still strong after six hundred years. "Why? Because he killed two human beings. Because he as good as killed my father and mother. They were never the same after the murders. Their son killing a woman and, especially, the child. They both lived by a code of honor. The life drained right out of them. They were the walking dead."

Fragger took a deep breath to lessen the anger and softened his tone as he continued. "I always thought Reed had been adopted or dropped straight into the middle of our family."

"Why?"

"He wasn't like the rest of us. I'm a military man, my dad was a military man—no-nonsense people. Straight ahead people. Even my mother. In her own way, she was tougher than the rest of us put together. But, Reed ... the damned kid was sensitive right from the start, too sensitive for his own good. The only reason other kids left him alone was because they knew I or my brothers would beat the crap out of them if they messed with him."

"He was homosexual, you mean?" Wik asked "Is that why they tried to bully him?"

Fragger shook his head. "No. Not that way. Simply different. He was one of those people who lived in the world but wasn't part of it. His mind ran on strange tracks. He was a damned poet. A poet in our family! Published and recognized nationally. Or so he said."

"You didn't like his poetry?"

"I didn't like it or dislike it," Fragger answered. "I just didn't understand it, that's all. Most soldiers don't have time for poetry, Wik, unless it's some patriotic drivel."

"Are you saying you weren't patriotic, colonel?"

"Don't be stupid, Wik. I loved my country and damned near died for it. I was as patriotic as the next soldier, but bad poetry has nothing to say about war. Real war. A man's guts spilling into your hands. A boy screaming for his mother in the midst of a rotting jungle like this. And the smell, always the smell of death. You never get that out of your nostrils. Crap poetry is written by crap people who've never been to war."

Fragger felt a sudden embarrassment at his openness and said fiercely to the vidman, "And the same goes for crap journalists who write crap in the pay of governments."

Wik's face screwed itself into an exasperated frown. "I've already explained that I haven't had a whole lot of choice in the matter, colonel. Besides, if I'm such a crap journalist, would I sit with you, a Rerun, and try to learn about his life?"

Fragger glared at Wik. "A clever one would. You have a knack for drawing people out. It's a skill handy for a weasel."

"I don't know what a 'weasel' is, but your tone tells me it's not good."

"A weasel is an Earth mammal. It's another word for treachery."

Alarm raised the vidman's thick eyebrows.

"Colonel, if you're expecting deceit from me, you won't get it, I assure you. In fact, as I told you earlier, I'd advise you to look at other members of Wenghorn's party."

"Be specific. Who?"

"I can't be specific! I'm not privy to Aiforian secrets. They don't trust me any more than you do."

"Well, then, what's your best guess as to what they're up to?"

Wik shrugged. "I simply don't have an answer for that, colonel."

"Well, I want one."

The vidman shot a distressed look at the Ranger. "You want me to be an informant?"

"Yes."

Wik shook his head. "No, colonel, I can't do that. I have no love for the Aiforians, but I do have a particular love of my life. As you can see," the vidman gestured at his body, "I'm about a meter short of bravery."

Fragger poured more beer into Wik's glass. "Oh, I don't know about that. A man without courage wouldn't be sitting in the middle of the Jivaron jungle talking to me."

"Flattery and alcohol, colonel. Two ingredients designed to induce cooperation."

Fragger smiled. The vidman was swaying in his chair from the effects of the chicha, but he still had his wits about him.

"It's not about cooperation, Wik."

"The hell it isn't!"

Fragger held up his hand. "Let me finish. I'll put it in the most practical terms possible. You want to live. Or at least live as long as possible, right?"

"No doubt about that. Who doesn't?"

"Well, then it's a question of where you'll live the longest."

"I'm listening."

"So, let's assume you make it back to Aifor. Once you provide the stories on me, your usefulness is at an end and so is your life. Or maybe the Aiforians see you as some sort of bargaining chip and send you back to Earth. You end up in the hands of the Disinformation Arm thugs. Torture and death are a certainty. The Corpses, the Aiforians—everyone in this time—they're not tolerant of people like you and me."

Wik raised an eyebrow. "Like you and me?"

"We're both freaks in this age, aren't we? From what I've seen, geneticists can do just about any damned thing they want to with the human body. Look at you. I'm willing to bet you're a living reminder of ugliness in their eyes, an affront to whatever the standards of 'normal' appearance are these days."

Wik shifted uncomfortably in his chair, but said, "I'll bet dwarfs weren't treated any better six hundred years ago."

"You're right, except for one thing. We didn't kill them. Besides, you're forgetting the main point."

"Which is?"

"I don't care what size, shape or color a man is. All I care about is what he can do."

"It sounds like you're asking me to join you, colonel."

"And why not? Look at who's already done so. Watanabe, Salinsky, Buurk, and all the others. I'd say I have a pretty good track record, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe," Wik conceded, "but..."

"But what?"

"I'm a practical man. I have to be. What's in it for me?"

"Not a damned thing, Wik. Just respect and opportunity."

"Opportunity? Live in the middle of the stinking Jivaron jungle always on the run!"

"To me, that sounds a lot like where you've been living the past few years," Fragger said.

The vidman took another gulp of beer and considered. "I don't know..."



"I'll tell you what," Fragger said. "I'm going to give you unrestricted access to Watanabe and Salinsky and any other member of the Jivaron Rangers you want to talk to."

The dwarf's eyebrows raised in sceptical surprise. "No restrictions at all?"

"None, except when it comes to revealing our military disposition or location."

The vidman looked longingly at his now empty glass. "Do I get to stay in here?"

"Of course, except for off-limit areas."

A shrewd look stole on to Wik's face. "Can I talk to Lady Lesto?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The lady has already nearly gotten me killed through her influence on others."

Wik's face lit up with journalistic eagerness. "She has? What happened?"

Fragger stood. "Wik, you're already pushing your luck, so no more on that subject. Do you accept my offer or not?"

The vidman started to protest, then thought better of it. "As I said before, what choice do I have?"

"A good one, to my mind."

The vidman hesitated before sliding off the chair and looking up at Fragger. "How about this? I accept your offer to let me do the interviews. Once I know you've kept your word in that area, I'll give you my answer about joining you."

"Fair enough," Fragger said as he walked the vidman to the door. "By the way, do you consider yourself an aggressive questioner?"

"Damned right I do!" A suspicious look clouded the vidman's upturned face. "Why do you ask? Do you want me to go soft on the interviews?"

"Only with Salinsky."

"Why him?"

"He's very loyal to me, and he has a very quick temper. He's prone to rash actions."

"Such as?"

"Slicing off the heads of people who provoke him."

Fragger grinned as the door closed on the ashen-faced Wik.

## Chapter 11

"Colonel, your treatment of us is unfair, and you know it!"

Fragger opened his good eye from a siesta in the hammock to find the Aiforian ambassador looking down at him with an indignant glare. As always, Wenghorn's expensive Feynman suit remained unwrinkled despite the soaring afternoon heat and humidity. Inside the suit, though, Wenghorn looked like a boiled hot dog. His skin was blotchy and red, and sweat poured down off the bald head. Fragger liked what he saw.

"Uncomfortable, ambassador?"

"You know damned well I am. And so is everybody else, except for Wik. For the past month, you've allowed him access to the ship and let him stay nice and cool while we roast out here."

"That's true."

"Why?"

"You already know the answer to that, ambassador. We've had this discussion before."

"Colonel, none of us is going to sabotage your ship. We don't have the capabilities of doing it."

"So you say."

"But...!"

"Ambassador, once Bucaram and Tat get back with an answer from your government, then you can leave."

"It's been more than a week since they left! They should be back by now. I don't know why you insisted on Tat's going. You knew he'd slow them down. He's terrified of being out in the jungle."

"Wenghorn, I sent him because I can't stand having the idiot around. Besides, you should be grateful. It was time he did something useful for you. As far as I can tell, all he's done around here is take up space."

Or size up our defenses. For a frightened mouse of a man, Tat has managed to make quite a few rounds of our position while he's been with us.

"But if I lose him, his father will have my head!" the ambassador said.

Fragger suppressed a sigh. I'm tired of playing this game with Wenghorn, but time to do it again.

He swung his body upright in the hammock and said, "Did you ever consider the possibility that Ban Tat sent his son with you to shape him up? Maybe he hopes the kid will finally get a grip after facing what Jivaro has to offer."

"Face the facts, colonel. From what I've seen, it takes a tough and hardened man to face the dangers of this planet. Kendlan Tat is no match for them."

"That brings up another possibility," Fragger said. "You Aiforians are a pretty Darwinian breed. Maybe Ban Tat wants his son gone if he doesn't shape up."

Wenghorn opened his mouth to protest. The protest died in a nod of the head. "I wouldn't put much past

Ban Tat."

"A tough old nut, huh?"

"The toughest. A first among equals, you might say. He's a ruthless, very demanding man and intolerant of incompetence."

"Well, if you want some instant psychoanalysis, maybe that's why his son ended up the way he did," Fragger said. "Trying to please his father, and it can't be done."

"You sound like you've had some experience of that, colonel."

Fragger smiled at yet another probe into his past by the ambassador. For the past month, Wenghorn had been subtle but persistent in his questioning.

In his own diplomatic way, he's as relentless as a siege army. His objective is to wear me down until he finds a breach in my defenses. It isn't going to happen.

"Ambassador, why don't you return to the others? This time of day is meant for a nap, not arguing."

"I know, I know, but then I have to go back to...."

"Lady Turnwaite?"

"Yes."

"She's something else, isn't she?"

"You have no idea, colonel."

"Actually," Fragger said. "I'd planned on giving us all some relief by sending her with Bucaram, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said he'd kill her before they got a kilometer into the jungle."

Wenghorn sighed. "I envy the man. He'd actually do what I only dream of. Colonel, I have a request of you concerning Lady Turnwaite."

"Which is?"

"She's provoking your men. She insults them, belittles them. She does the same to us, of course, but we have to tolerate it. Your men don't. Something bad might happen to her."

"What do you expect me to do about it?" Fragger asked.

"Separate her. Take her inside the ship."

"That's not going to happen."

"Trouble's sure to happen then."

Fragger thought his options over, then said, "I'll put her with the Shuar women out in the jungle. She's an ethnologist, isn't she? She should welcome the chance to study the culture."

"She may object."

"Nothing new there."

"Will she be safe?"

"Probably safer out there than here."

"I mean, will she be safe from the Shuar men?"

"Unlike us, Shuar men don't indulge in rape," Fragger answered. "Besides, they consider her useless so she'll probably be as secure as is possible on this planet."

"It's pointing out the obvious, colonel, but she's not going to go quietly."

Fragger signaled a soldier over. "Corporal Jinn, get two men and accompany Ambassador Wenghorn. He'll ask you to escort Lady Turnwaite to the Shuar encampment. She's to stay there with the women and not to return until I give the order. If she resists, be persuasive, but don't break anything. Understood?"

The corporal rolled his eyes at the mention of the woman.

Fragger grinned up at Jinn. "If you don't have ear plugs, you better find some quick."

"No, shit, sir," the corporal said as he saluted and then barked orders at a knot of soldiers.

A few minutes later, an infuriated shriek startled *duwudu* birds into flight. A livid Lady Turnwaite stumbled into sight, nudged forward none too gently by rifle butts. Hoots of laughter followed the detail as troopers gathered to watch the show. The Aiforian woman swung around and spat into the face of the corporal. Jinn raised a hand to slap her down.

"Corporal!" Fragger barked.

Jinn lowered the hand and received more spit. Trembling with rage, he shouted an order at one of the guards who produced cuffs and slapped them on the woman's wrists. The corporal flung her over his shoulder and marched the detail into the jungle.

Fragger lay back down into the hammock closed his good eye to get more rest, but Iso's question cut off the attempt.

"What's going on, colonel?"

"I'm not getting any goddamned rest, that's what, Iso. I just ordered Turnwaite taken to the Shuar's encampment where, hopefully, she'll cause less trouble."

His second-in-command dropped to the ground in a cross-legged pose. "You don't want any news then?"

"Is it good or bad?"

Iso shrugged. "One of our men just told me that Bucaram and that idiot, Tat, are on their way back."

"Any word on the Aiforian response?"

"Bucaram's kept it to himself. He didn't want to risk the runner being captured by Radmuller or Lesto and revealing the message."

"Good thinking," Fragger said. "So, Iso, what do we do if they accept our proposal and agree to move us all to a different planet?"

"Run the other way, colonel. You know damned well it's a trap. Nobody's going to let you get free if they can possibly help it."

"Yeah, I know, but there must be some way we can turn this to our advantage."

Iso rubbed at his stubbled chin. "I don't see how. I'd love to get off Jivaro, but it's the safest place for us at the moment."

"No doubt about that," Fragger agreed. "Not that it's all that safe. But we can't stay here forever. If we don't get off-planet with the Aiforians, the Corpses, the Ricers—hell, everyone—will hunt us down sooner or later. It's just a matter of time and manpower."

"No argument there," Iso said. "Trouble from without and trouble within. This damned place is wearing the troops down, colonel. They're good soldiers, but their nerves are getting rubbed raw from pressure applied by Radmuller's creatures, plus not knowing what our orbiting enemies will do next. They feel like sitting ducks and hate doing nothing. They need action."

"They need more than that Iso. They need hope."

"I agree, but how are we going to provide it?"

"I don't know."

Fragger stared at the dropship in frustration. "If we had a pilot, we could get that damned thing off the ground and take our chances."

He swatted at a cloud of insects buzzing about his face. They scattered, then re-assembled into a darting mass just outside his reach before moving in close to his head. Fragger swatted at them again. "Damn these bugs! Damn this entire planet."

"Stop wasting your strength," Iso suggested. "They're like our enemies. There are billions of them."

"The troops aren't the only ones getting worn down, are they?"

Iso wiped sweat from his face with a rough hand scarred from many years of combat. "I admit it."

The simple, frank response alarmed Fragger.

*I don't want my best man communicating fatigue to the troops. Iso's too good a soldier to say anything negative in front of the Rangers but his tone and posture speak volumes to veteran troopers. It's time to nip this in the bud.*

Fragger spoke quickly. "You know, Iso, I think I've been going about this in the wrong way."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. The idea's still forming. Let me think it through for a while."

Iso squinted skeptically at Fragger. "That means you haven't got any ideas at all, have you?"

"Oh, I've definitely got ideas," Fragger lied. "But I need to hear from Bucaram about the Aiforian response before I make my decision. In the meantime, I want you to get the word out to squad leaders that I've come up with a solution."

"They'll want to know what that solution is, colonel."

*Not any more than I do, Iso.*

"Tell them what I told you," he said sharply. "That's all they need to know for now."

Iso frowned at the tone, but nodded and left.

*Now all I need to do is come up with an idea*, Fragger thought as he settled back into the hammock and stared glumly into the hazy Jivaron sky. *And it'd better be a good one, that's for sure, or many people will die.*

It was a depressing thought and one unbecoming to an officer. Fragger banished it from his mind with the touchstone phrase that had guided him throughout his military career.

*Rangers lead the way!*

## Chapter 12

Two days later, Bucaram strode into the clearing toward Fragger and Iso with Kendlan Tat stumbling and limping behind him amidst the trailing Shuar warriors. The Aiforian's clothes were torn and tattered. Scratches and welts covered the man from his sunburned forehead below the bug-infested cloud of blond-white hair to the bare and bloody feet. Tears streaked the dirt on his face, dripping off the chisel-like chin.

"What happened to him?" Fragger asked Bucaram.

The uwishin's eyes glared at the Ranger from beneath his black bangs. "Colonel, I will obey every other order you give me from now on, but I will never ever take that man into the jungle again. He nearly got us killed. Not once, but several times."

Fragger handed the Shuar a skin of chicha. "And yet here you are. You're a man of remarkable talents, Bucaram."

The Shuar drank deeply, then drank again as if trying to wash away the sight of Tat behind him bending hands on knees and panting into the ground.

"What happened to him, you ask? What didn't happen to the man that he didn't cause himself? Stepped into a mound of inferno ants. Blundered into razor grass. Fell into the water and provoked a proto-croc—"

The uwishin recited a long and cursing list of Tat's idiocies. When he paused to take a breath, Fragger interrupted, "Bucaram, you have my sympathies but what about the message?"

The uwishin glared again, but took a deep breath and replied, "They accept your terms."

"No conditions?"

"None."

Fragger pulled Iso and Bucaram out of earshot from Tat. He asked Iso, "Too easy?"

"Definitely. What do you want to do, colonel?"

"Accept their terms, of course."

Iso stared at Fragger. "What! They'll never give us what we're asking, and you know it. Damn it, colonel, is this the idea you were talking about? If so, it's bullshit!"

"Relax, Iso. I—"

"You're not planning to capture another dropship, are you? They won't fall for that trick again."

"I said relax!" Fragger ordered. He summoned a soldier over. "Find Ambassador Wenghorn and bring him here immediately. While you're at it, take Tat with you and have Buurk give him medical attention."

"Let's get out of the sun," Fragger told Iso and Bucaram.

They sat in the shade of a junglewood tree and waited for Wenghorn. Within minutes, the ambassador joined them.

"I hear the party has returned. What was the message, colonel?" he asked.

"They accepted my terms."

Wenghorn blinked. "They did? Really?"

Fragger tried to gauge the expression on the ambassador's face. The Aiforian's surprise seemed genuine, but the Ranger decided to probe deeper.

"You didn't expect that response?"

"No, colonel, I can honestly say I didn't. You're more important than I imagined."

"I'm flattered."

"Your cynicism is well-founded, I admit that," Wenghorn said. "But, really, I had no idea. None at all."

"Any explanation as why your government acceded to my proposal so quickly?"

"No. My guess is that divisions have occurred within the Althing. It can be a somewhat, ah, fractious body."

"Or perhaps a handy excuse for setting a trap?" Iso said.

"Watanabe, I won't lie to you. I simply don't know. I'm out of touch because of your restrictions. If you'd just let me communicate with my people, perhaps I can get some clarification."

"No clarification necessary, ambassador. I'm going to accept your government's offer, and you're going to inform them of that fact."

Wenghorn gave Fragger a quick look. "I'm happy to hear that, colonel, but forgive me for being as skeptical as your sergeant. Why are you accepting the terms so readily?"

"Look around you," Fragger said. "My men have been in the jungle for a long time. They're as eager to get off Jivaro as you are. As you've pointed out, it's a dangerous place. They deserve better."

Wenghorn hesitated. "Still..."

"You have my acceptance, ambassador," Fragger said. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes, of course, but you're military man and appreciate bluntness so I'll ask you a direct question. You're not planning some sort of action against the landing party, are you?"

"No more than you're planning any action against me, ambassador. You're not, are you?"

"Of course not!"

Fragger suppressed a laugh at the transparently indignant response.

The ambassador is usually more subtle. Jivaro is definitely getting to him as well. There's something up.

"Then, you may go back to your dropship," Fragger said. "You can communicate my acceptance from there."

"Is that going to be the rendezvous spot?"



"No. I'll designate a landing spot. We'll meet there a month from the time I know the deal's in place."

"A month? That's a long time."

"We're in the jungle," Fragger reminded him. "It takes time to move people through it."

"How will I know where the landing spot is?"

"I'll send a runner with the coordinates."

"Lady Lesto will accompany me?" the ambassador asked.

"She stays here until her father calls off his attacks on us."

"But I'm not in touch with him. I've already told you—"

"Then you'd better find a way to get in touch."

Wenghorn sighed and signaled his acquiescence with a nod.

"You can leave whenever you wish," Fragger said.

"I'll have to give Kendlan Tat some time to recover, colonel."

"There's no need to wait for him."

Wenghorn's eyebrows raised. "Why not?"

"Two reasons. One is purely practical. If he goes with you, he'll simply slow you down."

"What's the second reason?"

Fragger smiled. "It's my personal gift to you, a gesture of good faith. No man should have to suffer the presence of Tat. In fact, since I'm feeling generous, you can leave Lady Turnwaite behind as well, if you wish. She's nearly as much trouble as Tat."

A confusion of delight and consternation struggled in Wenghorn's face and prompted a question. "They're hostages?"

"If you think I'd keep Tat as a hostage, you must think me a complete idiot," Fragger replied. "As for Lady Turnwaite, by the time she's returned to you, maybe she'll have learned a little humility. In either case, as I said, you'll get there faster without them."

A frank look of relief crossed the ambassador's face. "You're a compassionate man, colonel. "It's just become a very good day. I need to get a pack ready. I'll leave in the morning."

Fragger watched the ambassador walk off, then swung around to face Iso and Bucaram. "He kind of has a new spring in his step, wouldn't you say?"

The two men scowled at him.

"Those two stay here? I thought you had the welfare of your men at heart," Iso said.

"I can't vouch for their safety," Red added. "One is bad enough, but both of them together? It'll be cause for murder."

"Relax," Fragger advised. "I'm putting Buurk in charge of them. The man has the patience of Job."

"Even the Martian has his limits," Iso said.

Red nodded. "I agree. It's—"

"Enough!" Fragger said. "I gave you an order. Once Buurk is done treating Tat, have him escort the big pussy to the Shuar women's encampment to join Lady Turnwaite. Tell him to stay there and keep on eye on them. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir," Iso said.

"But, it's not fair to saddle Buurk with this duty," Red protested.

"Sergeant, keep talking, and you'll have the duty."

The argument ended abruptly.

## Chapter 13

"Colonel, why did you saddle me with this duty?"

Fragger looked up from his desk to see Buurk in his doorway. As always, the Ranger was startled by the sight of a Lincoln-like head atop the enormous body that had been engineered to breathe the thin atmosphere of Mars. The medic looked as weary as the great president had in the final days before his assassination.

Of course, Fragger thought, Lincoln only had to deal with a nation trying to tear itself apart. He didn't have to deal with Kendlan Tat and Alissma Turnwaite.

"Sit down and have some chicha, Buurk," he said. "You look like eighty clicks of bad Martian road."

Buurk folded his tall frame into a chair and gratefully accepted the glass the Ranger poured for him from the pitcher.

Fragger let the medic drain half the glass and then asked, "What are their complaints this time?"

"What haven't they complained about, colonel? The food, the conditions, the Shuar women, the bugs, the heat—"

"I get the point, Buurk. I mean, what different complaints do they have now?"

"Different? Different?" The Martian's bass voice rose into a soprano range Fragger didn't think was possible for the man. "There's nothing different, nothing at all! That's the problem. It's the same thing every day, day after day. When are you going to get these people out of here? I can't stand it anymore!"

"Relax and have another beer!"

"I don't want another damned beer! I want—."

"Buurk, they'll be gone soon."

"I ... what?" The Martian's eyes widened with hope. "You mean, there's been word?"

Fragger nodded. "I received a message about an hour ago. Wenghorn has the deal in place. We'll be on the move. You'll only have to put up with them for a little while longer."

"I'll have a second beer!"

"You deserve it. Drink the whole damned pitcher, if you want. You can't imagine what a service you've done for me. In fact, if there was a medal for babysitting one royal prick and one royal bitch, I'd give it you right now. Who knows? I may create one, anyway."

"Really?"

Fragger chuckled. I keep forgetting the Martian's lack of capacity for humor. In many ways, his ostracism on Mars made him an innocent. There human contact was a rarity for him unless it was for the miners, Kayla and Quart, to humiliate him in any way possible.

For a moment, the Ranger felt like a dog for burdening the Martian with Tat and Turnwaite, but Buurk's monumental patience had been an invaluable asset in this instance. Iso and Red had been right. Any other member of his command would have killed the two by now. The Shuar would have done it as well, he

was sure of that, except that they regarded the two Aiforians as lunatics and, therefore, not responsible for their actions.

"I'm joking about the medal, Buurk. But I'm not joking about the job you've done. With those two, you went above and beyond the call of duty."

The Martian's mouth broke into a broad and crooked smile. Alcohol had been foreign to him, and he didn't handle it well. His physiology seemed to absorb it with extraordinary speed, and he was tipsy already.

"Did you bring them with you, as I asked?"

"Of course." The Martian gestured toward the outside of the dropship. "I'm surprised you can't hear their complaining through the bulkheads."

"I am, as well."

"Colonel, I don't have to, as you say, 'babysit' them by myself any more, do I?"

"We'll all have to share the load, but I still want you to ride herd on them until they're gone."

"Colonel!" Buurk protested.

Fragger held up a hand to silence the outburst. "I'll need every soldier ready for combat so I can't spare them at the moment. Look, you can't tell Tat or Lady Turnwaite, but we're going back to the Yacuambi Triangle to meet Wenghorn. I promise you this though—as soon as I can, I'll do everything in my power to provide you with relief."

Buurk frowned. "We're going back to the Triangle? That's an awful place! I know we won a battle there, but—"

"What better place for us? It ensures they won't be dropping a boatload of troops on us, and we can melt into the jungle if there's any treachery."

Buurk grunted. "I suppose you're right, but I don't really want to go there."

Fragger adopted a soothing tone. "I know, I know. It's not what you're used to. It's the very opposite of Mars. But think big picture. It'll be the shortest way off this planet."

Buurk grimaced, but nodded his acquiescence.

Fragger gestured at the pitcher of beer. "Take this with you. In fact, ask Bucaram's men for more. You've earned a reward, small as it is. Share it with the Aiforians. Maybe, it'll keep them quiet for a while."

The Martian heaved his body out of the chair, swaying slightly as he picked up the pitcher. "Could you do me a favor, colonel?"

"What is it?"

"Find us a dry planet to live on."

"I'll try," Fragger laughed as he waved the Martian toward the door.

When Buurk was gone, the Ranger opened his commlink. "Iso, tonight relax the guard on Tat. That's

right, relax it."

Fragger closed the link and leaned back into his chair, unhappy that he'd had to lie to the medic about their destination.

It was necessary though. I hope all that beer does the job I expect it to. With the chicha loosening Buurk's tongue, it shouldn't take long for Kendlan Tat to get the information from the medic. Then we'll find out just how much a fool Tat really is.

## Chapter 14

The next morning an ashen-faced Buurk burst back into the office just as Fragger finished summoning Iso, Red, and Bucaram.

"Colonel, Kendlan Tat is dead!"

"How do you know that?"

"When I didn't see him this morning, I sent guards to search. They found bloody clothing in the jungle. Radmuller's creatures got him. He must have gotten drunk and wandered off. It's all my fault!"

"Buurk, take a deep breath and sit down."

"What? How can you be so calm? The man's dead."

"Sit down! That's an order."

Buurk slumped into the chair.

"Tell me something," Fragger said. "Were any body parts found?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Answer it, Buurk."

"I ... I don't know."

"Well, I do. The guards have reported to me already. They didn't find Tat's body. Just clothing."

"Radmuller's creatures must have dragged him off."

"Possibly, but I doubt it," Fragger said.

"What do you mean, colonel?"

"Tell me something, Buurk. Did you tell him about the Yacuambi Triangle before he disappeared?"

The medic's face flushed with embarrassment, and the words rushed out. "I might have. I don't remember. We were drinking beer together. There weren't any guards. You know I'm not good with alco—"

"Relax, relax, for God's sake" Fragger said. "You did what I expected you do to. And you did me a big favor."

The medic gaped at him. "What? Wait a minute! All that beer you gave me yesterday. You were deliberately trying to get me drunk."

"Yes."

"But—"

Fragger held a hand up for silence. "I had to feed information to Tat to see what would happen. If he was truly a fool, he'd still be here. But I got the result I expected. He's gone."

"But why use me?"

"Spies love honest men, Buurk, because honest men can't keep secrets. If I added alcohol on top of your honesty, I knew it was a dead certainty you'd tell him about the Yacuambi Triangle. And I knew he'd believe the reliability of that information if it came from you. Tat knows we've been together a long time."

Buurk sat down, his mouth working in a spastic fashion, attempting to get the words out. "I ... I don't understand. Tat, a spy? He's so ... pitiful."

"Did you really think that Wenghorn would bring an incompetent along with him on an important mission?"

"He's been faking all this time?"

"Of course."

"But, he's so convincing!"

"Too convincing," Fragger said. "He thought an ignorant Rerun would buy the story that the Emotional Enhancement movement turned him into a coward. Given my experience with Lord Lesto and the Aiforians, it didn't fit. They don't tolerate cowards. They kill them."

"So, by acting the fool, he could gather information."

Fragger nodded. "He could have only two purposes here—either to gather information, as you say, or to kill me. Once he'd confirmed my abilities, he knew he had to take the first choice."

Buurk paled. "You knew he might try to kill you, and you let him stay?"

"There's an old Earth saying, 'Keep your friends close and keep your enemies closer.' That way you can keep an eye on them."

"Colonel, that was a dangerous gambit!"

"Is there anything on Jivaro that isn't dangerous?"

The Martian frowned at Fragger. "I can see that your trick worked, but I don't appreciate being duped, Colonel Sparks."

"Don't go all formal on me, Buurk. I did use you, but it was for a good purpose. I simply played him the same way he's been playing us. You were my medium for doing that."

"He's going to communicate the wrong position to the Aiforians," the medic said. "But how? Red said he stripped them of all their gear before they were brought here."

"I don't know," Fragger admitted, "but men as devious as Tat and Wenghorn had a plan in mind, I'm sure, before they ever left their dropship. More likely, they've been in touch with Lesto all the time."

"I see," Buurk said and went silent.

"You're pissed at me," Fragger prompted.

"Damned right, I am!" the medic burst out. "Nobody enjoys playing the fool. You won't use me again, will you?"

"I can't promise you that," Fragger answered. "I will try to keep it to a minimum, though. And, I'll do you a favor. You're no longer in charge of Lady Turnwaite."

Buurk's face relaxed, then tightened back into the scowl. "You're not doing it as a favor. You just don't want me to reveal any more information."

"Yes. I think Lady Turnwaite is exactly what she seems, an arrogant, smug aristocrat. But I can't take the chance that she isn't."

Fragger stood and moved around the desk to the Martian. He put a hand on Buurk's shoulder. "I'm just being as honest with you as you are with me. But, I want you to know this. You're an extremely valuable member of my command. You may not know this, but everyone holds you in deep respect—"

"You're throwing me a bone, that's all!"

"It's not a bone," Fragger said. "It's the truth. The trouble with you is that you let all that slavery crap Quart and Kayla dropped on you on Mars get in the way of your thinking. Deep down, you think you're inferior, and nothing could be farther from the truth."

"People play me all the time, including you," Buurk complained.

"That's bullshit, and you know it," Fragger said. "You seem to think honesty is a vice. It's not. In our situation, it's just ... dangerous."

"So, you want me to start lying like you and everybody else around here," Buurk accused.

"That's exactly what I don't want you to do! Frankly, your honesty is too valuable to me."

"So I've just found out!"

Fragger sat on the edge of the desk and put his face close to Buurk's. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. I need a sounding board. No, more than that, I need a conscience."

"A conscience?"

"Yes. As I've already found out, it's easy for a man to lose his way on this planet and in this time. Sometimes, I have to do things I don't like to keep all of us alive and safe."

"Does that include raping the doctor?" Buurk accused.

"I deserve that shot," Fragger answered. "I'm not proud of what I've done to her. That's why I want you to make sure I don't extend my actions beyond an Aiforian noblewoman."

"I don't understand, colonel. What do you want me to do?"

"I'm promoting you to adjutant."

"Tossing me another bone in the form of a promotion?" Buurk asked.

"Not at all."

"I don't even know what an adjutant is or does."

"Then let me explain. Six hundred years ago, in the old Earth army, he'd manage the administrative functions for me, but this is six centuries later. I set the rules now. You'll maintain your medical duties, but



you'll also act as my sounding board and play the devil's advocate for me."

"Colonel, I don't know what a 'devil's advocate' is, either."

"He's a person who takes the opposing side in order to make me think through my actions. You're a natural for the part."

"I know nothing about military matters."

"I'm not talking military matters. I'm talking moral actions. Buurk, I don't want to end up being one of those leaders who kills people simply to further senseless aims that have nothing to do with our mission of finding safety and security. That's now your responsibility, to keep me on the right track. Always."

Fragger searched Buurk's eyes. "Do you think you can fulfil that responsibility?"

"That's probably the one responsibility I can fulfil around here," the Martian answered.

"Good. Congratulations."

Fragger stood and said, "You're dismissed. We'll have a ceremony later and find some sort of insignia to pin on you. Right now, I have to meet with Red, Iso and Bucaram."

The Martian rose with a question. "I'm not part of the meeting?"

"No, it's about military matters."

"And I might let information slip if I was part of that meeting?"

"Correct."

Fragger saw that his blunt answer didn't please Buurk, but the medic left without further comment as Iso, Red and Bucaram answered the Ranger's summons and entered the room.

"The big Martian looks unhappy, colonel," Iso said.

Fragger motioned for the men to sit down. "Why should he be happy? I just told him I'd used him to flush Tat from cover. He'll get over it. I just promoted him to adjutant."

Red raised. "Adjutant? He doesn't have clue as to anything military."

Fragger sighed inwardly. Red Salinsky had no command potential, and the corporal knew it, but that didn't stop him from being sensitive about the topic.

He spoke quickly to set Red's fears to rest. "That's true, Red, but military matters won't be his role. It'll be all administrative stuff."

"Such as?"

The tone bordered on insolent, so Fragger cut the exchange short. "We're not here to discuss Buurk. We have more important things to consider."

"Such as?" Iso asked.

"The first is making sure Tat reaches Wenghorn safely. We need him to plant the disinformation about the Yacuambi Triangle in the heads of the Aiforians. Bucaram, send your men after Tat. Tell them to protect him, but stay hidden while doing it."

"Colonel, I'm not sure Tat can find Wenghorn's position," Bucaram said. "From what I've seen, the Aiforians get easily lost in the jungle."

"Then have your men make sure he finds it. Herd him in the right direction."

"What if he reveals our position as well as the disinformation?" Iso asked.

"Bucaram already gave you the answer to that question. The Aiforians get lost easily. Tat could never find the way back."

"What's the second thing to consider?" Red asked.

"Going on the offensive."

Fragger watched the three men perk up and was pleased with the reaction.

The promise of action is always a tonic to aggressive soldiers.

"What's your plan, colonel?" Iso asked, thrusting his lower jaw out even more than usual. It made him look like a bulldog eager to latch onto a throat.

"A good one," Fragger answered and waited several beats before he gave an answer. It was always good to build anticipation for a major operation.

"Let's just say it involves a surprise for the Aiforians. And for Tyco Radmuller."

## Chapter 15

The two Aiforian women were wet and miserable and vocal about it.

Normally, Fragger thought, I'd be pleased about their condition, but the jungle is no place for a lot of noise.

Alissma Turnwaite and Andriana Lesto bickered at each other over the sharing of a canteen of water. The Ranger had expected problems with the eternally complaining Lady Turnwaite, but the doctor's lack of discipline was a surprise.

The heat, the humidity, the long trip through the jungle to Radmuller's base has worn her down, he decided.

The doctor slapped the canteen out of Lady Turnwaite's hand and turned to glare at him.

But not enough to dampen her hatred for me!

Fragger ordered Bucaram to quiet the two women and resumed his monitoring of communications for the signal he was waiting for from his decoy force in the far-away Yacuambi Triangle. When Bucaram told the two women to shut up or be gagged, Andriana struck at him. The uwishin avoided the blow easily and swept her legs out from underneath her. She landed hard in the mud and burst out crying.

As always, the distress gave the doctor a perverse beauty. Fragger wanted to simultaneously slap her and hug her. It was a dangerous thought, he knew. It meant he cared for the doctor at some level, and caring could get him killed. His repeated rapes of her had emptied him of his sexual urges and the rage he felt at the contempt she held for him and all Reruns.

In fact, he thought, I'm in danger of building contempt for myself, if it's not already there.

Fragger shook his head free of the thought. Still, my ill treatment of her has served my purpose. I'm sure Wenghorn got word to Lord Lesto, and an angry father may not make good decisions.

Fragger flipped his helmet open to the elements so the men could see he was sharing the smothering heat and humidity of the rain forest. He did a quick check of his troops' morale and was pleased at what he saw. They were pumped up and eager for action. The long struggle against the worlds that had abandoned them had broken the traditional animosity between the Ricer and Corpse soldiers and forged them into comrades. They were a solid fighting unit. They'd even begun to understand the Shuar and, Fragger hoped, the Shuar them. The two groups mingled easily in the rain, still maintaining the discipline minimum noise. The Shuar had taught them—and him—much about jungle discipline. With Lesto close to them and Radmuller's creatures continually on the prowl, it paid to keep a low profile.

Fragger shook the musings from his head and summoned Bucaram over to his position. The uwishin came and dropped into a crouch with a questioning look on his face.

"Are your runners back?" Fragger asked.

"Yes."

"What's their report?"

"Iso is in position outside Radmuller's base."

"Losses?"

"Two."

"What about Red's runner? Has he reported as well?"

Bucaram nodded. "He says Red is half a kilometer from his target position. He reports the loss of three men. From Radmuller's creatures."

"Our men are resisting the temptation to break cover and fight back?" Fragger asked.

"All reports indicate so."

"Good, the last thing we need is an all-out battle erupting before I contact the Aiforians."

The Shuar tribesmen had an unnerving capacity to disappear into the foliage equal to that of the savage genetically-modified animals roaming the Jivaron jungle. Once again, Fragger was glad the headhunters were on his side. He was also pleased that Red and Iso had maintained commlink silence. Iso was always reliable, but Red was quick to anger and impetuous. Before they'd left the dropship, he'd impressed upon the former Corpse soldier that everything depended on not being spotted.

"Any word from the Triangle?" Bucaram asked.

"Not yet. Maybe they didn't buy the diversion. Maybe it wasn't a good idea."

"It was a good one," Bucaram reassured him.

"Let's hope they did buy it and split their forces. We don't want the full weight of their weaponry coming down on us."

"They will fall for the diversion," Bucaram said. "I'm certain of it."

"How can you be certain?"

"Because you have a powerful *arutam*," the uwishin answered,

"A protective spirit? Maybe, Bucaram. But then, if this spirit is so protective, why did it let me be hurtled 600 years into the future away from my family and friends, away from my time altogether?"

"I don't know the purpose of a spirit, colonel. Who does? But isn't the simple fact that he can move you through time an indication of his power? He must have great things in store for you."

"Perhaps."

Fragger didn't pursue the subject any further. He didn't believe in spirits or ghosts, but he wasn't about to quash Bucaram's faith in him. Any leader had to instill respect in his followers. A little awe never hurt, either.

A squawk broke from the commlink. "Alpha One. This is Bravo Two. Action initiated with combined Corpse-Ricer force. Repeat action initiated."

Fragger acknowledged the message with relief.

"Maybe you're right about the *arutam*," he told Bucaram. "The diversion worked. The Aiforians think I'm in the Triangle. Send your runners to Iso and Red. Tell them to move into position around

Radmuller's base and notify me when they're in place. Once I receive word, I'll contact Wenghorn."

As Bucaram rose to carry out the order, one of his warriors emerged from the jungle and spoke quickly in Shuar. The uwishin dropped back down beside the Ranger.

"Lord Lesto has been spotted in the area."

"Shit!" Fragger said. "He definitely didn't buy our trick. Well, we can't do anything about him now. Tell your men to track him and keep me advised of his position. Otherwise, carry out my orders as before."

Bucaram obeyed the order and soon the Shuar melted into the jungle, followed by Fragger's troopers herding the two Aiforian women ahead of them.

## Chapter 16

The white spire of Radmuller's communication tower poked above the junglewood trees. Several white domes surrounded it at its base, all in the grip of thick Jivaron liana vines. The main building had the appearance of a laboratory. Arranged around it were several smaller buildings. Fragger scanned them with his power armor's binocular capabilities.

A mess hall, storage units, and barracks.

Among the buildings, there was minimal activity due to the midday heat. Two gorillas sat close to the mess, alternately chewing on dragonfruit and snarling and swatting at a pack of baboons trying to steal the fruit from them. A pack of hellhounds lay dozing, their massive heads raising from time to time to sniff the wind.

The sight of the hounds made Fragger doubly glad he'd left Andriana Lesto and Lady Turnwaite half a klick back in the jungle with Red and Buurk to keep them out of the hands of the Aiforians. The gen-mod dogs were fast and could overwhelm a position quickly. Radmuller's base was no place for the unarmed. The vidman, Wik, had remained with them, happy to stay out the line of fire.

Red, on the other hand, had been mad as a hornet at me for pulling him from command of his force.

Fragger had mollified the sergeant by pointing out that he'd have all the fight on his hands he wanted if the battle didn't go well.

There was no point in telling Red the real reason. His temper is a liability in a situation that might call for some delicacy. Ambassador Wenghorn will not be happy with my deception.

At the thought of the deception, Fragger activated his commlink and requested an update from the Yacuambi force.

The reply was brief. "Alpha One. This is Bravo Two. Heavy enemy bombardment. Large force landing."

"Acknowledged, Bravo Two," Fragger said. "Tango. I repeat, Tango. Acknowledge."

"Tango. Acknowledged."

Fragger noted the relief in the commander's voice at his order to draw the enemy into battle and then adopt hit and run tactics. The combined Corpse-Ricer forces had heavy firepower and could obliterate wide sections of the jungle.

Time to help the Triangle force out.

Fragger opened the agreed-upon channel and sent his message to the Aiforians orbiting the planet.

"Wenghorn, this is Colonel Sparks. Repeat, this is Colonel Sparks. Do you read?"

An Aiforian voice replied, "We read. This is the ambassador."

"I'm disappointed in you, Wenghorn. You alerted our mutual enemies to my position. Such treachery. Hardly diplomatic."

"Are you enjoying the bombardment, Rerun?" the ambassador asked. The tone was smugly triumphant.

"Actually, I'm enjoying some peace and quiet," Fragger answered. "As soon as you lock on to my signal,

you'll find I'm nowhere near the Yacuambi Triangle."

Fragger heard silence and then Wenghorn's angry voice demanding confirmation. Cursing followed with Kendlan Tat's name prominently featured.

"Not a wise decision," the Ranger said. "I thought you valued the lives of Lady Lesto and Lady Turnwaite more highly."

"Are they all right?" the ambassador demanded.

"They're fine for now, Wenghorn. Their continued safety depends on your actions however."

A pause followed before the ambassador spoke again. "My officers tell me you're close to structures. What are they?"

"Outside Tyco Radmuller's base."

"What? Why have you chosen that spot?"

"Taking care of some unfinished business," Fragger answered. "Now, are you prepared to honor our agreement?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

"That was a quick agreement. You're lying, of course."

"Not this time, colonel. I'm a practical man. I know you hold the cards. How shall we proceed?"

"Wait for my signal," Fragger said. "No movement by your forces until then. If I detect movement, you won't see Lady Lesto and Lady Turnwaite again. Understood?"

"Yes, colonel. How soon before you reply?"

"There will be some fighting down here. When it's over, I'll contact you."

"Fighting?"

"I'm going to do us both a favor, Wenghorn, and take out Tyco Radmuller if I can. At a minimum, I'll destroy his base and get him on the run. By the way, I know Lord Lesto is in the area. Tell him to stay clear if he values his daughter's life."

"I told you, colonel, I'm not in contact with Lesto!"

"Save it!" Fragger said.

He closed the channel and immediately opened another, sending an encrypted "Go!" message to the forces surrounding the base.

A few seconds dragged by before several beams lanced out of the jungle opposite Fragger's position and into the gorillas. The silverbacks toppled over in twitching agony. The baboons stared down at the dead primates for a second, then charged howling in the direction of fire as mortar shells blossomed among them. A dome suddenly tore itself into pieces and cries of agony pierced through the noise. Dozens of apes, baboons and hellhounds boiled out into the thick smoke and fire. The animals rushed toward the far side of the jungle only to be caught in enfilade fire.

Fragger blessed Iso's tactical sense. He'd positioned his men perfectly. Panic erupted among the survivors, and they fled back across the clearing toward the Ranger's soldiers.

Fragger waited until they were well within range, then gave a hand signal. Supported by riflemen, the spraygunners swept the charging animals with methodically lethal fire. Mortar shells augmented the carnage. Amidst the din, Fragger could barely hear the whish of the Shuar armed only with their traditional *cerbatana* blowguns. Unnatural screams rent the air as silverbacks, baboons and hellhounds flailed on the ground in agony. The smell of blood and piss assaulted Fragger's nose. He slapped the helmet of his suit shut and powered up his sword to meet the charge of a silverback that had made it through the concentrated fire. Fragger laid his sword into the beast before its massive arms could reach him. The gorilla howled and grabbed at the gash in its side. The Ranger swung again, slicing the blade into the beast's neck. Arterial blood spurted as the silverback toppled to the ground.

Fragger whirled around to face any other attackers and found none.

Most of Radmuller's creatures lay sprawled on the ground or were fleeing into the jungle.

Fragger ordered cease fire and opened his helmet. A few random shots followed his command before silence fell over the battlefield.

"Anyone seen Radmuller?" he shouted to his men, hoping the doctor had fallen in the attack. When several heads shook "No" at him, he asked the same question via commlink to Iso, Bucaram, and the other commanders. They gave him the same answer.

"We missed him. Bad luck, colonel," Bucaram said as he appeared from the jungle, wiping a bloody machete blade with a leaf.

"Radmuller may still be in the area," Fragger said. "Detail some of your warriors to search the jungle while we check out the buildings."

An hour later, Fragger stood in the middle of the base with Iso and Bucaram and asked for reports.

"Nothing," Iso said. "No sign of Radmuller."

"The same here," Bucaram added. "Sorry, colonel."

"Nothing to be sorry about," Fragger said. "It was a long shot to begin with. Let's deal with the business at hand. Move your men into position, and I'll contact Wenghorn."



## Chapter 17

A low rumble in the air told Fragger the Aiforians were on their way. The rumble grew quickly into a roar that shook the forest with its thunder. Six Aiforian fighters darted into sight above the base, escorting several troop carriers. They were joined by more fighters circling high to provide cover.

"They look like dung beetles," Bucaram said. "Ugly."

"Let's hope they don't drop a load of shit on us," Fragger said.

The fighters held their fire and their patterns. Soon, a shadow slid over the base, and a dropship appeared with a cargo transport vessel in its wake.

"Do the Aiforians love bugs or something?" Fragger asked as he watched the ship maneuver to one side of the base. "That dropship looks like an enormous wasp."

"They're sending us a message, colonel. 'We're too big and powerful for our enemies.'"

"Fortunately for us, big is not always good in the jungle," Fragger said.

The Ranger's commlink activated.

"Sparks! This is Ambassador Wenghorn. We're here as we agreed. The transport ship will be at your disposal as soon as we receive Lady Lesto and Lady Turnwaite. Once we land, we expect to see them in good health. Please make sure your men are not in the landing zone. We need to clear a space for both vessels."

"Understood," Fragger said and closed the link while saying to Bucaram, "So far, so good."

"You don't really expect them to hand over that ship, do you, colonel?"

"We'll see." Fragger answered. "In the meantime, contact everyone and warn them about the landing area."

Several minutes later, a white-hot beam splashed its lethal power down into the trees. The operator expertly rotated the beam to turn a circle of jungle into a smoldering mess of vegetation scorched to the ground. Then, the beam cut off, allowing the transport carrier to descend. Once it was on the ground, the dropship landed beside it, its engines whining down with an extravagant power that echoed through the clearing.

Immediately, an air lock slid open in the dropship, and a company of armored soldiers spilled out to form a perimeter around the vessel. As soon as they were in position, Wenghorn and Kendlan Tat marched out of the hatch between two lines of a squad to the center of Radmuller's ruined base. All signs of fear had disappeared from Tat. He stood tall and straight in his armor.

Wenghorn shouted, "Colonel, we're ready."

Frager sent a coded transmission to Iso.

"Colonel Sparks!" Wenghorn shouted again. "We're waiting. We're—"

The shifting of his guards into a defensive position drew Wenghorn's attention to the far side of the base. A figure strode out from among the trees, wearing samurai-style armor.

"Sparks, that's not you," the ambassador said. "That's not your armor. Is this some kind of trick?"

Iso's voice broke over the commlink. "It's no trick, ambassador. Just a simple precaution."

Wenghorn cursed and shouted. "Sparks, I'll only deal with you, not Watanabe. That was part of our bargain."

Iso strode up to the *Aiforian* party, keeping the commlink open as Fragger had instructed.

"Ambassador, Colonel Sparks has given me command of this situation. That means you work with me or the deal is off."

"I don't care what he said, you damned Ricer. I'll only talk with him."

"That won't happen, ambassador."

"Then we've all come this way for nothing!" Wenghorn said.

"As you wish."

Wenghorn's turned an unhealthy purple. "I can have you cut down right now!"

"You could," Iso affirmed. "But it's hardly the diplomatic thing to do, is it? Not to mention that I'd have your head before I was killed. Besides, have you forgotten the prisoners?"

The ambassador took a deep breath and wiped a hand across his forehead before spreading his arms wide in an apologetic gesture. "I'm sorry, Watanabe. I forgot myself. It's the cursed heat of this planet. I never get used to it. How do you want to proceed?"

"I want to inspect the interior of the transport carrier first."

"Why?" Wenghorn waved a hand in the direction of the vessel. "You've already seen that it functions perfectly fine."

"Just wondering if it might be filled with a company of your men waiting for the colonel. It's certainly big enough."

"Sparks asked for a ship large enough to transport all of you off the planet. That's what I've delivered."

"I still want to see the interior, ambassador."

"How do we know you're not planning something to get Sparks inside where he can use his MASER abilities? That's what happened to Lord Lesto. That's how you got his ship."

"Lord Lesto was trying his best to kill us, ambassador. The situation is different this time, I hope."

"This is insulting!"

Iso's blunt response came clearly over the commlink. "And you're stalling."

At this remark, Fragger scanned the skies again. Fighters at the higher altitude remained in their holding pattern. Below them, the troop carriers had disappeared.

Iso's response had an edge to it as sharp as his sword. "You're playing with the lives of the prisoners, ambassador. Are you going to let me see the ship or not?"

"Do I have your word that you'll not try anything?"

"You do. The question is, do I have *your* word?"

"Yes. Let me inform the ship's captain first. I need his permission."

"Of course."

Wenghorn spoke into his commlink, and an argument broke out with the officer on the other end. The ambassador shouted into the commlink and stabbed a finger repeatedly into the air. After a few seconds of this, Fragger sent an encrypted message to Iso.

*Wenghorn stalling. Trap. Execute plan.*

Fragger took a last, longing look at the transport carrier as he broke into a dead run into the trees.

*I'd hoped circumstances would force Wenghorn into the right action. A foolish hope. Right now, Aiforian troopers are dropping into the jungle, possibly linking up with Lord Lesto.*

He had no proof of this, but didn't need any.

*After all, he thought as he ran. It's what I would have done.*

## Chapter 18

Fragger hurried through the jungle, cursing the ability of every root, vine and tree to slow his progress toward Red, Buurk, Wik, and the women. As he ran, he kept his ears alert for any noise of Aiforian troopers about him.

When the suit's tracking system indicated he was close to Red's position, Fragger slowed his pace and crept forward, scanning the jungle for the enemy. He didn't have long to wait. Wielding a power axe, an Aiforian exploded out of the trees, looking like an ancient Norse berserker warrior in his armor.

The attacker swung his axe hard toward Fragger's legs. The Ranger accelerated and sidestepped the blow. His sword sliced into the back of the man's knees and sent him screaming to the ground. A quick stroke to the neck ended the screaming.

Branches snapped, and Fragger whirled around and met another charge. A quick blow ended the attacker's life in a spray of blood from the shattered faceplate. Fragger heard frightened shouts ahead of him and stopped to listen. He didn't expect panic from Lesto's seasoned warriors. They'd fought him bravely in the past despite their knowledge of his superior abilities.

It doesn't make sense. Unless—

Fragger accelerated again into the jungle, racing past three Aiforian bodies, and burst into a clearing. He stood stunned as he took in the scene before him.

Lord Lesto was alone with his sword raised above the helmetless body of Red. Fragger's breath caught as the blade sliced downward.

"No!" he screamed.

The sword swung deeply, not into Red but into the flank of a charging hellhound. Its shriek of pain set off a chorus of snarling anger from Radmuller's creatures ringing the clearing. Snarling baboons, gorillas and hellhounds feinted in and out avoiding Lesto's desperate strokes trying to reach the Aiforian women, Wik and Buurk who huddled together back to back in terror. The Martian had picked up Red's power sword and was swinging it inexpertly. His wild strokes kept a pair of silverbacks at bay.

Buurk's tiring quickly. As soon as he goes down, Lesto's rear will be exposed.

The strategy of the beasts was obvious. Wear their prey down, then pick them off at their leisure. Someone was directing them.

Radmuller! Fragger knew.

He scanned the jungle quickly and spotted him on the far side of the clearing. Radmuller stood calmly beside a junglewood tree, hands in pockets as he watched his creatures attack the party. A dispassionate smile creased his face as if he were interested in finding out the results of his latest experiment.

Fragger hesitated, torn between the desire to kill Radmuller and the need to defend his friends. The decision was made for him when a silverback leaped away from the attack and toward his position. Knuckles on the ground, it charged toward the Ranger snarling out a challenge.

Bellisarius! Fragger thought. No, no, he's dead. Red killed him in my rescue. Radmuller's replaced the beast. My God, he's huge!

Fragger quickly took in the size of the charging primate and estimated him to weigh at least 320 kilograms.

Over 700 pounds!

Fragger shook the astonishment out of his mind by reminding himself, He's nothing more than a big target.

The Ranger turned up the amplification on his suit and shouted a battle cry to match the silverback's roar. The gorilla flinched and paused at the amplified noise. In the momentary distraction, Fragger launched his own attack, running straight toward the silverback. Out of the corner of his eye, the Ranger saw Lesto take heart at his arrival and swing his sword with renewed ferocity.

The gorilla rose up to his full height, beat his chest and resumed his charge. Fragger aimed his sword at the ape's neck. With astonishing speed, the silverback ducked the blade and swung a massive arm. The blow knocked the Ranger to the ground. Stunned, he saw baboons swarming toward him. Their attack got him instantly back on his feet. He cut a swatch through the troop and charged the silverback again. Another blow staggered him backwards.

What has Radmuller done to this creature? he wondered as he tried to shake the ringing out of his ears. It's faster than anything I've run into on this planet. He must be getting close to an answer on my MASER abilities!

Then, another answer penetrated his foggy brain.

You forgot to accelerate, you fool! You rushed in without thinking. Uncertainty struck as he sped up into hyperspace mode.

But, it's been automatic before. I didn't have to think about it. Jesus, if I can't count on my MASER abilities, I've lost my one advantage...

Fragger shook doubt out of his mind. He had no time for it. To throw the silverback off, he avoided a direct attack and instead sliced his way through the hellhounds and baboons ringing the space, littering the ground with bloody arms and legs. A snarl of fury erupted from the gorilla, and he rushed straight at the Ranger. Fragger accelerated and laid the blade straight across the primate's belly. The ape screamed, grabbed at the entrails spilling out of its body, and thudded down onto the ground. The Ranger whirled and took on the remainder of Radmuller's creatures before they could get organized. He worked his way through two hellhounds until he was squarely covering Lesto's and Buurk's backs. A wild swing from the Martian medic made him duck.

"Buurk, goddamn it, watch what the hell you're doing if you want to live!"

The tall Martian swung around, and Fragger saw his eyes were wide with fear. Despite his terror, Fragger noted with approval, Buurk stood his ground and protected the women.

The Ranger dropped his gaze and found the medic was not the only one doing the protecting. From between the Martian's legs, Watrun Wik jabbed at a hissing and spitting baboon with Red's long-bladed dagger. In the vidman's small hands, it looked like a full-blown sword. The tip was red with gore. The expression on the dwarf's face startled Fragger. Unlike Buurk, he had no fear in his eyes. Instead, there was a lust for combat.

He's tasted blood, and he's enjoying it! Will wonders never cease?

Fragger checked the women quickly as he fended off another gorilla. Andriana had her father's pistol and lasered down the lead baboon in a group of three attacking her position. She calmly shifted her aim from

one target to the next. Soon, all the primates were on the ground. Fragger was glad he was in his armor. He wasn't all that sure he wasn't her next target, despite his protective presence. But she kept her back to him, her legs straddling Lady Turnwaite whose arrogance had dissolved into a fit of shivering. She wailed into the mud that had been churned up in the jungle earth.

Only one useless person out of five. Not bad! Fragger thought as he turned his attention back to the attackers. Radmuller's beasts still ringed them, but there was hesitation in their movements. He seized the opportunity to increase their uncertainty. He accelerated into a troop of baboons, carved through four of them, and was back into his defensive position before they hit the ground. Barks and grunts of fear broke out among the primates while the hellhounds fell into crouches, their eyes checking each other to see who had the courage to go first. Fragger struck the closest, separating its head from its body with a quick downward stroke. He picked up the bloody head and threw it at the pack, which broke and fled howling into the jungle. The primates scrambled after them.

Fragger scanned the jungle quickly, hoping to spot Radmuller among his retreating creatures. There was no sight of him. As he swung around to search the other side of the clearing, a beam from a pulsed laser splashed harmlessly against his thick armor.

Fragger turned back about, hoping that Radmuller had lost patience with his creatures and was foolish enough to attack him.

But it wasn't the scientist who held the pistol.

It was Andriana Lesto.

She had the weapon on full charge. The murderous expression on her face dissolved slowly into frustration as she realized the futility of her action. Her father reached over her arm and pushed it down.

"Leave him to me, Andriana," he ordered.

"But he just saved our lives!" Buurk shouted.

"For that, I owe him thanks, Martian. But he's also been raping my daughter. For that, I owe him death."

"Goddamn it, Lesto, Radmuller's getting away!" Fragger shouted. "Why fight now when we have a chance to get rid of him and his awful creatures."

"Radmuller is no concern of mine," Lesto answered. "You're far more of a threat than the mad doctor will ever be. It's my duty to get rid of you and defend my daughter's honor."

"You've made a poor choice," Fragger said. "You'll die."

The words were hard and true, but Fragger felt a strange reluctance to do what he'd dreamed of. Andriana was the difference, he knew.

Without her presence, I'd have cut her father down already.

Behind the face plate, the hard eyes of the Aiforian nobleman locked their gaze on Fragger.

"No, it's you who will die, Rerun."

The Ranger tried reason again. "We both know the outcome, Lesto. You're no match for my speed. You've learned that lesson, already."

Fragger shifted his attention to Andriana, hoping she could talk some sense into the man. "You've lost

your honor. Is it truly worth the life of your father?"

"Yes!"

"Look at him, Andriana! He's exhausted from defending you and the others. He's not my equal at the best of times. You're helping him commit suicide. Is that the action of a loving daughter?"

"It's the action of a loving father, Rerun," she answered. After he kills you, I'll ask him to kill me. I can't live knowing I've been touched by garbage like you. Nor will my people accept me back."

"A cold and harsh society," Fragger said.

"We live by a code. You wouldn't understand."

"I live by a code as well," he responded. "The Ranger creed. Part of it reads, 'I will always endeavor to uphold the prestige, honor, and high esprit de corps of my Ranger Regiment.'"

"Is rape part of that creed?" Lord Lesto accused.

The remark stung. Fragger didn't mention that another part of the creed read, *I will always keep myself mentally alert, physically strong and morally straight*. To break his shame at his action, he reminded himself, *Still, she's been trying to kill me—repeatedly. I wouldn't have raped her if she'd just left me alone*.

"Look who's trying to teach me about honor," Fragger struck back. "A man dedicated to slavery and dominance and who's willing to commit any kind of treachery in the name of the one god he worships, power. I don't need lectures from your kind, Lesto."

"I defend my world by any means necessary."

"I've no doubt of that," Fragger said. "Is it worth the loss of your daughter?"

"Honor sometimes has a high price, Rerun."

"You know what I think, Lesto? I think it has nothing to do with honor. Just pride, that's all. Arrogant and ignorant pride."

Lesto bristled. "Ignorant?"

"The weakness of aristocracy is the same now as it was in my time," Fragger said. "They believe in false superiority. No one is as good as they are until the truth is rammed down their throats by reality. In my book, that's ignorance."

"And *you're* that reality, Rerun?" The tone was sneering.

"You've chased me across Mars and half the Renowned Systems," Fragger replied. "Now, here you are, stuck in the middle of a stinking jungle and about to die. If that isn't reality, I don't know what is."

"Rerun, I may die, but all I have to do is keep you busy until my men arrive from the dropships."

"They won't arrive anytime soon," Fragger said. "Wenghorn and the main force are engaged at the moment as well as the forces you landed separately. At this moment, they're running into ambushes."

Doubt scuttled across Lesto's eyes, and Fragger used it to goad the Aiforian nobleman. "Brute force, that's your mistake. You always think brute force, and you can't use it in the jungle. Obviously, *Aiforians*

are incapable of thinking."

Lesto's reddened, and his sword buzzed with energy as he slashed it through the air. "Come on, Rerun, and we'll see who's incapable of thought!"

"Last chance," Fragger offered. "I'll let you walk away with your daughter and Lady Turnwaite. You've proven yourself no match for me, so I have nothing to fear by letting you go."

"Fight!"

Fragger put a shrug into his voice. "If that's what you want."

Lesto rushed toward him. Fragger parried a downward blow, moved to one side and drove an armored elbow into the Aiforian's side. Lesto stumbled in the mud and slipped to one knee. His daughter gasped and ran to help him. Cursing, he pushed her away, got up and attacked again, but with more caution. Fragger blocked a series of low cuts and side cuts as they circled each other. The ease of his defense showed Fragger that Lesto was tired from his battle against Radmuller's creatures. A moment of pity was cut short by a wild charge from the Aiforian. Lesto's sword swung downward and hit nothing but air as Fragger sidestepped the blow. Lesto lurched past him, his back exposed. The Ranger waited until the Aiforian whirled about, trying to hold his sword at the ready.

"Give it up," Fragger said.

The answer was another desperate rush. The two men crashed together in the center of the clearing. Lesto dropped low and thrust his blade upward toward the Fragger's groin area. Maddened by the action, the Ranger chopped down his sword and drove the Aiforian's blade into the ground before it reached its target. Then, he kicked Lesto full in the face, knocking him backward into the mud. With one step, he was over the Aiforian, the tip of his sword at the neck.

"Surrender!" he ordered.

Lesto shook his head.

"I said, surrender, damn it!"

"No!"

The sudden silence in the clearing was broken only by the in-taken breaths of the onlookers. Fragger sorted his options. The longer he fought with Lesto, the better the chance the Aiforian's men might somehow arrive on the scene. It was the life of one man balanced against the well-being of many others.

Still, he hesitated until he remembered Salinsky's body on the ground.

*Red! I have no idea if he's alive or dead. But, if he's alive, he may need help soon.*

Fragger raised his sword and drove it straight down into Lesto's faceplate.

Andriana's scream echoed through the jungle.



## Chapter 19

Fragger pulled his sword from Lord Lesto's body and turned to find the group staring at him. Lady Turnwaite's muddy face gaped up at him with a mixture of awe, revulsion and reluctant gratitude.

There was no uncertainty on Andriana's face.

The eyes held a hatred so deep Fragger was surprised that it didn't bore a hole through his armor. It seemed stronger than the beam again splashing harmlessly against his suit from her pulse laser.

For a moment, the Ranger felt an odd, detached admiration for her futile action. Despite her anger and grief, Lord Lesto's daughter held her aim squarely on him. He shook the admiration out of his head.

I haven't got time for this.

He strode to Andriana, ripped the pistol from her hand, and gave it to Wik. Her fists banged his suit as he knelt to check Red. He brushed the woman aside, momentarily forgetting the augmented power of the suit in his concern for Salinsky. She cried out in pain as she dropped hard into the mud.

Blood streaked Red's rough face. Fragger turned his head gently and found the source of bleeding. Lesto's power sword had sliced across the right side of the sergeant's head, taking an ear and part of the scalp. Fragger started to feel for a pulse, then realized he couldn't sense it through his armor.

"Damn it, Buurk, get over here!" he ordered. "Check Red's vitals!"

The Martian knelt beside Red. He checked for a pulse and pulled Red's eyelids back.

"Well?" Fragger asked.

"His pulse is rapid, colonel. His breathing is shallow and irregular. The pupils are dilated. He's in shock."

"But still alive! How bad is he?"

Buurk didn't answer. Instead, he shouted a series of questions at Red. "What's your name? Where are you? What's today's date?"

Each question received nothing but a groan.

"How bad is he?" Fragger repeated.

"It's a head wound, colonel. There's no way to tell out here in the middle of the jungle. We have to get him back to the ship."

Fragger looked wildly over at Andriana. Still stunned from his blow, she struggled to get up out of the mud. "What about her? Can't she do something? She's a doctor"

"Colonel, listen to me!" Buurk said. "Listen!"

The unusual force in the Martian's voice jerked Fragger out of his panicked concern for Red. "Okay, I'm listening.

"Colonel, nobody can do anything for Salinsky here. It's a head wound. We need a scan to determine the extent of damage. All I can do here is dress the wound. Ideally, I'd immobilize him, and we'd fly him out of here. But—" Buurk gestured at the jungle, "—we both know that's not going to happen."

"No, it's not. So, we walk."

"Use the suit, use your abilities," Buurk said. "You can get him back quickly."

Fragger noted the words coming out of the medic's mouth were sincere, but underlaid with fear. Buurk didn't want to be left alone in the jungle. The Ranger checked the others. None of them could keep their gaze on him. Their eyes shifted fearfully from his face to the jungle and back. The decision was made for him when Andriana struggled to her feet with her right arm dangling uselessly by her side. His blow had broken her arm.

"No," he said. "I can't leave all of you alone. You'd never make it. Red will have to take his chances until we can hook up with Iso or Bucaram or make it back to the ship by ourselves."

Nothing was said, but Fragger could feel the undercurrent of relief at his decision.

"Buurk, tend to Lady Lesto's arm while I get Red out of his suit. Wik, keep watch."

"Wh-what should I do?" Alissma Turnwaite asked.

"Keep watch opposite Wik," Fragger answered. "Buurk, loan her your sword while you're working on Andriana's arm."

The Aiforian woman took the weapon with shaky hands. "I don't know how to use a sword."

"If we're attacked again, you'll learn fast," Fragger said. "Just stay alert and warn me if you see something. You've seen my speed. I'll be there before anything reaches you."

He laid down his own sword and worked Red out of the power armor. Bruises painted Salinsky's forearms with an ugly yellow and purple color. The sergeant, despite his strength, had fallen prey to Lesto's quickness during their battle. But Fragger knew that the worst damage had been done to Salinsky's ego. It had been a point of pride for the sergeant that he'd never lost a fight except to his commander. The Ranger knew he'd have to set about restoring Red's confidence.

If he survives. Don't get ahead of yourself!

He avoided further thought on the subject as Buurk dressed Red's head wound then turned his attention to Andriana's arm.

"It seems to be a clean break," the medic said. "I need to splint it. Cut a branch for me, would you, colonel."

Fragger took his sword to a junglewood tree. He cut a branch, stripped it of its twigs, and handed to Buurk. The Martian began wrapping the doctor's arm with it. As he worked, he asked, "What are we going to do, colonel?"

"We have a couple of choices," Fragger answered. "We can head back toward Radmuller's base and hope to meet up with Iso, but we might run into Wenghorn's troops first. If there are too many of them, I wouldn't be able to protect everyone. We can't stay put either. It's too dangerous."

Fragger thought his options through until Buurk was finished with the splint, then informed everyone of his decision.

"We head back to our ship."

Gripping her injured arm, an ashen-faced Andriana said. "I'm not going anywhere with you, you piece of

shit! I'll take my chances with the jungle."

"Suit yourself," Fragger said, and then spoke to Lady Turnwaite. "You don't have to come, either. It's your choice."

Alissma turned from her guard position and spoke in a shaky voice. "Choice? That's no choice, and you know it. Radmuller's creatures would tear us apart."

"I didn't say it was a good choice."

"Then I'll stay with you. And Andriana will as well, even though she's right. You are a piece of shit."

"Insult me all you want," Fragger said. "While you're doing it, gather up any food you had with you and eat it now. You need to regain strength from the battle. We move out soon."

The Ranger bit eagerly into the food bar Buurk handed to him. As always after combat, his appetite had kicked into high gear. He reminded himself to eat it slowly as he checked to make sure everyone else was eating. They were all as hungry as he was, except for Andriana. She glared down at a self-heating MRE.

"Eat it," he ordered.

The glare shifted to his face. "I can't open it, thanks to you, you idiot!"

Fragger took it from her, pulled the strip and waited until it was warm. He detached the plastic fork from the side and handed the ration back to her. She cradled it on top of her knees, took a bite and vomited.

"It's not that bad," he said.

The doctor's face contorted. "It's not the food, you bastard! I'm pregnant!"

Fragger opened his mouth, but no words came out. Before his wits could return, she spoke again in a vicious tone.

"I promise you one thing. I'll kill it. I'll never have a mongrel child!"

The violence of her words stunned the Ranger. Then, his own rage rose up to meet hers as the memories of Libby and John, surfaced in yearning for his long-gone children.

"I'll never let that happen, Andriana!"

"I will kill myself before I have this ... miscegenation!"

"No, you won't! And do you know why?" Fragger asked.

"I don't want to know—"

"Because there's a question already in the back of your mind. What if the child has my abilities?"

"I'm not interested in any of your freakish abilities!"

"No, but Aifor certainly will be," Fragger said, jabbing a finger at her belly. "That child in there could be the answer to your planet's problems with the powers of the Renowned Systems."

"Aifor would never accept such a bastard!"

"Oh, believe me, expediency always trumps a 'noble' lineage," Fragger said. "Besides, our child would definitely be an improvement on Aiforian nobility composed of murderers, thieves and thugs."

"There are no murderers in our line, Rerun!"

"Don't kid yourself. That's what nobility is all about. It's what it's always about. It's no different now than in my time. Royalty is nothing more than crime under the guise of legitimacy. Strip off the titles, and it's about pure, naked power. No more, no less. Don't pretend otherwise."

"You'll pay for this in ways you can't even dream of, I promise you that, Rerun."

"Fine. Now, eat!"

"I can't keep food down."

"Eat, anyway. You'll want to be faster than a hellhound, won't you?"

The doctor spit at him.

"Suit yourself. But I can think of better ways to die than in the jaws of Radmuller's mutant creatures."

She spit again, and Fragger walked away. As he pulled apart Red's armor, he watched Andriana out of the corner of his eye. To his satisfaction, she soon started eating.

"What are you doing with the armor?" a voice asked.

Fragger looked up to see Wik, the journalist, spooning MRE greedily into his mouth as if he hadn't had a meal in weeks. Specks of spaghetti and meat sauce dotted the corners of the vidman's lips.

"I'm going to hide it so it can't be used by the enemy," Fragger said. "You know, you might want to chew your food before you swallow it."

"I can't help it, colonel. I thought I was scared when faced with EarthCorp's interrogation forces." He waved a fork vaguely at the jungle. "That was nothing compared to this."

The dwarf's legs shook in a tremor as if to emphasize his point.

Fragger paused in his work with the armor. "Wik, you're not scared."

"I'm not?"

"You're just experiencing post-combat letdown. It's normal."

"Well, I'll tell you this, colonel, I don't like it."

"Are you sure about that?"

The vidman stopped chewing. "What do you mean?"

"Wik, I've been a combat soldier for a long time. I know when a man loves a fight. And, you, as scared as you were, were enjoying yourself, little man."

"I was scared out of my mind! I damned near pissed my pants!"

"'Damned near' doesn't count. The fact is you fought back, and you wanted to kill. Kill everything in sight."

"Everything in sight was trying to kill me! I had to fight back or die. Anyone would do what I did."

Fragger put a hand on the vidman's shoulder. "Most anyone would fight back. Few would love it. Face it, Wik, you've got a soldier's heart."

"That's a terrible thing to say to a journalist," Wik protested, but there was a deep delight on his face giving lie to his words.

"Well, if you decide to change careers, I've got a place for you in the Jivaron Rangers," Fragger said.

Wik flushed with such pleasure that he choked. When he was done spattering spaghetti on the ground and Fragger's armor, he spoke quickly to hide his embarrassment.

"Why don't you keep the armor?"

"Like I said, we don't want the enemy to get their hands on it."

"I know that. I mean, why not have someone wear it so we can use it for further protection?"

"Wik, it takes months to learn how to use power armor. If anyone of you put it on, you'd be banging into trees all day long. Besides," he gestured toward the others, "who would you propose wear it? You're too short. Buurk's too tall. And I damned well wouldn't put Lady Lesto into one. The first thing she'd do is try to kill me. If that happens, there goes your protection."

"Okay, okay, I get your point," Wik conceded. "Still, it seems a shame."

"Don't worry, vidman. The suit will serve its purpose."

"How? As a booby trap?"

Fragger grinned at Wik. "See, you're already thinking like a soldier. A booby trap is a good idea, but I have something different in mind. At this point, it's more important to throw the Aiforians off our trail than it is to kill a few of them. I'll move it into the jungle and set the commlink to broadcast a signal well after we're gone. It'll also be a code for Iso to let him know we're on the move. It'll buy us some time."

"Do you think it'll be enough?"

Fragger shrugged. "Who knows? You do your best with what you've got."

He checked the group again to make sure they'd all finished eating and laughed.

"What's so funny?" Wik asked.

"I've led some funky units in my time, but you people take the cake. A seven-foot Martian, a dwarf vidman, and two noblewomen, one who's useless and one who will take every opportunity she can find to kill me."

Wik chuckled. "We are a motley group, aren't we?"

Fragger stood, holding Red's armor. "I've assembled myself a frigging circus and found myself as ringmaster of a freak show."

Wik scowled at the reference. "I'm not a freak, colonel."

Fragger looked down at the vidman. "Oh, yes, you are, Wik. And so am I. We're all freaks in this time

and place. Ask the Aiforians. Ask EarthCorp or the Ricers. Ask—"

"All right, all right, I get your point, colonel," Wik said. So, what do we do now?"

"As freaks, we can hide or we can fight back," Fragger answered. "Me, I plan to fight back until I die or until everybody else is a freak too. Once we do that, we're not freaks anymore. We're normal, Wik."

"That's a nice speech," the vidman said. "But that's not what I meant. I meant what should we do while you're putting Red's armor in the jungle?"

"Check to make sure every person has eaten and has rations. Then wait for me to return."

Wik was silent as he shifted from one foot to the next.

"What's the problem?" Fragger asked.

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with you leaving us. You're the only real protection we have."

"Don't worry, I'll be back," Fragger said. "I'll lead the way. Rangers always lead the way."

## Chapter 20

Several days into the jungle, Fragger called a rest period in mid-afternoon. They'd been on the march since dawn and needed a break. He cursed the rain. It had been coming down all day, and the temperature was unusually cold for the rain forest. He estimated it had to be in the 60s, a shock after the constant 80s he'd grown to expect. He laid Red on the jungle floor so Buurk could check him over.

"No change, colonel," the medic informed him.

"He's shivering. Will he be okay?"

"We're all shivering. My answer is the same as the last hundred times," Buurk replied. "I just don't know. I've kept the wound clean, but that doesn't tell us a thing about internal damage. His body could be healing itself or—"

"He could be a vegetable."

"It's possible."

Fragger wiped sweat from his brow. He'd kept the suit open to maintain personal contact with the group and to reduce power consumption to a minimum. Despite the suit's augmentation of his muscles, his arms were tired. Red had to weigh over a 100 kilos. Fragger did a quick conversion as he sat down to rest.

Two hundred plus pounds is a lot of weight to carry for anyone even with augmentation.

"Do you think the coded signal you had Red's armor send threw the Aiforians off track?" Buurk asked.

"They haven't found us yet, have they?" Fragger answered.

The medic's hurt expression at the irritated tone made the Ranger regret the loss of control.

"Sorry, Buurk," he said. "This march is getting to me."

"You're tired, colonel. Everyone is."

Fragger checked the small clearing to make sure everyone was present. Andriana lay back against the root of a junglewood tree, her good arm across her forehead. Alissma Turnwaite sat atop the root, fanning Andriana with a large leaf. Wik had laid his small body on the ground and was staring up into the jungle canopy.

"How are the women doing?" Fragger asked.

"They're doing as fine as can be expected. It's Wik, I'm worried about. It's hard for him to keep up with those short legs."

"Well, what do you expect me to do about it?"

"Nothing, I just thought you should know."

"You want a solution, Buurk, do the same thing I'm doing. Carry him. Put him on those big Martian shoulders of yours."

"I already suggested it to him, but he refused."

"When he gets tired enough, suggest it again. He'll take you up on the offer, I guarantee it."

Fragger sat down and leaned back against a tree.

"God, it feels good to take the weight off my feet."

Buurk folded his body and sat beside the Ranger.

"Colonel, I want to ask you a question."

"Can't it wait? I need some sleep."

"Of course."

"Stand watch," Fragger said. "Give me a half-hour, then wake me up. I'll answer your question if I can, at that time."

"Do you think the enemy is close enough that we still need to stand watch?"

"Who knows? Better safe than sorry. Keep one eye on the jungle and one eye on Lady Lesto. She's probably the bigger danger right now. Don't let her kill me in my sleep, Buurk."

"What a fucked-up situation," the Martian muttered as Fragger closed his eyes.

The Ranger chuckled at the gentle medic's use of the ancient Earth profanity. Buurk, always the outsider, was slowly working his way toward becoming a member of Fragger's team.

More than a team, really. More like family, he thought as he fell toward sleep. Buurk's always needed family. Don't we all?



## Chapter 21

Fragger woke with a start and was immediately pissed at Buurk. It was dark as only the jungle floor could be, pitch black leavened by phosphorescent bacteria, fungi, and insects. The Martian had failed to wake him and obviously let him sleep a long time.

With the suit helmet open, the Ranger's head and neck shivered from the cold. Below the neck, he was unaccountably warm. The power armor felt tighter than usual. He hoped the suit's temperature control hadn't malfunctioned and switched itself off. He lifted an arm to check and found it went nowhere. He tried the other arm. They were both being held down by something.

Oh, crap, Andriana's tied me up somehow, was his first thought. I'm in deep shit now.

But that didn't make sense, he realized. There was nothing in the jungle she could find that was strong enough to withstand the power of his armor.

Besides, she has only one good arm.

Puzzled, he looked down.

A slipsnake had wound four coils of its body around him.

The calm part of his mind estimated its length at 30 feet with a girth of at least 40 inches.

It has to weigh over 500 pounds!

The other part of his brain gibbered at the thought of being swallowed by Radmuller's beast. He didn't think the snake could ingest the suit, but his head was exposed. He knew anacondas bit their prey and hung onto them until they could crush the life out of the victim. It was not a possibility he cared to think about much.

He forced his breathing to slow down so he could consider his options. His brain sifted rapidly through alternatives. Quickly, he realized he didn't have any.

I can't get my arms free to reach a weapon. I can't accelerate out of its grip. I can't—

Mentally, he gave himself a vicious kick in the ass.

There are always options. You're a Ranger, and a Ranger always has solutions.

He checked the tightness around his body and noticed that the snake wasn't constricting any further. It didn't make any sense. Radmuller gen-modded his beasts for aggression, but the beast seemed to have stopped in the midst of its attack.

The cold! he realized. The cold has slowed its metabolism down. At least Radmuller hasn't been able to modify that part of the reptile's metabolism. Oh, Christ, I wonder how close to sunrise it is!

The maddening part was he couldn't hear Buurk and Wik snoring. The absence of noise meant something was wrong other than the snake. During the days they'd been on the march, he'd already learned to detest their distinctive sleep sounds. Buurk snored like a bolt being progressively ratcheted into place. It was a snawk-snawk-snawk sound that ended on a high note that infuriatingly refused to come down. Wik's snore, on the other hand, seemed to work on the bell curve principle. It rose until it reached a crescendo and then dropped to the far end of the curve before beginning another ascent. It was like

listening to two bad rap artists make noise because they had no talent.

I hate rap music, he thought, then realized it was an irrational thought. I'm 600 years beyond rap.

What he desperately wanted to hear right now was some awful snoring. He decided to chance provoking the snake by trying to rouse the two men.

"Buurk!" he whispered. "Buurk, get your sorry ass up. Now!"

There was no response.

"Wik, goddamn it! Wake up. I need some help here!"

He tried again several times, then quit when the snake shifted its coils. Sweating, he held his breath until Radmuller's beast settled down. He tried again.

"Buurk! Buurk! Sssst! Wake up, you Martian idiot!"

"Fuck me!" Fragger swore as he looked up and saw two things at once.

The sky was lightening to the east.

And Andriana Lesto and Alissma Turnwaite stood squarely in the light. The doctor held Buurk's power sword in her good hand.

There was blood on the blade.

"Your friends can't answer you, Rerun."

Andriana smirked down at him and said to Alissma, "The snake caught by a snake. If this isn't justice, I don't know what is."

"Snakes will eat anything, I hear," Alissma said. "Even garbage."

"This 'garbage' is the only protection you have," Fragger reminded them.

Andriana put a finger to her lips. "Not so loud, Rerun. You might wake the snake. Then, again, go ahead and shout. I want to watch the life being squeezed out of your body."

"My only regret then will be that I won't be around to see both of you swallowed by the snake when he gets finished with me," Fragger said.

"He's really not very bright, is he," Andriana said to her companion. "He forgets the nature of snakes. Once he's had a meal, he won't need another one for a long time. Cold-blooded animals don't need a lot of food energy."

"Besides which," Alissma added, "he'll probably have such a bad case of indigestion that he won't want to eat, anyway."

Both women snickered.

Fragger spoke, trying to say anything to sow doubt in their minds. "Maybe you're right. Maybe you're not. Remember, this isn't a normal snake. It's one of Radmuller's creatures. They're unpredictable."

Andriana cut the air with a few strokes of the blade. She hadn't powered it up yet, and Fragger wanted to keep it that way.

"The sword will handle the snake," she said. "On the other hand, I may not have the patience to wait for him to slowly ingest you. I might want to kill you right now."

She paused. "Of course, that would be entirely too quick and less than you deserve. You've already lost one eye. A quick poke and you'll have a matching set."

A shiver racked Fragger's body.

"Ah, I see you don't like that prospect," Andriana said. She jabbed the sword close to his face several times. Fragger tensed, waiting for the blow that would rob him of his sight.

Andriana sniggered, then lowered the blade. "But I do have the patience, Rerun. A rapist and a murderer deserves a slow death. If I could get inside your armor, I'd cut your balls off and make you eat them. As it is, I'll have to be satisfied with listening to your bones crunch and splinter as you asphyxiate. It'll be sweeter than any music I've ever heard."

"You're calling me a snake?" Fragger said. "You're more cold-blooded than any reptile."

"You killed my father!"

"Who would have killed me!"

"You're Rerun scum. You deserve to die! And that's going to happen very soon!"

Tears streamed down her face. Fragger felt the stirring of the snake's coils as her voice rose in volume.

"Look!" she said. "The sun's coming up. Soon, the heat of its rays will strike that snake and spur it into action. And I'm going to sit here and watch you die the death you deserve!"

"You really don't want to do this," Fragger said. "You'll be alone in the jun—"

"I don't care, so shut your filthy mouth, or I'll gag you and you won't even be able to scream. You'll die whimpering like the raping coward you are!"

She shook the sword at him again. "Do you understand? Do you?"

Fragger gave a quick nod of his head, not willing to provoke the woman any further.

The doctor lowered herself awkwardly to ground, laying the sword on her crossed legs. Alissma Turnwaite sat beside her. Unlike Andriana, her face was not set in a ruthless expression. She kept turning her head, checking the jungle about them as the rain forest's creatures awakened with the dawn. Her eyes darted in the direction of the chattering of the tinybirds high in the canopy. The distant howl of a hellhound caused her eyelids to shut in a fluttering, spastic motion. After a moment of silence, she ventured a question to her partner.

"Are you sure this is a good—"

"You shut up as well!" Andriana warned her. "We'll be fine."

"I ... I don't know. Your arm is broken, and I'm not good with wea—"

"I said, shut up!"

Fragger watched the sun rise. He swore it had deliberately chosen to rise faster than usual. Even the jungle seemed to be conspiring against him. His position was in line with an unusual break in the canopy.

Instead of the usual dappled light that reached the ground, the Jivaron sun would bring its full force onto the reptile's skin. The snake would convert the energy and raise its metabolism into full and deadly action.

Christ on a crutch, what am I going to do? The phrase kept running through his head like a runaway train on a closed track. What am I going to do?

Die! was the only answer that came to him as the sun topped the trees and the temperature rose quickly. He felt the coils tighten further. A rustling, slithering sound brought his attention to his right side. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the constrictor's massive head rise. A foul-smelling musk odor rose with the action of the diamond-shaped skull. The coils—dull green with black spots—tightened further as the slipsnake twisted its head to examine its surroundings. Slowly, it brought its gaze to bear on Fragger. The Ranger swore the reptile had its mouth twisted into a malevolent grin.

It's as if I'm staring into the face of Radmuller himself.

He grunted as the snake tightened its grip. The suit was protecting his bones, but the astounding strength of the beast was still compressing the armor steadily inward.

At least, I'll asphyxiate before he breaks my bones, he thought with gallows humor. That'll deprive Andriana of one satisfaction.

Another squeeze of the coils provoked an involuntary grin onto his face.

"That smile will end soon, Rerun," Andriana said.

He realized she'd mistaken the forced smile for an actual one, so he laughed simply to aggravate her.

It's the only action I have left to me, so I might as well make the most of it.

"Even as I die, Andriana, I prove I'm a better man as a Rerun than any Aiforian nobleman. And a better lover."

"You bastard! I will kill the child, as I promised. You can count on it."

"No, you won't hurt the child. You already know its potential for power. Boy or girl, it could be the key to Aifor's future. Oh, I will definitely live on. And you will live with my legacy."

Fragger laughed again as best he could under the tightening pressure of the snake's coils. "Imagine that. A Rerun, leader of Aiforian nobility."

"You forget, Rerun, no Aiforian beyond this group knows I'm pregnant, and they never will. The baby dies."

As if irritated by the conversation, the snake darted its head in front of his face and flicked its tongue against his cheek. The taste seemed to excite the reptile. A quick jerk of its muscles tightened the grip on the Ranger's body. Fragger felt the air rush from his lungs and his vision dim. Through the roaring in his ears, he heard Andriana's obscene giggle of satisfaction.

A third, odd sound thrust itself into his diminishing consciousness. An intake of non-human breath. A gurgle. Then, a sudden loosening of the pressure.

Andriana's had a change of heart, thank God! Fragger thought, gulping air into his lungs.

The snake constricted its body again, driving the air right back out.

She hasn't had any change of heart. She's provoking the snake to make the torture last longer. Bitch!

Nonetheless, when the coils loosened again, he was grateful. As his vision returned, he saw the snake striking its giant head repeatedly on either side of the tree toward an unseen foe behind the tree. Beyond the reptile, he could see Andriana screaming in frustration.

What the hell's going on? Fragger wondered. Something is really pissing off Radmuller's monster.

He felt the snake flinch and strike toward his right side. The lightning movement provoked a frightened yelp.

Fragger twisted his head to see who the attacker was, but the tree trunk blocked his vision. The snake flinched again and struck toward the left. This time, Fragger caught sight of a small blade being pulled quickly from the reptile's body. Blood oozed from the wound.

Andriana's fury told him who the attacker was.

"Wik!" she screamed. "I killed you."

The little man didn't have time to respond. Radmuller's beast loosened its coils so it could stretch out and get at the vidman as he hid behind the tree. Andriana saw the opening and rushed in with the sword raised. Fragger slipped an arm free to grab her wrist. He tightened his grip and jerked her face close to his

"Do you want your other arm broken?" he asked. "Give me the sword!"

She cried out in pain and released the weapon. Fragger grabbed it, pushed her away and twisted to meet a strike from the snake. He shoved his armored forearm into the reptile's mouth. As it mouthed futilely at the suit, Fragger activated the sword and jabbed it into the nearest coil. The smell of scorched flesh rose up amidst the snake's shudder. Fragger jabbed again and again, working to weaken the reptile's muscles. Reluctant to give up its prey, it constricted again, driving the Ranger's breath from his lungs again. He nearly dropped the sword, but Wik popped out again and poked his blade deep into the reptile's body. Radmuller's beast loosened its hold and struck at the vidman. Wik let go of the weapon and tumbled to the ground. The snake grabbed the hilt of the tormenting blade and tried to jerk it free. Seizing his chance, Fragger brought the full force of his sword down onto the reptile's neck. Lopped off, the head dropped to the ground and tumbled next to Wik. Wide-eyed, the vidman rolled over and scrambled away. The snake's body still shuddered and writhed. Fragger shoved upward, trying to slip out of the coils. Even in death, the reptile's body constricted again. Infuriated, the Ranger hacked at it until the blade cut through one section, then began on another. When the constriction ceased, he scrambled out of the loops and slashed repeatedly at the beast.

"Colonel! Fragger!" he heard Wik shout.

"What?"

"It's dead, colonel, it's dead! Stop!"

Panting, Fragger glared at the vidman. He gave one final chop before examining his bloody handiwork. The snake lay in sections about the base of the tree. The adrenaline surging through the Ranger's body left him with little satisfaction. He whirled about to find Andriana. She knelt on the ground. He strode swiftly toward her and raised the blade high.

"Do it!" she urged him. "Slice me like the snake. Do it now!"

"Colonel, don't!" Wik said. "Think about what you're doing! Think about the child!"

It took all of Fragger's strength not to strike the doctor's head from her body, but he lowered the sword. Andriana dropped her face into her good hand and wept.

"It won't be the last time you cry, woman," he promised her. Still shaking with anger, he turned back to the vidman.

"Wik, I owe you big time. You may be a little person, but you're tall with courage. You're a Ranger at heart."

The dwarf reddened so much that the color nearly matched the blood seeping from a head wound. Fragger gestured toward the cut. "Did she do that?"

"Yes."

"What the hell happened? Buurk was supposed to keep watch."

"I'm not sure, colonel. I was asleep. When I woke up, my head was ringing. Then I found blood on my face and thought we'd been attacked by the Aiforians. That's when I saw what was happening with you and the snake."

A shudder through the vidman. "Damn, that was a big—sonuvabitch. Is that the old Terran phrase?"

Fragger nodded. "The biggest damned snake I've ever seen. But not the deadliest. I'll award the doctor that prize. You're lucky, Wik. Apparently, she didn't have enough strength in one arm to deal a death blow. Head wounds bleed badly. She must have thought she'd killed you."

"I've got such a headache I half-way wish she had killed me!" the vidman complained.

Fragger checked the clearing. "Where's Buurk? Is he dead? And what about Red?"

"I don't know, colonel. I didn't have time to check on them."

Fragger swung back to Andriana. "If they're dead, I swear I'll—"

"Kill me?" she asked. A hysterical giggle broke out. "Please do."

Fragger growled in frustration and stomped off with Wik close behind him.

They found Buurk sprawled on his stomach. A purple lump swelled the side of his head. Fragger did a quick check of the rest of his body and found that an ominous gash had laid open the medic's side. Insects swarmed in the wound. Fragger waved futilely at them and then rose and went to Red. The corporal lay on his back, shivering and groaning. His pallor was corpse-like. The Ranger examined him quickly and, to his relief, saw no sword wounds. He returned to Buurk. Wik knelt beside the Martian, his fingers on Buurk's neck.

"He's got a pulse," the vidman said.

"Is it strong?"

"As far as I can tell. I'm no medic."

Fragger shook the Martian. "Buurk, can you hear me? Buurk?"

When Buurk didn't answer, he shook the man's head gently. This brought a groan, and a sigh of relief from Fragger. He detached the first aid kit from the medic's belt and handed it to Wik.

"Treat him."

"Colonel, I don't know how to do that. Clear your head. You do."

Realizing Wik was right, Fragger cursed himself for his stupidity. He opened the bag and found a sterile dressing and antiseptic cleanser. He washed the wound carefully and applied the dressing. When he was finished, he rolled the big Martian over onto his back. Buurk blinked up at him in confusion.

His voice came out in a croak. "What happened?"

"That's my question," Fragger said, unable to contain his anger. "You fell asleep on duty. You almost got us all killed."

Buurk struggled up onto his elbows. "I did? Oh, damn, I did! I'm sorry, colonel. I'm sorr—"

"Save it, you dumb bastard! When we get back to the ship, I'm putting you on latrine duty for the rest of your life. You'll be so deep in shit, you'll be the color of brown. You'll—"

The shame in the medic's eyes cut Fragger's outburst short.

"Oh, forget it, Buurk. You're tired. We're all tired."

"Colonel, I tried to stop her! I did fall asleep, but she woke me up, complaining that her arm hurt. When I dug into my first aid kit, she grabbed my sword. I never expected a pregnant woman with a broken arm to be able to—"

"You're just too trusting," Fragger interrupted. "She's a woman, but a deadly one. Don't make the mistake of trusting either her or Lady Turnwaite again."

"You don't have to worry about that," Buurk said, then asked, "Do you remember that I wanted to ask you a question before this all happened?"

"Yeah. What was it?"

"Well, I was going to ask you how you could rape Andriana."

"The question has changed?"

"Yes," Buurk answered. "Now, I want to know how you were brave enough to get in bed with her in the first place."

Fragger laughed. "The worst mistake of my life, man, believe me, the absolute worst."

The Ranger helped Buurk sit up. While Wik brought the Martian water, Fragger sat down exhausted and forced himself to dig into an MRE while he took stock of the situation.

*Red's still battling for his life. Despite his wound, Buurk appears mobile, but he'll be slowed down, especially if infection sets in. The jungle is not a good place to have kind of injury.*

He glanced over at the women. Andriana was quiet at last, her head in Alissma's lap. Her efforts to kill him seemed to have taken all the energy from her body.

*Or, it's another trick, he cautioned himself. I may have to tie her one good hand to her body at night simply to keep safe.*

He swung his gaze to the one good piece of news in a sour state of affairs—Wik. The little man seemed energized instead of tired. He busied himself tending to Buurk and feeding him soup. The Martian looked simultaneously grateful and thoroughly annoyed at being fed by a man not even half his size. Fragger also suspected that the Martian was embarrassed that the little man had proven himself to be very big indeed.

The Ranger shook his head at human behavior. *You simply don't know what the pressure of combat will bring out in a man. Thank God, Wik came through.*

That brief bit of good news cheered him temporarily, but soon the gloom descended again.

*Even with Wik's help, there's no way I can get the whole party back safely. Red needs immediate attention. His shivering won't stop and the insects are eating him alive.*

Fragger glanced back at Andriana. *Plus, there's the baby. I don't know how much stress it can take.*

He checked out Alissma Turnwaite as well, hoping she'd somehow found courage. One look at her eyes dashed that hope. They held a thousand-yard stare that said she might break soon.

Fragger sighed and downed the rest of his meal. It had tasted like chicken although he wasn't sure it was. He rummaged in the MRE packet for more food and was delighted to find peanut butter.

*Six hundred years into the future, it's still a staple.*

He spread it on a cracker and popped it into his mouth, savoring the taste and the memory of home it brought with it. John, in particular, had had a passion for peanut butter since he was a kid while Libby had hated it.

*My kids, my wife, all gone. I miss them.*

Tears threatened to spring to his eyes, and Fragger shook his head to clear his mind of useless memories that wouldn't let him alone. The last thing his party needed was to see him crying. Leaders didn't have the luxury of tears.

He finished another cracker with a vicious bite, rose and went to the armor. Reaching inside, he accessed the commlink and set it on continuous send. He sat down again, hoping only Iso or Bucaram would hear the encrypted call for help.

He didn't think it was likely.



## Chapter 22

Three days later, no one had answered his signal. Enemy or friend. Fragger had checked the commlink several times to make sure it was functional and found it in perfect working order.

The whole situation is maddening. I can't stay with my party, and I can't leave it. If I stay, I can keep them alive only to have both Red and Buurk die slow deaths.

At that thought, he glanced over at Red lying on the ground. Salinsky shivered and shook as his body grappled with the injury done to it by Lord Lesto. Buurk sat beside him sweating and listless. Despite the antibiotics the Ranger had given the medic, the Martian already had a fever. Beyond them, the Aiforian women slumped against the broad trunk of a tree. Alissma had sunk into apathy, and Andriana was close to joining her in that state.

On the other hand, he thought, if I leave, they're all bound to die quick and violent deaths if more of Radmuller's creatures show up.

There'd already been ominous howls from the distance as hellhounds ranged, trying to pick up their scent. Wik remained the only saving grace. The vidman remained alert and at full strength in the midst of an oppressive heat that had replaced the unusual cool spell. His act of courage in attacking the snake had filled the tiny man with a boisterous confidence. He alternated watches with Fragger with no complaint, tended to Red and Buurk, and encouraged everyone to stay hopeful.

Fragger wished he felt as hopeful.

Wik is putting me to shame in the attitude department. And, somehow, amidst all his activity, the vidman still finds time to type on his epad as he's doing now.

"What are you writing about?" he asked Wik to take his mind off depressing thoughts.

"About you, me, the whole situation, colonel," Wik answered, barely glancing in his direction. "It's a first draft of an article."

"Read it to me."

Wik gave Fragger a questioning look. "I thought you didn't care that much about what I wrote."

The Ranger shrugged. "I don't, but I need a diversion."

The vidman wiped sweat from his face as he surveyed the jungle. "I can certainly understand that. Still, it's a pretty long piece. Why don't you read it while I get Buurk some water?"

"Good idea."

Wik stood and handed the epad to Fragger. "You may not like some of it."

"Are you objective?"

"As objective as any journalist can be, colonel."

"Then, that's good enough for me."

"How can you trust me so easily?"

Fragger gestured toward the spot where the battle with the snake had taken place. "I told you I owed you big time, didn't I? You've fought beside me and for me. Combat reveals the true nature of a man. I can trust you, Wik."

"I'm not sure I want that much trust, colonel. It may affect what I write."

Fragger smiled. "Then I win both ways, don't I?"

Wik returned the smile. "Indeed, you do."

As Wik picked up a canteen and went to Buurk, Fragger turned to the epad screen and read:

*Citizens of the Renowned Systems:*

*I've been on the planet, Jivaro, with Colonel Jonathan "Fragger" Sparks for the past few months. That's right, the "infamous" Rerun does actually exist. I'm currently sitting in the colonel's camp in the midst of the steaming, stinking Jivaron jungle. My purpose in writing this article is describe the situation as I see it, so you can make up your mind about the man from the past.*

*First, a few facts to explain my presence on the planet: I was originally hired by the Terran Educational Research Foundation (TERF) to work with Professor V. W. Vanderford to write a rebuttal to Dom Kleem's seemingly fawning (and seditious) article about Colonel Sparks, The Story of an Improbable Hero. At the time, I was more than happy to collaborate. For one thing, I loathed the Rerun as much as any of you, having heard the horror stories about his "atrocities." Second, Professor Vanderford possessed a remarkable intellect and was one of the finest and most thorough scholars to ever grace our great University system. Frankly, I wanted to share in the prestige associated with his name. Third, a large amount of credits had been dangled before me by TERF, and I needed the money. Only after I'd accepted the assignment did I discover that TERF was a front for the Disinformation Arm of the Interrogation Forces. And my task wasn't to collaborate; it was to clean up Professor Vanderford's prose for public consumption. His prose didn't make for good popular reading. His style was made worse by the fact that he'd been threatened with cellular stripping if he didn't write the article. To be blunt, he caved in at the prospect of that particularly heinous form of torture (who wouldn't?). Unfortunately for the government, the professor was a typical academic writer before the threat of punishment, and his subsequent case of nerves made his prose so bad it was unpublishable. That's why the government called me in. To make the unreadable readable and to ensure that you, the average reader, would read the material.*

*(An aside on the professor before I proceed: According to official EarthCorporation sources, he died in a fire in his home library on the Terran island-nation of Sri Lanka while indulging in the archaic and filthy habit of smoking a cigarette. Professor Vanderford, while a pompous ass in many respects in my opinion, did not enjoy the addictive pleasures of tobacco. In fact, he was a man of such strict moral rectitude that he was continually lecturing others on any deficiency which caught his eye. As far as I can tell, his only vice was sheer gullibility. He believed he could deal with the subject of Colonel Sparks in an official capacity and survive EarthCorp's desperate need to distort all information regarding the Rerun.)*

*By accident, I discovered Dom Kleem's unpublished opinion's on Fragger Sparks. Professor Kleem painted an entirely different picture of the Rerun. I soon realized that that knowledge was dangerous to have, so I escaped Earth by illegal means (a feat easy enough to accomplish if you have the right sources and enough money) in order to stay alive and to find out the truth about Colonel Sparks. At the time, I knew that the Aiforians were keenly interested in the Rerun for two*

*reasons. One, they wanted the secret of his supposedly remarkable MASER abilities. Two, he had defeated Lord Lesto in battle on Jivaro and taken his daughter hostage in the process. So, I made my way to Aifor and agreed to work with Ambassador Wenghorn...*

Fragger snorted and shouted across the clearing to Wik. "You agreed to 'work with' Wenghorn?"

"I told you it was a first draft, didn't I?" Wik said as he checked Buurk's dressing. "Even in the middle of the damned jungle, everybody's a critic."

Fragger laughed and continued reading, skipping the part about how Wenghorn and Wik had finally located him.

...So, what does the Rerun really look like? That's your question, isn't it? Well, I can assure you that Fragger Sparks doesn't have horns, he doesn't breathe fire, and he doesn't have fangs which rip into innocent children's flesh for breakfast. In fact, except for the power sword wound scarring his face, Fragger Sparks is of quite ordinary ancient Earth stock. That's to say, in the meaningless terms of those times, he's a mixture of Irish-European, Spanish-American, and American Indian stock. He's nearly two meters tall, weighs an estimated wiry 80 kilograms, and has the ramrod straight posture of a professional soldier. His hair is black and cut in the military fashion of his time, cropped close to a skull heavily tanned by the Jivaron sun. The nose apparently was very straight at one time, but has taken its share of abuse in the colonel's many battles and now is in the shape of an elongated-S when viewed head-on. As reported many times previously, the Rerun is missing one eye; however, that makes his remaining eye all the more remarkable and, frankly, unnerving. It has a seldom-seen deep blue color, verging on black. But it's the mind behind the eye that penetrates to the core of your being. No, no.... those aren't the right words.. Colonel Sparks isn't any more intelligent than the average elite soldier. I don't believe he's any more moral than the common trooper, either (which says little for that part of his character)...

"Not any more intelligent or moral than the average soldier? Thanks a lot Wik!"

"You told me to be honest and truthful, didn't you?" the vidman.

Fragger muttered to himself, "Be careful what you tell people, Sparks," and kept on reading:

...But there is a rock-solid honesty at the core of the man. When the one eye looks at you, you desperately don't want to disappoint Colonel Sparks' faith in your integrity. It was maddening, but I was unable to lie to the man even in the service of the greater good of EarthCorp, and, believe me, I was prepared to do so to get at the truth of the man. During my time with Fragger Sparks, I've found they're always eager to share with me the legends about their commander: "He fought a Hellhound barehanded and killed it." "Armed only with a power sword, he took on six armored Ricer warriors and defeated them." Colonel Sparks chuckled when I told him of the tales spread and shared by his men. He assured me there wasn't an unarmored man in all the Renowned Systems who could defeat a Hellhound. He told me that only a lunatic would take on six Ricer troopers—and the lunatic wouldn't survive....

"Well, Wik, you've finally put some facts amidst all the bullshit in your article."

"What facts are those?"

"The part where you quote me as saying only a lunatic would have taken on six Ricer troopers."

"Keep reading, colonel, and see what your men think of you. I'll bet you won't find that part to be bullshit, either."

Fragger dropped his eyes to the screen again and read until he found the section Wik was talking about.

...I talked—and continue to talk—with others under his command and discovered they feel the same way about the colonel's integrity. Oh, they cuss him up one side and down the other as soldiers do, complain about the lousy rations, swear he'll get them all killed with another bit of combat foolishness, then follow him unswerving into battle. Another way to get a measure of Colonel Sparks (and his remarkable charisma) is by studying the odd mixture of men he's gathered closest to him. First, there's Corporal Samuel “Red” Salinsky (also known as “Slummer”, but not to his face), formerly a soldier in the ranks of the EarthCorp military forces. (Before you label him a traitor, please read the entire story, then make your judgment). As his nickname indicates, he has a brush of red hair covering a bullet-shaped skull perched atop burly shoulders and a hulking body. The most noticeable feature of the face is its thick crooked nose. (From its flattened nature, one can deduce that Corporal Salinsky likes to fight as much outside of combat as in it. I never had the nerve to ask him.)

His eyes are blue like Colonel Sparks', but lack the razor-sharp intensity and focus possessed by the Rerun. Instead, they have a kind of dogged determination as if, once Red's mind is made up, nothing is going to get in the way of accomplishment of his mission. Frankly, Red is typical of someone with a slummer background. He's not the brightest of men—in ordinary life, at any rate. However, on the battlefield, it's not necessarily brains which ensure survival. The doggedness in Red's character apparently translates into a brilliance of butchery. Almost no one stands before his power sword. (As I write this, Red Salinsky lies on the ground, possibly mortally wounded. More about that later.)

Lest you think I'm exaggerating, I have two sources of proof. One source is his fellow soldiers. Normally if you ask a trooper to describe combat exploits, he or she is eager to exaggerate their own accomplishments or those of other well-liked infantrymen. It's no secret that soldiers are the biggest liars around. Ask about Salinsky, however, and you're greeted with a sense of awe and a shake of the head or a simple, “You have to be there.” The second source of proof is a straightforward one—Red Salinsky's longevity. In a profession where you can get killed or maimed in a microsecond, the corporal has lasted a decade!

As I mentioned earlier, Red Salinsky is the typical outsourced slummer from Rockpile who makes up the rank and file of our armed forces, and it's this background that brought him into service, and, he claims, keeps him in it. “It's an easier life than the Rockpile slums,” he told me. “And not nearly as dangerous.” One last item on Corporal Red Salinsky to make him come alive for you: He has the slummer's inordinate love of the vegetable “gark”, a root plant which is native to Rockpile. *[If you've forgotten, the plant got its name because when chewed or cooked, it smells like a mixture of Terran garlic and onions and, as the wits would add, “methane gone bad.”]* Slummers tolerate its odor because it dulls hunger pangs and creates a mild euphoria similar to Terran coca leaves, which allows native Rockpilians to survive the tedium and danger of that labor force planet. At any rate, after making sure they're well out of earshot, his fellow soldiers claim Red doesn't need a sword at all in combat; his secret weapon is that he kills the enemy with the smell of his breath alone! As you might guess from my description, Red is the “brawn” in Colonel Sparks' command.

The Ricer non-com counterpart to Salinsky is Sergeant Isoruku “Iso” Watanabe. If Red Salinsky is the brawn, Watanabe is definitely the tactical brains. The first thing you'll notice about him is his heavy and noisy breathing. Although the stocky Ricer is in top physical condition, he has an extraordinarily small button nose, and squashed, courtesy of a sword hilt smashed into his face early in his career. This creates the odd effect of making a person feel like he's talking to a Terran bull, all snorting impatience and itchiness to gore anything in his sight. This picture is completed by the protruding jaw of Watanabe. The man looks as if he could chew asteroids for breakfast, moons for lunch, and planets for supper! His combat reputation among the men is that of a highly skilled and impossibly brave swordsman whose rash nature is eventually going to get him killed. When I informed Colonel Sparks of Watanabe's reputation among the men, he simply said, “Then Iso will die a happy man.”

"I never said 'Iso will die a happy man'," Fragger complained.

"Poetic license," Wik responded. "People love a good story. Besides, you did make the remarks I wrote next."

...The colonel also added that he'd never seen a better soldier when it came to meticulous implementation of battle plans and "if there were any justice within the 'screwed-up' Renowned Systems, the sergeant would have been made an officer a long time ago." (After this statement, the colonel wagged a joking finger at me and said, "But not a gentleman. Make Iso a gentleman, and you'd ruin a good soldier!" Frankly, this reference to officers as gentlemen is not clear to me at this point in time. It's a well-known fact that few officers are gentlemen since they come from the professional military outsource planets and not from the ranks of nobility.)

To my eyes, the oddest man in Colonel Sparks' inner circle is Bucaram, the Shuar "native" of Jivaro. (*As you already know, after Dr. Radmuller fled to Jivaro to escape punishment for illegal genmod experimentation.*) EarthCorp forcefully relocated the headhunters from the Ecuadorian Amazon region to the planet because of the need to exploit their similar rainforest environments and find Radmuller or at least be able to deal with the proliferation of Radmuller's creatures over the planet. They assumed the loss of a people so insignificant was an acceptable risk!

Typical of the Shuar people, Bucaram is short and slight and, on first sight, a mere weakling compared to the professional soldiers he works with. But, as often happens, appearances are deceiving. He can run the jungle and swamps all day long and leave everyone in his dust (if there were any dust on this miserably wet planet!). Because he is a Shuar and supremely knowledgeable of the jungle, he can make himself and entire squads disappear from sight with impunity, a skill that's an invaluable tactical advantage for the always outnumbered forces of Colonel Sparks (whose small unit tactics consistently frustrate the blundering regular army units that hunt him). As to physical description, Bucaram has the black hair of his people cut into the prevalent bowl style. He wears long sideburn ornaments made of beetlewing covers and decorated with Jivaron toucan feathers. He has the distinctive nose of the Shuar that forms a sharp bridge until it reaches the nostrils which flare out widely like the beetlewing decorations. Above the gold-brown cheeks, the black eyes are shrewd and alternately impenetrable and transparent as befits, I suppose, a shaman, who's continuously amused by the doings of people who are not in touch with the gods (all non-Shuars).

When he feels like it, Bucaram wears standard-issue fatigues (mostly for military ceremonial purposes); when he doesn't, he wears the uniform of the jungle, a simple set of shorts usually overhung with a belt and sheath holding a prized combat knife given to him by Colonel Sparks. It's my conclusion that, in many ways, Bucaram is the most valuable member of the colonel's staff. His impressive knowledge of local terrain and climatic conditions give Sparks an invaluable edge over his opponents...

"That's for sure," Fragger said. Grudgingly, he admitted to himself that Wik had a remarkable eye for people and their character. The descriptions matched his assessment of his most important soldiers.

He skipped over an equally accurate description of Buurk until he came to the last part of the article.

...A little background is required here in order for you to understand the current situation: The colonel had agreed to an exchange of his hostages, the Aiforian noblewomen, Lady Andriana Lesto and Lady Alissma Turnwaite, for a ship to take him and his men off Jivaro. But a trap was laid by Ambassador Heisst Wenghorn and his fellow Aiforians. They engaged the colonel's combined force of Corpse and Ricer professionals and the Shuar. An experienced soldier, Colonel Sparks had prepared for betrayal and hid the hostages well back in the jungle. When he realized the trap had been sprung, the colonel ordered his forces to fight back while he made sure the hostages were secure. They were not, as I

already knew. As ordered by the colonel, the Martian, Buurk, and I had remained with the hostages under the protection of Red Salinsky (who was mad as a hornet at not being on the front lines with the colonel). Soon after the trap was sprung at the main landing site, Lord Lesto arrived at the hostage location to rescue his daughter. The battle between him and Red Salinsky was ferocious—the lightning-quick skill of an Aiforian nobleman against the brute strength of Salinsky. Lord Lesto adopted the strategy of leaping in to strike a blow and then jumping back to tire Salinsky out. His shrewdness paid off. He goaded the frustrated soldier into a bull rush, stepped aside, and knocked Salinsky's helmet off with a viciously effective swing of his blade. Salinsky dropped to the ground immediately....

Fragger glanced over at the unconscious Salinsky before resuming his reading. “Red, you idiot.”

...Red Salinsky was a dead man or would have been had not Tyco Radmuller's genmod creatures chosen that moment to attack and interrupt the death stroke. These monstrosities—genetically-modified giant silverback gorillas, baboons, and hellhounds—swarmed into the clearing, determined to kill us all. Lord Lesto fought them with remarkable skill. His daughter, Andriana, fought with equal ability. Buurk and I battled alongside them, but neither of us had any combat experience. We were fighting, but losing, until Fragger Sparks showed up. With his remarkable MASER abilities and our help, he drove the beasts off.

Sad to say, our relief didn't last long. Lord Lesto immediately attacked Sparks for the rape of his daughter, Andriana, and paid the price for his rash action. Forced to defend himself, Sparks ended up putting the blade of his sword through the nobleman's helmet in full sight of Andriana Lesto....

"Hey, Wik, how come you don't mention the fact that Andriana Lesto almost killed me in the fight? And has tried to damned near every other day?"

"Relax, colonel," Wik answered. "I said it was a draft, didn't I? That means I haven't gotten everything in yet."

Mollified, Fragger said, "Well, don't forget to mention your part in it. Without you, I'd be dead meat."

The vidman smiled ruefully. "And who'd believe that? A 1.2-meter vidman rescuing the feared Fragger Sparks?"

Fragger converted the height quickly into the old English measure and joked, "Four foot, my ass. You're lucky if you top three and a half feet."

"It was tall enough to help you out, wasn't it, colonel?"

"Amen to that, brother."

"I don't know what that means, either."

"It's a compliment, Wik. It means that no matter what anyone says, you're a hero in my book."

Appeased, Wik returned from Buurk's side and sat down next to Fragger. He stuck a food bar into his mouth and made a face.

"This stuff gets old in a hurry."

"Beats the hell out of starvation."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Wik, you're in the middle of the damned rain forest. That means there are plenty of fruits to eat. Go

gather some."

The vidman's eyes darted around the jungle. "I'm not getting anywhere out of your sight."

"Well, then, shut up about the food!"

For one of the few times since Fragger met him, Wik fell silent.

"Sorry, Wik," he said. "I'm tired and letting the situation get to me."

"It's okay, colonel. We all—"

Wik's head cocked to one side. "Something's different."

Fragger immediately came alert. "No sound. The jungle's gone silent. Radmuller and his creatures may be back. Wake Buurk and alert the others."

The Ranger powered up his sword and stood watch as Wik motioned the others into a defensive circle around the prone Salinsky.

A small voice escaped the vidman. "Colonel, there's no way we can survive another fight."

Alissma Turnwaite whimpered her agreement.

"There's always a way," Fragger said in a strong voice to reassure his party. "I'm a Ranger, and I always find a way. Just fight the way you did three days ago, and you'll be fine."

Andriana spoke sharply. "Maybe it's Wenghorn and his soldiers, Rerun. If he's here, you're a dead man, Rerun."

"You'd better hope so," Fragger said. "If it's Radmuller's creatures again, we'll all end up in bloody pieces."

"I don't care," she said. "As long as I get to see you die first."

"Charming," Wik muttered.

Fragger laughed. As long as one of his comrades had a sense of humor, there was hope. It meant Wik was keeping his wits about him.

His laugh was cut short when a severed head flew out of the jungle, landed with a bloody splat on the ground and rolled to his feet.

## Chapter 23

Fragger froze as another head thumped into the ground beside the first one. He nudged one over so he could see the face. Then he roared with laughter.

"Andriana, you're right. Wenghorn is here."

Fragger looked closely at the other head.

"And so is Tat."

The Ranger lowered his sword and yelled into the jungle, "Bucaram, you Shuar son of bitch, what took you so long?"

The uwishin popped up behind a tangle of liana vines and grinned broadly at him.

Fragger heard the sound of vomiting. He turned to see Alissma Turnwaite on her knees, emptying her stomach. Beside her, Andriana sat in white-faced shock. Buurk's knees buckled and he sank to the ground next to Red. Only Wik remained standing, his eyes wide in delighted disbelief.

"I told you there was a way, didn't I?" Fragger said to the vidman before whooping and running to grab Bucaram and lift him off his feet. Shuar warriors poured out of the jungle to surround them, shouting and celebrating.

Fragger set Bucaram down and gripped him by the shoulders. "I take back every word I ever said about you being ugly!"

"Colonel, I can't say the same for you. You get uglier every time I see you!"

"Ain't it the truth, Bucaram! But being ugly and alive beats the hell out of the alternative."

The uwishin surveyed the scene behind the Ranger. "Is everybody okay?"

"Red's hurt and in bad shape. He lost a battle with Lord Lesto."

"Lesto? Where is he?"

"Dead. I killed him."

"More good news," Bucaram said. "Although I don't think Lady Lesto will agree with me. She's hurt, as well?"

"Yeah, I broke her arm accidentally."

"Is she still trying to kill you?"

"You don't know the half of it."

"It's good to know that some things haven't changed."

"Thanks a lot!"

Bucaram grinned at him again. "My wives try to kill me all the time. Why should you be any different?"

"I don't think they're quite so dedicated to the task as Doctor Lesto is."



"True, colonel, very true."

"When did you hear my signal?"

"I didn't hear any signal, colonel. I didn't need one, anyway. The Aiforians heard it, and all I had to do was follow Wenghorn and Tat."

Fragger glanced down at the severed heads. "Obviously, you caught up with them at some point."

Bucaram nodded. "I did as you said. I waited in the jungle while Iso's forces engaged the Aiforian main body. When I saw Wenghorn lead a party away from the battle looking for you, my men and I followed them with no trouble. Elephants are quiet compared to these Aiforians. We harassed them every step of the way until they lost discipline. Then it was easy to pick them off."

"What about Iso? Is he okay?" Fragger asked.

"Fine and on his way back to our ship."

"What about the Aiforian ship?"

"Gone, colonel. Iso got on the commlink and told me he didn't have enough strength to take it."

"Damn! I knew it was a long shot, but still I hoped..."

"No time for regrets," Bucaram said. "It's time to celebrate and rest before we set out for the ship."

Fragger looked over at the unconscious Salinsky. "Red won't be doing any celebrating. I wish there were a way to get him back faster."

"There is none, colonel. And your brief time in the jungle has taught you one thing. Enjoy the moment since it may be your last. Come, I'll tend to Red while you and the others rest. But, first, you have one duty to perform."

"What's that?"

"Turn off the suit's signal. We don't need any uninvited guests for tonight's celebration."

## Chapter 24

The smell of roast pig woke Fragger. His mouth watered as he got up and joined the party around the fire. It wasn't a pig turning on the spit. It was a tapir. Chicha was being passed freely about the circle of Shuar, and Wik was in the midst of them, swilling the beer with his usual abandon. The two Aiforian women sat back in the shadows, frightened by all the drunken men but eating hungrily.

"Colonel!" Bucaram called. "We saved the tapir's rear end for you. As you say, it takes one to know one!"

A roar of laughter went up, and Fragger grinned as he sat cross-legged beside the uwishin. Bucaram sliced a piece from the tapir and handed it to him, along with a skin of beer. Fragger wolfed down the meat and chased it with a swig of the chicha. The strength of his hunger made him realize he'd get sick if he ate at too fast a pace. He forced himself to slow down by asking, "Have you set up sentry posts, Bucaram?"

The Shuar chieftain gave him an offended look. "Do you think I made it all the way here without proper precautions?"

Bucaram peered closely at Fragger, "You're still tired and not fully awake, colonel, or you wouldn't have asked me such a silly question. My men are in place all about our position."

"Sorry," Fragger said. "How's Red?"

"He seems better. I gave him a potion of headroot, and his shivering seems to have quit."

"That's good. Any sign of consciousness?"

"No."

Fragger glanced at Andriana and Alissma beyond the fire. Flame shadows danced on their drawn features.

"You've warned the men to leave the women alone?"

Bucaram laughed. "I have, not that there was any need to do so. They're convinced Lady Lesto is a witch—"

"They got that right," Fragger interjected.

"—and Lady Turnwaite, well, they think she'd be as worthless in bed as she is in the rest of her life. So, the women are safe."

Fragger took another slice of tapir meat and chewed it slowly as he asked, "Bring me up to date on what happened after I left the battle."

"They had many troops, colonel. They poured out of the ship like ants. But crazy ants! The Aiforians are fearsome soldiers in a mass attack. They swarmed at Iso and his men and would have overrun them easily if Iso had remained out in the open. But, of course, he didn't do that. Like all off-worlders, the Aiforians seem to underestimate us. Of course, I didn't see the entire fight, but Iso told me that he'd had a small force bait them with a 'panicked' retreat while the main body flanked them."

"Classic," Fragger said with satisfaction.

"Iso decimated the Aiforians until they made a retreat of their own back toward the ships. Our men followed them and fought under the heavy guns of the ships where they couldn't be reached by the enemy fire power."

"That sounds like Iso," Fragger said. "Always taking the fight to the enemy. Were there many casualties?"

"Very few," Bucaram answered. "He's very happy about that, of course, but he's also happy about something else."

"What?"

"He took prisoners before he retreated back into the jungle."

"I don't see any reason to be happy about prisoners," Fragger said. "It just means more mouths—"

He stopped as an impish grin grew on Bucaram's face.

"You're holding something back on me," the Ranger accused.

The uwishin nodded. "The prisoners are very special."

"How so?"

"They're both pilots."

"What? How? Pilots wouldn't be in the middle of the battle."

"Iso led a raiding party on board and, as he said, got lucky."

"Oh, my God! They're qualified to pilot our ship?"

"Yes."

"But will they cooperate, that's the question."

"They haven't got much choice."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it. Will we be able to trust them? Will we be able to—"

"Colonel, calm down. You're babbling."

Embarrassed, Fragger lapsed into silence.

"Loss of manhood is a powerful motivator for prisoners," Bucaram said.

The Ranger raised an eyebrow. "The most powerful I can think of. Has Iso's threat to cut their nuts off worked?"

"Iso tells me they're now most cooperative. Of course, as your ancient Earth saying goes, he's promised them a carrot as well as a stick."

"What's the carrot?"

"Freedom once your destination is reached."

"Do they believe that promise?"

"He gave them his word. More important, he gave them your word."

"I'm surprised they accepted it, Bucaram. With my reputation among the off-worlders, why would they trust my word?"

"Your reputation is black indeed, except it seems in that one respect. The propaganda machines may be in high gear, but soldiers know the real truth about each other."

"That's good."

"Yes, yes it is."

The sudden distance in Bucaram's tone made Fragger ask, "What's wrong, old friend?"

"You have a decision to make, colonel."

"What decision?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't"

"Don't be coy, colonel. We have pilots so we can now leave the planet, but the ship isn't big enough for all of us. So, the decision is, who goes and who stays. Have you thought about how you'll make the selection?"

Fragger sighed and took another swig of beer. "No, damn it, I haven't. I only know that I don't want to leave anybody behind."

"But you have to," the uwishin said. "The cold facts say there is no other way. However, I will make the decision a little easier for you."

"What are you getting at?"

"Should you get off the planet, I won't be going with you."

"I think I know the reason why, Bucaram, but I need to hear you say it."

The uwishin gestured toward the jungle. "My people were forcibly moved to this planet, and for that I will never forgive EarthCorp. But, for better or worse, it's the home of the Shuar now. When I was in the midst of battle, I watched the Aiforian soldiers fail to adjust to their surroundings. They flopped around like fish out of water. I realized then that if I were on their planet or any other one, I would be the same."

"We don't have to go to a planet like theirs," Fragger said. "We could find a jungle world like this one."

"It would be matter of chance, and you know it, colonel. There are no guarantees that we would reach such a planet."

"Guarantees are an illusion in this time, Bucaram."

"You're avoiding the facts. The dropship is too small for all of us, and I will not leave my family or any of my people behind. Besides—"

"What?"

"On a dropship, I would feel useless. I can pilot small ships, but, on large ones, I have no skills. Worse,

ships are cold places and confined. They're not warm like the jungle."

"You're the most adaptable man I know," Fragger argued. "Besides, there are no hellhounds on dropships on other planets. No slipsnakes. No silverbacks trying to tear you apart."

"They are fearsome enemies," the uwishin agreed. "But they are enemies I know. I can deal with them."

Fragger studied Bucaram closely. The Shuar's black eyes glistened moistly in the light from the fire.

"There's something more?"

"Yes. My wives have refused to go with me."

"You could order them to go."

Bucaram brushed at his eyes and laughed. "You still do not understand the Shuar, do you? We are families who make decisions together. In time of war, I am their leader. Otherwise, we are—"

"A democracy?"

"Yes. A fractious one, sometimes, as all families are, but a democracy nonetheless."

Around them, singing rose, accompanied by the beating of monkey-skin drums. It was a celebration of victory, but to Fragger, it had the tone of sadness.

"There is an alternative, colonel," Bucaram said after they'd listened for a few moments.

"Which is?"

"You could stay."

"It wouldn't work, and you know it," Fragger said. "If I stay, the attacks will never end. The governments of the Renowned Systems have endless resources. Your people would be destroyed, if not the entire planet. I don't think I could hold all my men together, either. They long for familiar homes, just as you do."

Bucaram swung his body toward Fragger and said earnestly, "We've fought the off-worlders very successfully. There's no reason to believe that we can't continue doing the same. They don't know the jungle as we do."

"Eventually, they'll learn," Fragger said. "And if they can't fight as well in the jungle as we do, they'll find someone who can. People from another jungle planet. It will only be a matter of time."

He paused and added, "We can't afford to deceive ourselves with foolish fantasies."

The uwishin nodded. "Well, we will welcome those soldiers of yours who decide to stay. How do you plan to choose who goes and who doesn't?"

Fragger shrugged. "I'll call the men together, explain the situation and ask for volunteers. Then, I don't know ... a lottery?"

"It will be a difficult decision, colonel. I don't envy you."

"Let's forget it for now," Fragger suggested.

"A good idea," Bucaram agreed. "We've won a great victory and should celebrate. The Aiforians fought

bravely, but we fought better and harder."

"I knew their soldiers would fight well, but what about Wenghorn and Tat, Bucaram? How did they fight?"

"Very well, to my surprise," the uwishin answered. "The ambassador, in particular. He fought with considerable ferocity and skill. I did him the honor of killing him myself."

"A kind show of respect," Fragger said. "Did he have a chance to say anything before he died?"

"As a matter of fact, he did. Before I took his dagger from him and cut his throat to end his misery, he spoke. He said to tell you, 'I hope Lady Lesto cuts your tiny balls off and has them for breakfast.'"

Fragger laughed and lifted his chicha in salute to the fallen ambassador. "A final insult! Good for Wenghorn. He died like a man."

Bucaram raised his own skin of beer. "To brave warriors. They bring honor to the living and dead."

Fragger drank deeply and felt the beer take the deep ache out of his bones.

Bucaram rose, saying, "Enough talk of death. Let's join the others. As always, I will outsing and outdance you."

"Since I don't sing or dance, victory will be yours," Fragger said. "So, I think I'll just sit here and watch."

For a brief moment, he thought of pulling Bucaram back down and continuing the argument for the uwishin to leave the planet. He dismissed the thought quickly as the Shuar leader joined the dancers around the fire.

He knew Bucaram's decision was final.

And it's right! he told himself fiercely.

This time, it was his turn to brush at his eyes.

## Chapter 25

Days later, Fragger led the group into the clearing around the dropship. Despite the wind and rain swamping the area, Iso strode out to meet them with a grin as big as the ship itself.

"Colonel, how was the journey?"

"It was so easy I nearly didn't know what to do with myself. No gorillas, no slipsnakes, no baboons. Nothing. It allowed us to make good time. What's your situation?" Fragger asked as he took in the scene about the dropship. Guards marched the soggy perimeter. The on-duty gun crews manned their cannons and sprayguns and were at the ready while the off-duty crews oiled and greased their personal weapons beneath dripping tarps.

"Everything is in order here," Iso said. "A few attacks, random and unorganized. Either Radmuller is dead, or he's regrouping."

"He's not dead, Iso. He escaped me in the fight with Lesto so consider him to be regrouping. What about the pilots you captured? Are they in good shape?"

"Yes. I made it clear to the men that they're our ticket off the planet so they've been treated well by everyone."

"Good."

Iso's smile dropped as he looked beyond Fragger at Salinsky lying on an improvised stretcher. "What about Red?"

"Still unconscious, but Bucaram has been treating him with a liquid concoction of headroot, something called cat's claw, and other herbs only an uwishin knows about."

Iso was skeptical. "Do you think they'd do any good on a head injury?"

"I don't know, but I've learned to respect the Shuar's medicinal knowledge. It beat doing nothing, anyway. Still, we need to get him into sick bay and find out what's going on with his brain."

Iso ordered two men to carry Red into the dropship, then asked, "What about the others?"

Fragger looked back at the Aiforian women. They were sweaty and dirty with their clothes torn by the jungle and the battle with Radmuller's creatures. Exhaustion had written itself deep into their faces. Grimacing, Andriana clasped the broken arm with her free hand. Beside them, Buurk sat, gingerly leaning against a tree and rubbing at his own wound.

"Andriana and Buurk need to go to sick bay as well, Iso."

"The enemy injured them?"

"Not exactly," Fragger answered. "I'll explain later."

"What about the vidman?" Iso asked, nodding toward Wik who sat, eyes closed, next to the Martian.

Fragger chuckled. "Ain't nothing wrong with him that a skin or two of chicha won't cure."

Iso raised an eyebrow. "Really? Of all your party, he's the one I least expected to come back."

"Don't let the size fool you. He's tougher than a coconut and has balls about the same size."

Iso greeted this remark with a dubious look.

"Iso, he took on a slipsnake to save my life."

Surprise replaced the doubt in Watanabe's eyes. "Him!? He wouldn't make an appetizer for a beast like that. Are you sure you're not telling me one of your Ranger tall tales?"

"Every word is true," Fragger said. In an amused voice, he added, "Wik is quite proud of his actions. He wants to be called 'Snake.'"

Iso laughed. "It sounds like he's earned the honor, so 'Snake' it is. Who would have thought it? The little man is a warrior. You'll have to tell the story for us all."

Fragger chuckled. "Don't worry. Wik will be sure to tell it."

"With courage like that, he'd make a good candidate for the Rangers. Are you going to ask him to join?" Iso asked.

"No, I think we'll let him make the decision by himself. In his own way, he's prickly proud and would probably think we were trying to compromise his journalistic integrity. Just make sure everyone treats him with respect. I'm sure that he's had little enough of that in his life."

"And that will suck him into our life," Iso said with approval. "Shrewd thinking, Colonel."

"At the moment, I'm not thinking at all. We all need rest. Especially Andriana."

"Why her? She's injured, but her wound doesn't look as bad as the rest."

"She's pregnant."

"You dog! Congratulations!"

"Save it. She's sworn to kill the child."

"Oh."

"Get her fixed up, Iso, and then send her under guard to the Shuar women. They'll make sure she doesn't do anything to harm the child. Better yet, get Alissma Turnwaite over here."

Iso ordered a corporal to fetch the woman. The soldier came back with the bedraggled Aiforian noblewoman. Between strands of hair plastered against her face, a venomous stare fixed itself on Fragger. The look had become so common he thought it had frozen into her features.

"Alissma, you're going with Andriana. You'll both stay with the Shuar women. And I have a job for you."

"I won't do anything for you, Rerun!"

"You don't have any choice in the matter. I want you to take care of Andriana."

"I'm already doing that, you idiot!"

"I mean I don't want her hurting herself or the baby."

"She hasn't tried anything yet," Alissma said. "She wants you to die first."



"I'm well aware of that, but she's tired now and she can't get at me, so she may want payback any way she can."

Alissma shrugged. "It's none of my business."

"It is now."

"I can't stop her if she wants to harm herself."

"Yes, you can."

A smirk curled her lips. "Why, if I fail, what are you going to do to me that you haven't already done."

"Kill you."

The ethnologist paled. "You're not serious?"

"It's a promise," Fragger said. "And I always keep my promises."

"You bastard! You might as well execute me on the spot. Andriana does what she wants, and I can't stay awake twenty-four hours a day."

"Then I suggest you use your head," Fragger said. "Tell her what will happen to you if she kills the baby. Organize the Shuar women so she's never alone. I know you'll do a good job. Your life depends on it."

After the ethnologist left on shaky legs, Iso studied Fragger for a long moment before saying, "This baby means a lot to you. Are you missing your family again?"

Fragger nodded. "Yes. I've always been a family man. I like children. I love them. And, who knows, this one may be special if the genes carry my MASER abilities."

"I understand," Iso said. "Everyone wants to live forever. That's what children are for."

"So, when are you going to have kids?" Fragger asked.

"Me? I'm a warrior, plain and simple. It wouldn't be fair to a woman or the child. Just another complication I don't need."

"That's all our life is about," Fragger said. "Complications. Don't let them stop you. Besides, it's a great way to aggravate your enemies. Just imagine, a bunch of little Watanabes wreaking havoc on the Renowned Systems."

"We have a mission to accomplish first," Watanabe reminded him.

"What's that?"

"Staying alive."

"A good reminder," Fragger admitted. "All right, let's get everyone taken care of and we'll worry about your love life later."

"There's another mission you have to accomplish, colonel."

"And that would be?"

"Sleep. I want you fully alert to deal with our next step, and that's getting off this planet and staying in one

piece while we do it."

"You going to tuck me in, Iso?" Fragger asked.

"If I tuck my sword up your ass, you won't sleep at all."

The Ranger tried to laugh, but a wave of weariness cut the effort off. "We'll have another issue to settle, Iso. We can't fit everyone on the ship. Some of the men will have to stay."

"There'll be time enough to decide that later. Get inside, colonel."

Fragger accepted the order and walked toward the ship.

It's good to be home, such as it is.

When he woke up, Red was the first thing on his mind. Fragger rolled out of his bunk, cursing the deep ache in his bones. A buzz sounded from the door before he had finished putting his shirt on.

"Enter," he said.

The door slid open. A young, blond private stood holding a tray with sliced bananas and pineapples and a cup of headroot tea.

Damned kid looks like Opie of Mayberry, Fragger thought as he automatically appraised the soldier's bearing. Except for the eyes. They look haunted.

"What's this, private?" he asked. "I didn't order any breakfast."

"Sergeant Watanabe's orders to me, sir."

"Take it away. I'm not hungry."

The soldier shifted uncomfortably but stayed put.

"Son, what's the problem?"

"Sir, the sergeant said I was not to leave until you'd eaten your breakfast."

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, I'm countermanding that order. Get your ass out of here, private."

The soldier squirmed harder, but held his ground.

"Did you hear me, private?" Fragger said. His joints twinged from the accumulated actions of so many battles, and the pain made him irritable.

I may have MASER abilities, but the body is still all too human, damn it!

"Yes, sir!"

"Then, move it!"

Beads of sweat broke out on the soldier's forehead. "I can't, sir. Watanabe said he'd have my 'guts for garters' if I came back with a full tray."

"You don't know what garters are, do you, private?"

"No, sir, but I caught the meaning."

"Well, far be it from me to have you face the wrath of Watanabe. Put the tray down. I'll eat it."

The private obeyed, placing the tray on the small table against the bulkhead opposite the bunk. He moved next to the door and assumed a parade rest position.

Fragger glared at him. "Why aren't you leaving, private?"

"Sergeant Watanabe's orders, sir. I'm not to leave until you've eaten all the food."

"Goddamn it, I don't require a nursemaid, especially one as ugly as you!"

The private was sweating so hard Fragger thought he might dissolve on the spot, but the boy remained in position.

Relenting, the Ranger sat down and took up a fork. Ready to dig into a piece of pineapple, he noticed a bite taken out of it. He surveyed the plate quickly. There was a bite taken out of every piece of food.

"Did you eat some of my food, private?"

"Yessir!"

"You can't be that hungry. I feed my soldiers well."

"Orders, sir."

Fragger glanced down at the food and back up at the soldier. "You're my poison taster?"

"Yessir!"

"Well, you're still alive so I assume I'm safe in eating this."

"Yessir."

Fragger ate slowly while he kept a steady gaze on the soldier. When he was finished, he sipped at the headroot tea. Before long, it was reducing the intensity of the aches and pains bedeviling his joints.

Putting the cup down, he asked the soldier, "Okay, son, spill it. How did you fuck up?"

"Fuck up, sir?"

"Mess up. Make a mistake. Don't play coy with me, private! What's your name?"

"Riig, sir."

"Well, Riig, tell me!"

The private's face reddened with shame as the words burst out of his mouth, "In the battle at Radmuller's base, I panicked, sir. I ran."

"What happened?"

"The gorillas, sir, the baboons ... they came at our position hard and overran us ... because of me."

"You were on point?"

"Yessir. I froze and failed to warn my squad in time."

"How many were killed?"

"Fi ... five, sir."

Fragger restrained an impulse to rise and deck the soldier.

Physical force is a tactic used by incompetent commanders, he reminded himself.

"Had you run before, Riig?"

"Sir?"

"You've been with me all this time in the jungle. Did you freeze in previous actions?"

"No, sir!"

"Are you telling me the truth, private?"

Riig met Fragger's eyes for the first time. "Yes!"

"Why do you think you broke this time, Riig?"

The private blinked back tears before answering. "I ... don't know, sir. All of a sudden, it seemed like they'd never stop coming."

This isn't about punishment at all, Fragger realized. Iso's sending me a message. Time to get off the planet. As if I didn't know that already. The men are tired. But a poison taster? I'm not some damned king or other piece of royalty garbage. Or is that another message? Another traitor in our midst trying to kill me?

The Ranger shook his head to get rid of the thoughts and reminded himself, Paranoia is the first step to command paralysis.

"Sir, it won't happen again, I promise!"

"Damned right, it won't!" Fragger barked.

Riig snapped to attention. "Sir, I wish to be executed."

"Don't be so damned melodramatic," Fragger said. "Besides, that'd be the easy way out."

"It's better than being shunned by my buddies, sir. No one will talk to me!"

Fragger stood and walked to the private. "Riig, every soldier has his breaking point. You found yours. You can wallow in self-pity or regain the respect of your squad members."

"How, sir?" Riig asked in anguish.

"You already know the answer to that."

"I don't think I can wait until the next battle, sir. This is killing me."

"It's making you stronger, Riig, that's what it's doing. Until the next fight, accept your punishment like a man."

"Yessir."

"Promise me one thing, Riig."

"Anything, sir!"

"When you do fight, don't do anything foolishly heroic. That's just another form of suicide. Instead, fight effectively. Kill the enemy, not yourself. I haven't got room in my ranks for stupid soldiers, only professionals."

"Yessir!"

"Now, take the tray and get out of here."

Riig grabbed the tray and hurried from the room.

Fragger followed the private out the door and went to sick bay. When he entered, he saw Buurk studying the monitor on a medical device above Red's head.

"How's he doing?" he asked the medic.

"I'm no expert at this, colonel," Buurk answered. "But, as far as I can tell, the swelling within Red's thick head is going down."

"You've never used that machine before?" Fragger asked in alarm.

"Of course not, but it's a combat version of a neurological healer."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you do some simple programming, and it runs itself."

Fragger studied the prone form of Red. Salinsky's face seemed less pale, and the fits of shivering had disappeared. Still, the Ranger wasn't sure about Buurk's actions. As wonderful as it was, the medicine of the future unnerved him at times. He voiced that concern to the medic.

"Are you sure you should have undertaken this procedure?"

Buurk scowled his irritation. "What choice did I have? I had to get the swelling down. I had only two other choices. Let nature take its course and hope for the best or let Doctor Lesto work on him. I don't think you would have preferred either course."

"Sorry," Fragger said. "I'm just worried about Red."

"There's nothing you can do here, colonel. Red will wake up when he wakes up. I'll inform you as soon as he regains consciousness."

"All right," Fragger said and turned to leave. Buurk's voice caught him before he got to the door.

"Thanks, colonel."

"For what?"

"For everything out there in the jungle."

"You acquitted yourself well," Fragger said. "Amazing what a man can do when his life is on the line, isn't

it?"

"I still don't like killing, colonel. I just want you to know that."

Fragger smiled. As always, the big Martian struggled with his conscience. "I hope not. It's not your job, and I won't ask you to do it, except when your life is on the line."

Buurk hesitated. "I only bring it up because it seems Wik has acquired a real taste for it. I don't want to end up like him."

"Believe me, there's no chance of that," Fragger said. "Soldiering isn't in your blood."

"I'm worried that Wik will go beyond soldiering and into killing for the sheer pleasure of it, colonel."

"Point taken," Fragger said. "I'll do my best to keep him out of trouble."

"He's taken to calling himself 'Snake,' Buurk reminded him.

"A large ego in such a small body is dangerous, I agree. I'll let him know that he's a vidman first."

The medic snorted. "Snake!"

Fragger hid a grin as he left sick bay. Buurk's tone said he was as annoyed by Wik's grab for attention as he was by concern for the vidman's well-being.

On the way to his office, he instructed an orderly to find Iso. Moments after he was settled behind his desk, Watanabe entered.

"Bring me up to speed on the situation," Fragger said.

"No attacks on our position, colonel, but there's a lot of angry commlink chatter among the ships in orbit."

"How can you tell that? Aren't the messages encrypted?"

"Either they're still not taking us seriously, or they're trying to deceive us into thinking they're in disarray," Iso answered.

"Which is true, in your opinion?"

"The second. Patrol flights have increased dramatically, trying to penetrate the ship's chameleon screen. But, it's also true when you have that many men and that much firepower in orbit, there's a tendency to get overconfident."

Fragger digested this information before asking, "Where's Andriana?"

"With the Shuar women, as you ordered. Lady Turnwaite is keeping a close eye on her since she values her life highly. When she comes back to the ship to pick up food and supplies, the Shuar women assume that duty."

"Only the women?"

Iso shook his head. "I've got guards posted about their encampment as well. Dr. Lesto's not going anywhere."

"Good. What about the pilots you captured? Where are they?"

"Safely in the brig."

"Have them brought here now. Let's talk while we wait for them."

Iso spoke an order into his commlink, then asked, "About what, colonel?"

"Don't you 'colonel' me, Iso. I know why you sent Private Riig to me. You wanted the boy straightened out. But assigning him as a poison-taster, for God's sake? Are you serious?"

"Absolutely."

"We've got another traitor in our ranks?"

"Not as such."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that word has gotten around that some of the men will have to stay on the planet."

"Damn it, who told them?"

"No one told them, as far as I know. They've figured it out because it was obvious in the first place. Someone is not happy."

"But poisoning? What proof do you have of that?"

"A cook died. He was preparing your food."

"It could have been poor handling of the food," Fragger suggested. "It wouldn't be the first time."

Iso shook his head in the negative. "He dropped dead on the spot, colonel. You don't die immediately from food poisoning."

"Maybe he had a bad heart, something genetic, and didn't know about it."

"Not a chance," Iso said. "Bucaram said it was the frog poison they use on the tips of blowgun darts, and he's the one who should know the symptoms. Batrachotoxin, according to Buurk and the medical computer. A dose of 100 to 200 micrograms will kill you. That's equivalent to two or three grains of salt. It's potent, and there's no antidote."

"Jesus!" Fragger said. "And you assigned Riig to taste my food? You're a hard bastard."

Iso shrugged. "Better him than you, colonel. You're our ticket off this planet and into whatever life we can achieve if we survive. Besides, Riig will prefer combat after this experience. Any soldier hates not being able to fight back, and you certainly can't do that against poison."

"You said you thought our soldiers were involved. Poison suggests that one of the Shuar is in on it," Fragger said.

"I said our soldiers *might* be involved, but I think it's unlikely. I think it's equally unlikely that Shuar warriors are involved. Bucaram knows his people and says none of his warriors did it."

"Shit and double shit!" Fragger swore. "All right, control access to the kitchen and campfires outside the ship carefully."

"I've already taken precautions," Iso said. "I've also got my non-coms stiffening discipline."

"Good. I'll call a meeting to hash out the whole matter of who's leaving and who's staying. Right now, there's nothing more to be done on that subject so the next order of business is the *Aiforian* pilots. Are they here?"

Iso checked his commlink and nodded.

"Have them brought in."

Iso opened the door and gestured the pilots in. Fragger stifled a chuckle as the first man entered. He was the blond twin to Iso, short and squat, but instead of Iso's bulldog jaw and overhanging brow, he had a basset hound's long face and large ears. Fragger half expected him to trip over the ears as Iso directed him to a seat.

The second pilot's physical appearance reminded Fragger of the fighter jocks he'd known on Earth. The man was slim, fit and medium-height and every inch of it was suffused with cockiness. In contrast to his Caucasian partner, he was black with a shaved, hairless skull, a nose as broad and flat as a shovel, and brown eyes that locked immediately onto the Ranger's.

"Names?" Fragger asked.

"Sturl," Basset hound answered.

"It's on my uniform or can't you read, Rerun?" his partner said.

"Quite an attitude for a man in your position ... Ranglin."

"My attitude is none of your business, Re—"

A sudden cuff alongside the head from Iso cut the sentence short.

"You'll address the colonel with respect and by his title."

"I have no—"

Fragger shook his head as Iso raised his hand again. "You're not going to beat arrogance out of this one, Iso. Obviously, he comes from Aiforian nobility where they've been bred to be fools."

Ranglin bristled at the tone.

"I'm curious, though," Fragger said. "Every Aiforian I've seen so far has been Caucasian stock like your friend here. You're black."

"Thank you for stating the obvious," Ranglin said as he rubbed at the spot where Iso had struck him. "However, my ancestry is none of your business. All you need to know is that we are an honorable house."

Fragger shifted his gaze to Sturl. "That true?"

The pilot nodded his hound face glumly.

"Interesting," Fragger said. "On a planet full of blue-eyed Viking stock, you have black royalty. I'll bet you all get along like two scorpions in a bottle."

Ranglin sneered. "We have none of your ancient prejudices about race."



"But you've come up with plenty of new ones to replace them, haven't you?" Fragger said.

"One can only have prejudices toward human beings, Rerun."

Fragger stopped another blow from Iso. "Well, whether you consider me human or not is beside the point. Right now, I have your noble nuts in a metaphorical vise although I can make I get a real vise of up here real fast."

Sturl blanched at the threat. Ranglin maintained the sneer on his lips, but a rapid blinking of his eyes said the threat had hit home.

"So, you're going to pilot this ship off the planet for me. In exchange, you will live and go free at a time of my choosing."

"Of your choosing?" Ranglin asked. "That could be forever."

"Believe me, none of us would want you around for long," Fragger said. "We've already had far too much experience with *Aiforian* nobility. I'd rather deal with slipnakes and protocrocs. They have more honor."

Ranglin pointed a finger at Fragger. "If I could get you alone for a second, I'd teach you the meaning of respect and honor."

"If you could get me alone for a second, you'd be dead within that second. Lord Lesto already found that out."

"Lord Lesto was no friend of mine," Ranglin said. "But he was a great warrior, so you lie. He's not dead. A Rerun like you couldn't kill him. I don't believe all the stories about your abilities. They're just good propaganda designed to instill fear into your enemies."

Fragger sighed. *At times, I feel like a military Jesus, doomed to walk on water time and time again to prove to the faithful that I am what I say I am.*

He rose, accelerated around the desk, picked Ranglin up out of his chair and slammed him against the bulkhead. The Aiforian's eyes barely had time to bulge before Fragger was back behind his desk. Ranglin dropped to the floor, disbelief frozen into his face.

Fragger pointed his own finger at the nobleman. "Your balls will be gone even faster if you don't cooperate. Am I clear?"

Ranglin's head bobbed rapidly up and down as if a spring had replaced the muscles in his neck.

"I can't hear you!" Fragger barked.

"Ye..yes."

"And you, Sturl. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"All right. Pick yourself up off the floor, Ranglin, and let's talk. Iso, order some headroot tea for all of us. I believe these gentlemen could use its soothing qualities."

Gingerly rubbing the back of his head, Ranglin got back in his chair.

When the tea arrived and was poured, Fragger said, "Let's get down to business, shall we? I need you two to not only get us off the ground and off the planet, but through the blockade. In exchange, as I promised, I'll set you free. Now, how are you going to accomplish this mission?"

"I don't see how it can be accomplished, Re..uh, colonel," Sturl answered.

"I didn't ask you how it couldn't be accomplished. I don't want to hear any negatives."

"But, there are only negatives!" the pilot persisted. "Jivaro is encircled by a combined fleet of the best ships the Renowned Systems have to offer."

"If they were truly the best, you two wouldn't be sitting here," Iso interjected.

Both pilots flushed and drank the tea to cover their embarrassment.

"Now, how can we do it?" Fragger insisted. "I want options."

"There's only one option, and that's stealth," Ranglin spoke, gesturing at his surroundings. "There's no way this ship can stand up against a single magnetic accelerator cannon, let alone multiple batteries of them."

"Stealth seems to be an Aiforian specialty," Fragger said. "How do you propose to mask our presence from the enemy?"

"I'll have to study the ship's capabilities first," Ranglin answered.

"Don't lie to me. This is an Aiforian ship. You know its capabilities well."

"No, colonel, I don't. This isn't a standard dropship, remember? It was the personal ship of Lord Lesto, and it may have enhancements I'm not aware of. Lesto was an extremely accomplished engineer as well as a pilot."

Fragger shifted his eyes to Sturl and pinned him with a cold gaze. "Do you agree?"

"It's very likely, sir."

"All right, I'll accept that for now."

"But you'll need more than that," Ranglin continued.

"Why?"

"Because it's difficult to hide the signature of a ship lifting off the surface. The ambient clutter from the jungle will disguise it for awhile, but eventually we will clear it and all electronic eyes, believe me, are on the surface of the planet."

"What do you suggest?"

"A diversion of some sort to gain precious time."

"It's a tactic I've used before," Fragger said. "By now, your commanders are expecting it. If they're worth anything, they've studied my thinking as much as I've studied theirs."

Ranglin shrugged. "It's the only idea I can come up with."

"What kind of diversions then?"

"That's your area, Colonel. I'm a naval officer. Jungle warfare is not within my realm of knowledge."

Fragger turned back to the other pilot. "Sturl, you haven't contributed much to this conversation. What are your ideas?"

"I'm a pilot, not a military planner but I'd recommend more of the same. I don't see any other way."

"What do you think, Iso?" Fragger asked.

"I agree."

"All right, then," Fragger said, making a quick decision. "Iso, have these two taken to the bridge to study the ship's capabilities. Ask Bucaram to join them."

The Aiforian pilots looked blank at the mention of the Shuar's name.

"Bucaram is an experienced Shuar pilot," Fragger explained, "although not on this class of ship. He'll monitor your actions."

Bravado made a return to Ranglin as he sniffed, "The Shuar are not known as outstanding spacers by any stretch of the imagination."

"Perhaps," the Ranger said, "but he may surprise you, and he has one other outstanding asset you'll find interesting should you attempt to warn the ships in orbit."

"What's that?" Ranglin asked.

"He's a Shuar. He likes to shrink heads and would love to add yours to his belt."

Both pilots went pale.

Iso summoned guards. As the pilots got up to leave, Fragger added, "If I were you, I'd tread very carefully with Bucaram and be completely honest with him. If you aren't, he'll eat your guts for breakfast before he shrinks your heads."

When the two men were gone, Iso chuckled. "You're certainly turning out the bullshit today."

"Just wanted to head off any heroic actions," Fragger said. "Let's talk. What do you think of the idea of another diversion?"

"Probably our only option. The question is, what kind and what will it take to mount one? Our resources are limited."

"Isn't that the truth?" Fragger said, as he sipped at his tea. "But we all want to get off this planet, don't we? Except for Bucaram."

"What? He's not coming with us?"

"No."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me in the jungle. This is his home. His wives have told him they won't go."

"Shit!" Iso swore. "I was just growing to like the little bastard. He's a helluva warrior. So are all the Shuar. And I'm not sure we can afford to lose them."

"We don't have a choice in the matter, do we?" Fragger asked. "But his decision may work to our advantage."

Iso raised a questioning eyebrow. "How?"

"With the subject we just discussed. A diversion."

## Chapter 26

After they'd sketched out basic plans for a diversion, Iso left. Fragger leaned back in his chair, grateful for a moment to himself.

"There's too damned much going on," he complained to the empty room. "Escape plans, poisoning plots ... shit, there's no end to it."

The longing for his wife and children pushed its way into his head again. He shook the thought from his head quickly.

Six hundred year old remembrances are useless. Worse, it brings the tears too close to my eyes, and military leaders don't cry.

"This one damned near did," he said to the room again.

Still, I long for someone to talk to, he admitted to himself. Someone who's not a soldier. A woman.

He knew Bucaram would bring him a woman if he asked him to. But it wasn't the same. Fragger grunted in amusement.

Some soldier you are! You're supposed to be a tough, whoring, oversexed sonuvabitch, and all you want is a wife to come home to.

Even if he did have a woman in mind, he knew it wouldn't be fair to her. A wife and family would end up as pawns in the lethal game he was playing.

"And dead too," he said.

Growling in exasperation, he left the office, knowing action was the only antidote to thoughts that were leading him nowhere.

Outside the ship, he inspected the troops, snarling and giggling petty offenders whose weapons weren't clean and upbraiding his NCOs for not maintaining discipline. Muttered curses rose in his wake. He didn't care. It was always good to keep soldiers alert and if they were pissed at him, they'd be pissed at any enemy who showed up. He circled the defenses until he was back near the main hatch. He was ready to re-enter the ship when he heard peels of laughter. Turning, he saw Wik in the midst of a knot of soldiers and listened to their conversation for a moment. It was clear the little vidman was reliving his moment of glory in the jungle, expertly pantomiming the slipsnake that had nearly killed the Ranger.

He should be good at the pantomime, Fragger thought. It's only the hundredth time he's done it since we got back.

"Wik!" he shouted. "Get your ass over here! You men, get back to your positions unless you want latrine duty for the next week!"

The soldiers scattered, leaving a peeved Wik in their wake. He showed his annoyance at being interrupted by slowly strutting like a banty rooster in Fragger's direction.

"What do you want, colonel?"

It wasn't a question. It was an arrogant demand.

"Let's talk."

Wik stopped close to Fragger, his fists against his small hips. "About what?"

"In my office. Now!"

Fragger walked toward the ship, then turned when he realized that the vidman wasn't following him.

"Now!" he said again.

"I'm not a soldier, colonel. You can't order me about."

"You little prick, do as I say."

"No."

Fragger glared at Wik. The vidman was as stuffed with self-importance as a Thanksgiving turkey. Fragger quickly checked the reaction of the soldiers standing within earshot. Some of them had smirks on their faces. Others stifled laughter. All of them were waiting to see how he reacted to insubordination.

With a swift motion, Fragger clipped Wik across the chin, dropping him to the ground. Angry whispers broke out among the soldiers.

"Any man care to step up?" Fragger challenged.

When no one answered, he ordered, "Get back to your posts!"

He scooped the unconscious Wik from the ground and carried him into the ship and to sickbay. Bent over the equipment monitoring Red, Buurk looked up in surprise as he entered and asked, "What happened to our hero?"

"I decked him," Fragger said and answered the medic's question before it escaped his lips. "Because he was insubordinate, that's why. I think he's okay. Just check him out to make sure."

"Put him on the table over there," Buurk said.

"How's Red doing?" Fragger asked as he laid the vidman down.

"The good news is that there's no brain damage."

"And the bad news?"

"There is no bad news," Buurk said as he walked over and manipulated Wik's jaw, checking for fractures. The vidman groaned at the effort. "Just slow news. He's still unconscious."

"Is he going to be—?"

"Functional? Colonel, you've asked me that question a million times, and my answer is still the same. We won't know until he wakes up. Now, here's some immediate good news on Wik. You didn't break his jaw. No surprise there. It's as thick as his head."

"The idiot challenged me in front of the men. I couldn't let the action stand."

"Wik challenged you?"

"Not me, personally. My authority. Things are tense enough around here without having a civilian question my position, especially one who barely reaches my belt buckle."

"Well, I won't say he didn't deserve it," Buurk said. "Lately, he's been more full of shit than a latrine. Still, I suppose it won't play well with the men. They like him."

"Command isn't about people liking you," Fragger snapped.

"Just stating a fact, colonel. Don't get bent out shape with me as well."

Fragger rubbed his hands over his eyes. "Sorry, Buurk. With everything going on, I'm not in a good mood. How's your own wound doing?"

The medic patted the side where Andriana had sliced him with the sword. "It's healing well. It wasn't the cut I was worried about; it was the potential for infection. The damned jungle is a Petri dish for every bacteria on the planet."

"Not to mention idiocy," Fragger said as Wik's moan drew his attention. The vidman's eyes fluttered open and stared blankly at the ceiling until they suddenly snapped into focus. The dwarf pushed himself onto his elbows, scowling at Fragger.

"You punched me! What the hell did you do that for?"

"For good reason."

"What do you mean, good reason? There was no reason at all!"

Spluttering, the vidman searched for more words and when none came, he burst out, "I saved your life!"

"Yes, you did, Wik. And you've been milking it for all it's worth since we returned to the ship. And I don't care if you save my life again. Nobody challenges my authority, especially a shrimp civilian."

Wik glared, then turned to Buurk for support. "That's real gratitude, isn't it?"

"Oh, shut up!" Buurk said. "If the colonel hadn't done it, I was next in line to put a fist in your face."

Wik gaped at the gentle Martian's uncharacteristic outburst.

"If you were a balloon," Buurk continued, "you'd have risen into the stratosphere, you've been spouting so much hot air. Here, take this pain killer and shut that big mouth of yours."

Wik accepted a glass of water, swallowed the pill, and glowered at both men.

Fragger pulled a chair next to the vidman and sat on it. "Let's have a heart-to-heart, Wik. Ever since you tasted combat, you've gotten too big for your britches. One battle doesn't make a soldier, or a hero, out of you. It's an insult to every soldier inside and outside this ship because they've put their lives on the line time and again and will continue to do so without claiming to be heroes. Do you understand me?"

When Wik snorted, Fragger grabbed his shirt and jerked the startled vidman close to his face. "I said, do you understand?"

"Yes," Wik said between gritted teeth.

Fragger released his hold. "Good. Right now, you hate my guts. No matter. I'm not running a popularity contest. That means if I catch any word of you showing insubordination, I'll throw you into the brig so fast your head will spin right off your body. Are we clear on that point, mister?"

"Yes," Wik said again, but a scowl remained on his face.

Fragger said, "I can see you're still pissed at me, so let me add a threat that will hit home with you. If you're in the brig, you won't be able to write a story, will you? And I know that would kill you faster than any slipsnake."

Outrage replaced the scowl. "You promised, colonel. You promised me a story!"

"And I'll keep that promise. You'll get your story as long as you keep that insufferable ego in check."

"You won't censor me?"

"We'll review it to make sure you're not inadvertently giving away vital information; otherwise, no."

"I have your word on that."

"Yes."

Wik drained the glass and handed it to Buurk. The motion made him wince and grab at his jaw. "You gave me a helluva headache."

"You'll live," Fragger said as he looked down at his watch to check the time. Another groan made him glance upward in irritation. "Wik, I didn't hit you that hard. Stop with the dramatics."

"That wasn't me making any noise, colonel," Wik protested.

All three men looked across the room to see Red moan and heave himself into a sitting position on his bed.

"Who the hell is making all the noise?" he complained.

Buurk hurried over to the corporal. "Red, you're back!"

Salinsky stared at him in bewilderment. "Back? Back where?"

"Here. In the ship."

Red blinked. "What's going on?"

Fragger rose and went to Salinsky, saying, "Red, you've been unconscious for a long time."

"Colonel? I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

Fragger put a hand on the corporal's shoulder. "Don't you remember? You fought Lesto."

"I did? Did I kill the sonuvabitch?"

"Afraid not. You came out on the short end of the stick. Lesto whacked you. Only your thick skull saved you."

Red touched the wound on his head and winced. "Shit. I don't remember it. So, the bastard is still alive?"

"No, he's not. I killed him."

Red nodded and winced again. "Well, that's good news. Man, my head hurts."

"You're not the only one with that problem today," Buurk said as he retrieved medication and handed it to Salinsky along with a glass of water. "Here, take these. It'll lessen the pain."



"I hope so," Red mumbled as he swallowed the pills. "So, what's the situation? Did we get the ship Wenghorn promised us?"

"No," Fragger answered. "But Wenghorn's dead, and Iso captured some pilots, so now we have the ability to leave the planet with our own dropship."

"More good news, I guess. But there isn't enough room on the ship for all of us, colonel. You know that."

"I know, Red, so we're going to have to leave people behind."

"Who?"

"I haven't decided yet. I need to talk to the troops."

"When?"

"Soon."

"I want to be there," Red said, sliding off the bed and on to his feet.

"Take it easy," Fragger advised. "You need time to recover."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not."

"What do you mean, colonel?"

"Red, you're swaying like a tree in a heavy breeze."

"I am?"

Red staggered, putting a hand on the bed to steady himself. "Maybe you're right."

He lurched backward and slid to the floor. Lying on his side, he stared glassy-eyed up at Fragger. "Whoa ... that feels better."

"Get him back up on the table," Buurk said.

He and Fragger each grabbed an arm and stood the corporal upright, letting his weight carry him back onto the bed. After they'd pulled Red up into a comfortable position, Fragger took Buurk aside and asked, "What just happened?"

"It may simply be that he got up too fast," the medic answered. "Or there may be damage we don't know about. Only time will tell."

"If he can't fight, it'll kill him. That's all he knows," Fragger said.

"I know, colonel. I'll keep an eye on him while he's here. You'll have to do the same when I discharge him."

"What symptoms do I look for?"

"It all depends on which area of the brain was affected. Just look for any behaviors that aren't typical of Red."

"Hey, what about me?" Wik demanded.

"You? What about you?" Buurk asked.

"Aren't you going to check me further?"

"No, aside from swelling, your jaw is fine. You can ice it down, but it'll still take time for the swelling to go down."

"Oh, great," Wik grumbled as he turned onto his stomach and pushed himself off the bed and on to the floor. "With Jivaron heat and humidity, that means it'll take months."

"Get a beer," Fragger suggested.

"There's not enough chicha on the planet to take care of it," the vidman complained as he walked out of the sickbay.

Fragger grinned at Buurk after Wik had left. "He bitches a lot, but did you notice his pace pick up when I mentioned a beer?"

Buurk laughed, then asked, "Do you think he'll be any more trouble, colonel?"

"I don't know. I hope not. I've got enough problems already. Any more cases of poisoning?"

"No one's shown up with any symptoms, and I haven't received any reports from Bucaram or the officers."

"Well, that's something, anyway."

"Colonel?"

"Yes?"

"You said some of us would have to stay behind?"

Fragger nodded. "That's what the situation dictates."

"Am I going to be one who remains?"

Fragger looked sharply at the Martian. "No, not a chance. You're the only medical person we have beyond the field medics. Why? You don't want to stay, do you?"

Relief loosened Buurk's stiff posture as he responded, "Oh, shit, no! As much as I respect Bucaram and the Shuar, I hate Jivaro. Nothing is ever dry. Everything rots, practically before your eyes. I was just afraid that..."

"You'd be one of the hard choices I have to make?"

"Yes."

Fragger gazed levelly at the Martian. "Buurk, make no mistake about it. If I had a command reason to leave you here, I'd do it. That's part of my job, unpleasant as it is. But, you're going with us. Just remember, it'll be far less safe getting off the planet than staying on it. You may wish I left you behind."

Buurk shook his head and plucked at his tattered shirt. "Not a chance. I'd rather die quickly in the cold of space than disintegrate on Jivaro like our uniforms."

"We've been through a lot together since we first met on Mars," Fragger said. "In that time, you've learned I'll do my best to keep you alive. Barring that, I can promise you a quick death."

"As odd as it sounds, colonel, that's a great relief to me."

"Hey, what are friends for?" Fragger joked as he left the sickbay.

He headed back of the ship and took time to conduct another quick inspection of the troops to make his presence felt again. He traded friendly insults with the soldiers who were tending properly to their weapons and, to get everyone's attention, braced a surly Earthcorp soldier who gave him a fuck-you salute. When he was satisfied with the discipline he saw, Fragger went down the trail to the Shuar women's encampment. Steam rose from the jungle floor courtesy of a morning rain and the scorching Jivaron sun. The oppressive heat and humidity made him feel as if he were breathing water rather than air. To keep his mind off the unpleasant climate, he inspected the guards posted about the site. He was glad to find their eyes were on the jungle and not the females. For the women and the children, Bucaram's men had built several thatched huts with palm trees forming support for the walls. Fragger had stayed in many of the homes during his months on Jivaro and had come to envy the cool and airy feel of them when he was confined in the cramped and indifferent surroundings of the ship. Outside one hut, the women were busy plucking manioc root from a pile, stripping it, and tossing into a pot of boiling water. Fragger approached and greeted them in his halting Shuar as a courtesy. He'd picked up enough of the language to make a fool of himself. The women giggled and offered him a gourd of chicha. He drank politely and thanked them. When he asked about the condition of Andriana Lesto, an elderly woman gave him a rapid update before pointing him toward a hut in the center of the clearing.

Fragger entered the home and let his eyes adjust to the dark interior. Andriana lay on a crude bed with her back propped up against the wall. Beside the bed was a small junglewood table with dishes and glasses scattered on its surface around a large bowl of manioc paste.

Probably constipation, Fragger guessed.

Following Bucaram's advice, he'd used the paste himself to relieve constipation after eating too much monkey meat, and it had worked well for him.

Seated beside the bed on a small tripod stool, Alissma Turnwaite fanned the doctor's sweating face with a palm leaf. She glared up at him and demanded, "What do you want?"

"To see how you're both doing."

"As if you really cared."

Fragger sat cross-legged on the floor. "I didn't come here to trade insults, Turnwaite. It's too hot for that."

Alissma's laugh was bitter. "You can go back into the coolness of the ship any time you want whereas you leave a pregnant woman out here in—"

"I didn't come to talk to you, either," Fragger interrupted and turned his attention to Andriana. "How are you feeling?"

She brushed a wet lock of black hair from her face but refused to look at him. She kept her eyes fixed on the ceiling as she spoke. "I'm pregnant with your monster of a child. How do you think I feel?"

"A Shuar woman just told me you've tried to kill yourself."

"Obviously, I didn't succeed."

"No," Fragger said. "But you may get your wish for death soon."

Andriana swung a hate-filled glance full onto him. "What do you mean?"

"We'll be leaving Jivaro. I have pilots now. And you'll be on the ship. We have to run the blockade, and we may not survive."

"Good," Andriana said, returning her gaze to the ceiling. "As long as you die along with me."

"Not to thwart your wishes, but I'll do my best to make sure both of us stay alive," Fragger said.

"What about me?" Alissma Turnwaite asked. "Am I going too?"

Fragger was unable to resist yanking the irritating woman's chain. "You're an ethnologist. I should think you'd jump at the chance to study the Shuar for an extended period of time."

Alissma's eyes grew wide with fear. "You can't—"

"Relax," Fragger said. "It was a joke. You're going too."

"It's a damned poor joke!"

"Believe me, I'd leave you here if I had a choice. But I don't want Aiforians killing more Shuar to find out where you are. You're not worth the lives of some very good people."

"Bastard!"

The hatred of the two women filled the hut with a heat that rose above the jungle's temperature. He found their attitudes as draining as the Jivaron climate, but he fought the urge to simply get up and leave. He knew he had to attempt to forge some kind of peace with Andriana. Her unborn child was important.

More important than I care to admit. Every man wants a legacy, and I sense this could be an important one.

"You know, you two spend a lot of energy despising me. You might—"

"There's a lot to despise," Andriana spat at him.

"As I was about to say, you might consider your child first. Assuming it's a boy, do you want him to come into the world full of rage and hatred?"

"If he comes into the world, yes! Because I will teach him to come after you without mercy."

"As a mere Rerun, I didn't think I was worthy of that kind of emotion."

"You're not!" Andriana said, jabbing a finger at her swollen belly. "But your actions are."

"We've had this conversation before," Fragger said wearily. "You were trying to kill me. And you're still trying to—"

"Real men, real human beings, don't rape women."

"Unless, of course, it's Aiforian men raping Rerun women," Fragger shot back.

Revulsion contorted Andriana's features into an ugly mask. "They wouldn't touch a Rerun female, Sparks! It'd be like ... bestiality."

"Then, you have a lot of beasts in the nobility," he said. "Conquerors can never resist rape. It's an age-old method of wiping out enemies and replacing them with your line."

Andriana twisted onto her side and vomited onto the floor.

"The thought makes you sick," Fragger said when she wiped her mouth and heaved herself back into a reclining position. "But you know what I say is true."

Andriana laid an arm across her eyes and didn't answer.

"As I was about to say, you're still trying to kill me. How did you get the poison into the food?"

"What poison?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You're a clever and resourceful woman."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Rerun, but whoever's doing it, I wish them luck."

"Poison is always the woman's choice of weapon. It's subtle and indirect."

"Give me a weapon, and I'll show you how direct I can be."

"You're the poisoner, doctor, there's no doubt about that. Somehow, you've suborned one of the Shuar women into sharing their knowledge of the frog poison. Or," he moved his gaze directly onto Turnwaite, "Alissma is doing your dirty work for you."

"I'm not doing any such thing!" the ethnologist said. "I wish I were, though."

The shifting of her eyes told Fragger she was lying.

"Subtlety has never been one of your strengths, Alissma. You've been going back and forth between here and the ship. It would be easy for you to slip poison into the food."

"Believe what you want, Rerun."

"Well, right now, Iso has one of my soldiers tasting my food for me, so it's a useless gambit."

"And you complain about us treating Reruns poorly," Andriana said with a harsh laugh. "You're willing to kill one of your men to save your own skin."

"It was a punishment for cowardice during a battle," Fragger said. "But I think he's learned his lesson. It's time to replace him. That's why I've chosen a new poison-taster, and it's you, Alissma."

Lady Turnwaite turned white.

"You'll do your best to keep my food from being contaminated because you know that Andriana wouldn't let even the life of a fellow Aiforian stand in the way of killing me. And I know you value your life too much to die for a Rerun."

Fragger paused to let the impact of his statement sink in and then added, "You two are coming back to the ship with me. The rules remain the same, however, Alissma. Well, almost the same."

"Almost the same?" Alissma asked. "What do you mean?"

"I promised you that if Andriana harmed herself or the baby, I'd kill you. I've changed my mind on that promise. Now, if she dies, I'll do something worse. I'll hand you over to my troops. And, if we get off this planet in one piece, then I'll hand you over to every Rerun I find. Do we understand each other?"

Alissma Turnwaite shivered as if a sudden chill had seized her in the midst of the Jivaron heat.

"I said, do we understand each other?" Fragger demanded.

In a small voice, she responded, "Yes, Rerun."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes ... colonel."

"Good. Then you two may return to the ship with me right now. Andriana, you'll be in the brig. It's the safest place on the ship. Buurk will look after you when Alissma is off performing her poison-tasting duties."

"You're a piece of slime!" Andriana shrieked.

"This piece of slime will wait outside," he said. "Be ready to go in five minutes. If you're not, I'll send in guards."

Andriana's cursing followed him as he exited the hut. The sound of breaking dishes and glass cut through the heavy air. Around the pot, the squatting Shuar women glanced quizzically up at him as he stood in the hot Jivaron sun and waited for the tantrum to subside.

He was ready to summon the guards when the doctor appeared in the doorway, supported by Alissma Turnwaite. A bloody rag was wrapped around Andriana's right hand. As Fragger strode over to help, the doctor swayed and reached out to the Ranger's shoulder to steady herself.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I cut myself on a piece of glass."

"Your rage doesn't accomplish much, does it?"

"No, no, it doesn't."

The uncharacteristic meekness of the answer raised alarms in Fragger's brain so he was ready when she suddenly let go of his shoulder and swiped the rag-covered hand toward his face.

Fragger accelerated instantly and knocked her arm away. The force of the blow spun the doctor around. Instinctively, she fought to keep her balance by grabbing at her companion. The rag slapped directly onto Alissma's face. The woman shrieked, knocked Andriana to the ground, and ran to the pot of boiling manioc. Ignoring the scalding heat, she frantically splashed water into her mouth.

Understanding reached Fragger's brain quickly.

Tree frog poison!

He glanced down in time to see Andriana sit up and raise the rag-covered hand toward her own face. He accelerated again and ripped the cloth from her hand. The action revealed a palm covered with a protective coating of manioc paste.

If she'd touched the poison in her effort to kill me, it wouldn't have reached her skin! She would have waited until I was dead before she tasted the toxin herself.

He threw the rag into the dirt and kicked it away.

A panicked gasping turned his attention back to Alissma. The Aiforian woman straightened up and clawed at her throat and her heart as if she could pull the poison out of her body with her fingers. She staggered, banged against the pot, and fell, convulsing, to the ground. A bluish color spread across her contorted face

Cyanosis, Fragger thought, remembering his basic Ranger medical training. Lack of oxygen for the heart.

For a terrible minute, Alissma's body twitched and shuddered as the poison sent her heart and nerves into fatal overdrive. Then, with a final arching of her back, the Aiforian noblewoman slumped to the ground, and Alissma Turnwaite's eyes gazed sightless at the Jivaron sky.

Fragger stared in disbelief at evidence of the extreme toxicity of the poison.

A sudden movement by Andriana drove him out of his mental paralysis. She dove clumsily toward the rag. The Ranger kicked it behind him before she could reach it. Sobbing, Andriana beat at his legs with her fists. When she tried to bite him, he jerked her to her feet.

"You killed your friend. You killed one of your own," he yelled, shaking her by the shoulders. "Your hatred for me is murdering everyone around you! When's it going to stop? When are you going to realize that trying to kill yourself or others is useless?"

He shook her again.

"The only choice I'm giving you is to live! Do you understand me?"

Andriana nodded weakly.

"Do you?" he demanded. "Answer me!"

"Yes."

Fragger searched her eyes, looking for defiance. There was none there, only a bleak emptiness.

An emptiness maybe I can fill with something more positive, Fragger hoped. If not, when the child is born, then she'll have to die. I'm suicidal myself if I allow her to keep making attempts on my life.

He picked her up and carried her back to the ship.

## Chapter 27

When the men were assembled, Fragger stepped up onto an ammo crate so they could see him well. It had been months since he'd brought Andriana back to the dropship. As he surveyed the crowd, he could see the time spent in preparation for the escape from Jivaro had made them as restless as the wind-whipped junglewood trees surrounding the perimeter. It was the first sign of the hurricane flexing its strength over the area. As forecast, it was a monster storm. Tarps snapped like gunshots, echoing the uneasiness of the soldiers facing the Ranger. To cut through the tension, he spoke loudly.

"All right, I'm not going to mince words, men. We all know the situation. The dropship isn't big enough to carry all of us off the planet. That means some of us have to stay."

He pointed to the Shuar uwishin squatted next to him. "Bucaram has decided to remain. Jivaro is his home. I'm going on the ship because my continuing presence here is a threat to all the Shuar people. EarthCorp, the Ricers, the Aiforians—everybody in the damned Renowned Systems—wants me captured or dead and will do everything they can to accomplish that objective, including wiping out the Shuar. I can't have that on my conscience. So, if I leave, things should settle down here."

A ripple of anxious shifting ran through the assembly as he continued, "So, the question becomes, how do we select who goes and who remains? We're between a rock and a hard place. For those of us who go, there's no guarantee that we'll get through the blockade. For those of you who stay, you'll to adapt."

He motioned again toward the Shuar leader who sat beside Iso. "Bucaram welcomes those who decide to stay. As you well know, the Shuar are masters of the jungle and damned good fighters. You can have, if not a good life, then a reasonably secure one. And, if that's not to your liking, then, remember, there's another possibility. Trade in headroot is likely to resume once I'm gone, so some of you may be able to catch passage on a freighter and get home."

A mixed reaction arose from his audience. Some soldiers nodded. Others remained grim-faced and sullen.

"The first thing I'm going to do is ask for volunteers to stay."

A burly sergeant with a thick black beard stuck his hand up.

"What's your name, sergeant?" Fragger asked.

"Backroth, sir."

"What's your question, Backroth?"

"Who've you selected to go with you, the special few?" The tone of the question was surly.

"What do you mean, 'special few'?"

"Oh, come on, sir. We know you have favorites."

"I haven't selected anyone. Everyone is free to choose."

Backroth snorted. "You mean Watanabe and Salinsky and Buurk can stay here if they want?"

"I want them to go with me, sergeant, there's no doubt about that. We've fought many battles together and are one helluva fine team, but it's still their choice."



"Fat chance of that," Backroth muttered.

Iso growled, "Watch your tone, sergeant. Colonel Sparks has kept your ass alive, and you'd better pay proper respect to a man who can do that, given the fact that you move through the jungle about as quietly as a blast from a particle cannon."

Backroth reddened as laughter rose about him and protested, "You said we could talk freely."

"And so you can. Just keep it civil. This isn't an easy situation for any of us."

"Go on, sergeant," Fragger said. "You've got more to say."

Backroth hesitated. "I could go on, colonel, but it's not fair."

"What's not fair?"

"If I say something you don't like, you could kill me in no time flat with your MASER abilities."

"Have I ever used those abilities against you or any member of my command?"

"No, sir, but these are different circumstances."

"Backroth, I won't do anything to you, so spit it out."

The sergeant took a deep breath and said quickly, "It's just that some of us feel like we're being fed to Radmuller's beasts so you can get away."

A collective intake of breath stiffened bodies in the crowd.

Iso bristled again. Fragger stayed him with a motion of his hand. "Backroth, I'll be blunt with you and everyone here. You seem to have forgotten that an enemy fleet surrounds this planet. That means your chances are better on the planet than with me. Out in space, we won't be able to fight back, at least not against the massed weaponry of the enemy fleet. One direct hit and we're space debris. As I said before, we haven't got a whole lot of choices in our situation. If anyone has other ideas, I'm listening. Backroth?"

The sergeant dropped his eyes as shook his head. The Ranger swept his eyes across the rest of his men. When no one spoke up, he said, "Well, then, it's time for you to decide—"

"Sir," Backroth interrupted.

"Yes?"

"What I said before—about saving your own skin—that's not really what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

Backroth hesitated, and Fragger prompted, "Say what you're thinking, sergeant."

"It's just that ... you're our leader. Who's going to take command when you leave?"

"Bucaram would seem to be a logical choice."

"No offense, Bucaram," Backroth said to the uwishin, "but you're not Colonel Sparks. I mean, who is? Nobody has his abilities. The colonel, he's our good luck."

Fragger laughed. "It's not about luck, Backroth. It's about guts, skill, determination and looking out for

your buddies. That's what war is. That's what it'll always be."

"That's true, most of the time, but not with you, sir," Backroth said stubbornly. I mean, nobody's ever seen anybody like you before. Nobody!"

Iso rose to whisper in Fragger's ear before he could reply. "This is no time to get modest, colonel. Your men believe in your invincibility. Don't destroy that belief; use it."

Fragger nodded. Raising himself tall, he addressed the troops again. "Through sheer accident, I am one of a kind. We've seen the enemy try to kill me time and time again. And, guess what? I'm still here!"

The men cheered.

He jabbed a finger at them. "And, despite the best efforts of the Ricers and Corpses and everybody else to get rid of you, you're still here!"

The cheers grew.

"You're some kind of soldiers, did you know that? In my day, that day 600 years ago, the proudest title any military man could receive was that of Ranger. And that's what you are now, the Jivaron Rangers. I'm prouder of you than any group of men I've ever led! You're the best of the best!"

Fragger waited as the cheering grew into a roar and then died down. "I've been proud and honored to lead you in battle, and I want to do it in the future. But the time is not right. We need a place, our own planet, where we can build our strength and eventually show the Renowned Systems what they're up against! Think about it! Our own world! And, I can promise you this, when we find it, it will be a place where a title doesn't matter, your birth doesn't matter, your wealth doesn't matter! All that will matter is your ability!"

Fragger swept his eyes across the crowd. "It's a simple, age-old concept called democracy. Each man and woman has a stake, a vote, in the government they create. You own the government, not a corporation. You form the government, not the nobility. You create your own destiny, not some faceless bureaucrat feeding out of the public trough. Does that sound like it's worth fighting for? Well, does it?"

"Yesss!" the soldiers shouted in one voice.

"I can't hear you!"

"YESSSS!"

Fragger held his hands up to hush the crowd. "Well, then, as I said, we've got some hard choices to make. One we've already discussed. Some of us have to leave Jivaro while others have to stay. For those who stay, the choices are this—scatter and return to your home planets as best you can. Or, remain as a fighting force and train until the time when I return. Because I can promise you this, I will return!"

The soldiers leapt to their feet, jabbing fists in the air and shouting Fragger's name.

When the noise quieted, he said, "I'm not going to give you some crap about making sacrifices. We all know that's part of being in the military. So, if we're going to make sacrifices, let's do it for each other, not some chickenshit politicians and so-called noblemen. From now on, we fight for what we've always fought for, our buddies. And one more important goal, and that's a future of freedom! I'm not invincible, but I'm as close as any man is ever going to get. And that near-invincibility is yours if you continue to follow me! Right here and now, I commit to your freedom and the freedom of your families. Because,

you know what? We're going to extend that freedom to every single person in the Renowned Systems!"

"So, make your choice now!" Fragger shouted to the crowd. "Slavery to a corporation, slavery to aristocrats ... or freedom!"

"Freedom! Freedom!" the soldiers chanted.

"Then haul your asses up off the ground and get to work on who goes and who stays. I'm not going to waste any more time on this speech!"

Fragger stepped down from the ammo box amidst the continued cheering.

"Was that what you wanted?" he whispered to Iso.

His friend grinned at him. "Rangers always lead the way, colonel."

Let's hope so, Fragger thought as he shook the hands of the excited soldiers about him.

Because this has to be longest shot in the history of humankind.

## Chapter 28

"Okay, let's go over it once again," Fragger said to Bucaram while Iso and Red listened. The four men had positioned themselves on the leeward side of a large junglewood tree to get out of the rising wind. Bucaram's toucan-feather head dress fluttered wildly about his head. The uwishin rolled his eyes at the request.

"We've gone over this too many times to count, colonel."

"Humor me."

Bucaram sighed. "I occupy Radmuller's old base and, at random intervals, squirt the false messages indicating you're at that position having cornered Radmuller. When they attack, we fight long enough to convince them it's a last-ditch effort, and then we disengage."

"That's right. Just fight long enough to be convincing, but don't—I repeat, don't—fully engage the enemy force, Bucaram." Fragger stared hard at the uwishin. "Am I crystal clear on that point?"

Bucaram grinned at him. "Absolutely, colonel."

"Don't let your men get their blood up. Most important, don't you get your blood up and lose control."

"Don't worry, colonel. Unlike Iso and Red, I'm a professional."

The two men snorted at the friendly insult.

Fragger put his hand on Bucaram's shoulder. "I'm serious. If I come back and find that you've lost valuable men in lame heroism, I'll kick your ass twice around the planet and then once more for good measure."

Bucaram laughed. "An empty threat, colonel, since my wives do that every day. But, don't worry, the order will be obeyed. I have to take care of my people. Especially Red."

Salinsky's bullet-shaped head snapped toward Fragger. "What? You're leaving me here?"

"Yes. You'll report directly to Bucaram."

"Why? And why didn't you tell me before?"

"I'm sorry, Red. It was a decision I hated to make, but I had to do it."

"But, why?" Salinsky repeated.

"For two reasons, Red. Most important, I need someone to hold the troops together on Jivaro until I return, and you're the best man for the job. And..."

"And what?" Red demanded.

"You're not fit for combat yet."

"The fuck I'm not!"

"Settle down," Fragger ordered. "That blow Lesto gave you is still affecting your skills. I've watched you. Your reaction times are slow, you forget things, and your judgment, never your best quality, is lacking."

And you're even more irritable than usual. For now, you're a liability in any pressure situation."

"A liability!" Red sputtered.

"I said 'for now,' Red. You need time to recover. That means no combat."

Red stomped out into the wind, paced back and forth in agitation before turning to face Fragger.

"No, goddamn it! No!"

"Red—"

The corporal stabbed a thick finger at Fragger. "You're telling me I'm worthless, that I'm not good enough to come along with you. And, you know what, that's bullshit! Bullshit!"

"Stop shouting, Red. This is exactly what I'm talking about."

"I've got every right to shout, goddamnit!"

"And I've got every right to make sure your ugly hide stays in one piece!" Fragger said. "You're of no value to me dead or making bad decisions that cost good troopers their lives. So, it's a direct order. You will stay with Bucaram. You will train the troops to the highest degree of efficiency. And you will stay out of combat until Bucaram is satisfied you're healthy enough to be an asset and not a liability. And one more thing, Red."

"What?" the sergeant asked in a sullen tone.

"I will come back for you. I promise you that. I guarantee it. And when I do, you'll have a promotion and as many battles to fight as you want. But the first order of business is to get healthy."

"But...!"

"Get your gear, soldier!" Fragger ordered. "This discussion is over."

Red emitted a deep, visceral growl. He clenched and unclenched his fists several times before finally saluting and stalking away toward the ship.

"I didn't want it to be this way," Fragger said with a sigh.

"You didn't expect it be any different, did you?" Iso asked.

"No, not really, but I was hoping."

"It's the right decision, colonel. Red is a liability right now. I will miss his skills, but I wouldn't want him alongside me in combat at this time. I'd be so worried about him that I'd become less effective myself."

Fragger nodded. "I know, but I hope I don't have to do that again soon."

He turned to Bucaram. "Take care of Red's sorry ass, will you?"

"Don't worry, colonel. I will. Red is not a complicated man. To make sure he rests, I will supply him with chicha, although I'm not sure we can make enough beer to keep his thirst satisfied. And if that isn't enough, well, for reasons beyond my understanding, several of our women find him ... interesting."

Fragger chuckled and said, "Well, he is a big man in every respect," before turning serious.

"This is not the way I wanted to leave, Bucaram."

The uwishin smiled. "I'm not glad to see you go, but my wives are. You know women. They're all about peace and stability, and those are two things you never bring with you."

Fragger returned the smile briefly, then put his hand on Bucaram's shoulder.

"Are you sure you want to carry out the diversion? It would be safer to simply take the troops and your people and melt into the jungle."

Bucaram waved the idea aside with a flick of his hand. "We will hold their attention long enough for you to escape, and then we will scatter. They'll be so greedy to capture the infamous Colonel Sparks they'll come to us like flies to a dead slipsnake, only the snake will be very much alive and very dangerous. You'll have your opportunity to get off the planet. Make the most of it. I want you back if no other reason than to take Red off my hands."

"Good, then let's get this plan into—"

"Before I leave, I have three gifts for you, colonel" Bucaram interrupted. "One is my daughter, Amalia—"

"That's unnecessary," Fragger objected. "I don't need a wife, and it wouldn't be fair to her."

Bucaram laughed, "She won't be going along as a wife. She'll be a nursemaid for your child when it's born. You can't let Lady Lesto do it. She'd kill the baby. And if she couldn't kill it, she wouldn't nurse it. The baby won't feed itself."

"But it's a dangerous journey. Amalia may die."

"Her husband was killed in the battle at Radmuller's base soon before her son was born," Bucaram said. "It's made her very sad, and she needs her mind diverted."

He sighed and added, "To tell the truth, you'd be doing me a favor. She always was a restless child, very unlike a proper Shuar woman. She wanted to accompany men on hunting trips. Perhaps going with you will rid her of these desires, and she'll recognize her true place upon her return. Tell me you'll take her."

Fragger nodded reluctantly.

Bucaram pulled an object from his belt. "Here is your second gift. I want you to have this. It's a warrior's breast plate."

Fragger took the gift, admiring its craftsmanship. Twisted bark formed the outer shield-shape. Suspended in the middle of it was a small toucan's head, its black-and-yellow beak pointed downward. From the toucan, blue feathers fanned outward to the border. Above and below the head were figures painted on bark in bright yellow, red, gold and white colors. At the bottom of the breast plate, more feathers hung.

"It will protect you, colonel. The border is wrapped with the hair of many of your enemies."

"I'm honored," Fragger said as he slipped the breastplate twine over his head.

"It's an old practice of the Shuar that we brought with us from Earth. I made it for you."

"Thank you, Bucaram."

"And here's a third gift, colonel. I found it strapped to Wenghorn's leg."

Bucaram handed Fragger an Aiforian dagger. The Ranger took it from its leather sheath and examined it. The stabbing weapon had a birch wood handle wrapped with oxhide attached to a razor-sharp four-inch blade. The *svastikas* etched into the metal showed fine craftsmanship in the Nordic style.

"It's beautiful work," Fragger said. "But fundamentally useless for modern combat. I don't understand why he was wearing it."

Bucaram shrugged. "I don't either. I suspect it's a family heirloom, perhaps handed down from warrior ancestors as part of a proud tradition."

Iso snorted at the sentimentality. "The proud tradition was probably one of assassinating other Aiforians."

"Nevertheless, it will also bring luck," Bucaram said. "It takes power from your enemies and gives it to you."

"Three wonderful gifts," Fragger said, "and I have nothing to give you."

"Return," Bucaram said. "That will be gift enough."

Fragger took the uwishin's hand and shook it firmly.

"That's a promise I intend to keep. By the time I return, the Renowned Systems will know of the Shuar's bravery and great hearts. I'll make sure Wik broadcasts your people's deeds to all planets."

Iso placed his hand on top of theirs. "I've never known a better man or a better warrior. Good luck, Bucaram. May you live long enough for your many wives to make your life truly miserable."

"And, you, Iso," Bucaram said, "may you live long enough to produce children who are even uglier than you are."

A silence fell over the three men. Fragger broke it by snapping a salute for Bucaram.

"On your way, then. We'll wait for your signal."

Bucaram turned to his men and shouted orders as he walked away.

"Tough little bastard," Fragger said to Iso.

"The toughest," Iso agreed.

The Ranger shook himself free of the sadness he felt at the parting. "Let's find Red and make sure he joins Bucaram."

"You don't think Red'll do anything stupid, do you?" the sergeant asked.

"In his condition, who knows?"

The two men walked back toward the ship. Fragger stopped a soldier and asked him if he knew where Salinsky was.

"Oh, yeah, definitely, sir," the soldier answered. "He damned near knocked me down as I came out of the mess. That's where you'll find him."

The two men found Red sitting alone at a table in the middle of the dining area, his thick jaw furiously chewing at a slab of monkey steak. About him, three chairs lay mangled on the deck. In the farthest

corner of the galley, a frightened cook had backed himself against the wall. A shaking hand held a carving knife for protection.

Fragger pulled an intact chair from another table and sat down across Salinsky. Iso sat beside him.

"Feel better now that you've broken some furniture, Red?" the Ranger asked.

His question was answered with a glare.

"You plan to destroy the whole ship because you're pissed at me?"

The corporal stabbed the fork into a piece of steak and shoved it into his mouth.

"If you want to stick that fork into me, go right ahead," Fragger said. "You've got every right to be pissed, but it doesn't change the situation."

Red stopped chewing and pointed the utensil at the Ranger. "We're a team. Teams stick together."

"We're still a team, Red. We always will be."

"That's a load of crap!"

"It's true. Sometimes, teams have to separate. It's a fact of life, and you know it. I told you I'll come back. I always keep my word, and you know that too. Six hundred years ago, I signed on to the Ranger creed, "Never will I fail my comrades," and I still keep that creed today. Have I ever failed you, Red, in battle or on a personal level?"

"Not in battle, but, on a personal level, you just did that today, colonel."

"You ungrateful idiot," Iso burst out. "He saved your butt from Lesto."

The corporal's thick face reddened. "Easy for you to talk, Iso. You're not the one staying behind."

"Quiet, both of you," Fragger said as the two men leaped up and glowered at each other. "Sit down."

"I said sit down!" he shouted when neither man budged. "That's an order!"

Taut as overstressed springs, Iso and Red lowered themselves down.

"Listen, you two. In case you've forgotten, there's an enemy out there trying to kill us, so I don't have time to referee fights between a couple of my most valuable men!"

"And my friends," he added in a softer tone.

Iso and Red shifted uncomfortably in their chairs at this remark.

"Red, this is only a temporary situation—"

"So, you say—"

"Don't interrupt, soldier. Just listen. It is a temporary situation. All that medical stuff about you, it's true. You're not fully fit for combat. But that's only part of my decision to have you stay with Bucaram. It's your experience I need here on this planet. You've fought for years. You're battle-tested and battle-tough. That means you have a lot to teach the Jivaron Rangers that remain. I need you to teach them how to stay alive. When I'm not here, they need to listen to a legend."



"Legend? What the hell are you talking about?" Red asked.

"How long have you been a soldier?"

"All my life."

"That's right, Red, all your life. And you're still alive. You've survived everything that's been thrown at you and then some. When our men look at you, they see skill and luck. Good luck, that's what you are to our Rangers."

"Some luck," Red said with a snort.

"You know as well as I do that soldiers are the most superstitious people around, Red. When you're facing death at every turn, you look for any edge, no matter how irrational. Most of the time, they look to me for that luck. But, when I'm not around, you're the one they latch onto. They see your big ugly face and the innumerable scars you have on your body, and they think, 'That man's too mean to die, and if I follow him, I stand a good chance of living.' Whether you like it or not, that's leadership, Red."

"That's a great speech," Red muttered.

Despite the sarcasm, Fragger detected a note of pleasure in the response and forged on.

"Have you heard of a general named Patton?"

"Who?"

"He was a famous general in my time, Red, and a helluva tank commander. One of the reasons he was famous was for a remark he made."

"Which was?"

"He said, 'The object of war is not to die for your country but to make the other poor bastard die for his.'"

"A smart man," Red admitted. "But what does that have to do with me?"

"That's what I want you to teach our Rangers—to make the other poor bastards of the Renowned Systems die for their country or planet or whoever else they're fighting for."

"Hell, you've already taught them that, colonel."

"Yes, but you need to reinforce that message while I'm gone. And I need you to teach that to any new recruits we get."

"New recruits?" Red laughed harshly. "What new recruits?"

"The word is getting out. We've been monitoring system wide reports. There are rumblings. EarthCorp, the Ricers, all the others, they've all got their panties in a bunch about 'traitors' wanting to join up with us."

"Sounds like load of crap to me," Red said. "Probably just stuff to scare citizens into line."

"You know as well as I do, the governments of the Renowned Systems have a lock on the media," Fragger said. "When such information infiltrates their propaganda, it's true."

"Still feels like you're feeding me a line, colonel. Give me facts."

"All right, then, here's a fact for you. There's at least ship on the way with 500 volunteers."

"What? How do you know that?"

"Red, we're still monitoring all enemy communications. There's been a lot of intership buzz in the orbiting fleet about volunteers lately."

Red narrowed his eyes into skeptical slits. "It's convenient that you're just now mentioning it for the first time."

"We had to wait to confirm it."

"They'll never make it through the blockade. They're fools if they try."

"You don't get it, do you?" Fragger asked.

"Get what?"

"If there's one ship, that means there'll be another. If the first ship doesn't get through, there'll be more. You can't stop the tide raised by an idea, Red. Sooner or later, that tide will wash volunteers on to the shore of Jivaro, and when it does, we need to be ready. That's why I need you here. Bucaram is a skilled jungle fighter, but he has no experience at conventional warfare. You do. You two will make a great, new team for the Rangers. Bucaram can train them in small unit jungle strategy and tactics; you can train them in large unit matters. Think of it, a multi-skilled, multi-disciplined force ready to take on the best that the Renowned Systems has to offer."

"Another pretty speech," Red said as he looked over at Iso and asked, "Somebody slip a politician into the colonel when we weren't looking?"

"What can I say, Red? The man amazes me," the sergeant answered.

"And you're just as full of bullshit as he is, Iso."

Fragger leaned back in his chair. "That's the situation, Red. That's our opportunity. What do you say?"

Red's silence made Fragger fear his friend would refuse. Then Red's jaw lost its tightness as he answered, "What do I say? As if I had any choice in the matter. All right, I'll stay. I'll do my best. But, if you don't come back, I'll hunt you down and cut off your balls for being a lying sack of shit ... sir."

"I'd worry about your own balls first, Red."

"What do you mean? Ain't any soldier on this planet got a knife big enough to do that."

"I wasn't talking about soldiers," Fragger said with a grin. "Bucaram told me several Shuar women have their eyes on you. I hear they make good lovers unless you cross them. Then they shrink your balls like they shrink heads. You mess with them you'll end up with two peas between your legs."

Red laughed. "Don't worry about that, colonel. I'll keep them all satisfied."

"All right, then," Fragger said, standing up. "Get going. Take your power armor with you. You stay in that, the Shuar women won't be able to get at your testicles."

He reached across the table and shook Red's hand hard. "I'll miss you, even though you've given me

nothing but grief ever since I met you."

"If I'd known the trouble you'd cause, I'd have spaced you for sure, and that's a fact," Red replied gruffly. "Now, get outta here. I've got things to do after I finish this steak."

Fragger rose as Iso reached across the table and gave Red an affectionate slap on the shoulder.

As they walked out of the mess and left Red chewing glumly on his food, Iso said to Fragger, "That stuff about reports of men wanting to join up and a ship coming ... I haven't monitored any communications on that subject."

"That's because there haven't been any," Fragger said.

"You lied to Red?"

"In a way."

Iso stopped in the corridor and faced Fragger. "In a way? Either it's true, or it's not."

"As far as I know, there are no volunteers on the way to Jivaro, Iso. But that doesn't mean they won't be coming in the future. I have a feeling about that."

Iso glared at him. "A feeling? A feeling doesn't mean weapons and men. To use your old Earth phrase, a feeling means squat. Red and Bucaram can't do a goddamned thing with a feeling!"

"Calm down!" Fragger ordered. "I've given Red hope, and he'll spread that hope to his troops. It'll hold them together until I can return."

"And when that hope is dashed? What then, colonel?"

"Then people die."

"You're an evil sonuvabitch," Iso said. "Are you going to lie like that to me?"

"Never."

Iso scowled. "Now you're not only an evil sonuvabitch. You're an evil, lying sonuvabitch. You'll do whatever it takes to win."

Fragger met Iso's glare with a steady look and asked, "Would you have it any other way?"

"...No ... goddamnit ... no!"

## Chapter 29

"This hurricane is very dangerous."

The Aiforian prisoner, Ranglin, spoke the worried words over his shoulder from the pilot's seat. Despite the bulk of the dropship, the storm's winds shook the vessel and wailed about it like angry banshees eager to tear the hull apart to get at the occupants.

"Not in terms of its size, but in terms of its winds. It's a tightly wound storm."

"Good," Fragger answered.

"Gusts are hitting 350 kilometers per hour, colonel. We can't fly in this!"

"Not yet. What was the last reading on the enemy's forces?"

It had taken Bucaram and Red a month to move their forces into position around Radmuller's former base. During that time, the storm had taken shape. Upon receiving his order by runner, Red had revealed his position to the orbiting fleet.

"It looks like they've opted for mass force again," Ranglin answered. "The last sensor readings indicated two large attack vessels, six troop carriers, and an escort of 20 fighters. The attack ships launched missiles to soften up the area. As far as I could tell, the weather was hampering their disposition even though they're at the edge of the storm."

"Good. That means when those troops hit the ground they'll be facing a lot of confusion," Fragger said, then asked hopefully, "Are there any more readings?"

The pilot shook his head. "The electromagnetic interference is too great."

"We can't see them, but they can't see us either," Fragger said. "How long until the eye is over us?"

"I estimate another hour. Colonel...?"

"Yes?"

"I've never flown in a storm like this before."

"Then it'll be a first for both of us, Ranglin."

"Comforting," the pilot muttered to Sturl, the co-pilot.

"Relax," Fragger said. "The eye will be calm compared to this."

His words didn't match the roiling in his stomach. I hate any situation in which I'm not in control, and I can't think of a situation with less control than this. I've never been in frigging hurricane before.

He forced himself to sit in a relaxed position and grinned at the men surrounding him on the bridge to shore their confidence. Beside him, Iso sat, reinforcing that attitude with a cocky smile on his face. Fragger envied his calm until he noticed a persistent twitch in one of his friend's legs.

Fortunately, he noted, the hand he has holding the pulse pistol trained on the pilots is steady.

The Ranger surveyed the rest of the bridge crew and found several of them praying to whatever gods

they worshipped. This made Fragger suddenly wish he had a deity to pray to. Six hundred years ago, he'd been Catholic until too much carnage had destroyed his belief.

Irrationally, he wondered, Is Christianity still around? Or Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism? In all my time in the future, I haven't even thought to ask. All I've seen is some form of animism practiced by the Shuar.

The sight of Wik didn't cheer the Ranger any further. The little vidman's face was green. He'd let Fragger know that he wasn't happy about flying into the storm. On Earth, he'd accompanied hurricane hunters for a news story and knew the immense power of the winds. Secured in his chair, he looked like a munchkin who'd found himself in a very bad land of Oz.

A gust that shook the dropship hard jolted Fragger out of the thoughts about Wik. He busied himself by getting on the ship's internal commlink. Amidst asking for crew updates, he kept everyone informed of the situation until Ranglin said, "Winds lessening, colonel. The eye is approaching."

"Can we lift off?"

"We still have gusts over 200 klicks per hour."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"That's a no."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I'll feel safer when they fall under 150. The ship will be manageable then."

"As soon as they do, lift off."

"If we wait until the center is directly over us, then wind speed will be negligible from what you tell me. Otherwise, we're going to bob like a cork in a violent sea."

"Understood, but time is of the essence. You have your orders."

"Yes, sir."

An hour later, the ship rose into the shrieking winds with all the steadiness of a sailor well into a three-day drunken shore leave. It bucked and yawed and did its best to shake everyone loose from their posts. Fragger wanted to puke, but kept his eyes on the Aiforian pilots. To his relief, both Ranglin and Sturl had snapped into a cool professionalism once they were in the air. Like every pilot he'd ever known, it was obvious they loved the freedom of flight, no matter how dangerous it was.

Fragger locked his eyes on the screen to take his attention off the vomit threatening to erupt from his throat at any moment. The view showed the storm lashing its fury against the jungle as if it were furious with the land for getting in its way. Sheets of rain drove against the screen obscuring the view, but, between gusts, the Ranger saw trees bending nearly to the ground only to snap back into the teeth of the next gust. Above them, the white eye wall of the hurricane soared as if it were the tower to heaven.

"How soon until we're out of the winds?" Fragger asked as the ship took a sickening drop.

"The cloud tops are at 16 kilometers," Ranglin replied. "It'll be a while."

"Any sign of the enemy locking onto our position?"

"No, sir," Ranglin answered. "It's still too soon for them to get a lock on us. The atmosphere around us is

boiling with energy."

"No shit," the Ranger said under his breath as he looked at the clouds boiling on the viewscreen.

"Pardon, sir?"

"Nothing, Ranglin. Just do your job and do it well, and you'll have the freedom I promised you."

"Yes, sir," the pilot said, and then did his own muttering.

"What did you say?" Fragger asked.

"I said, 'If I don't get my ass blown apart first.'"

The Ranger laughed. "In that case, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing my ass will be joining yours as well."

He saw Ranglin suppress a grin, then focus his attention tightly on the controls as the ship yawed under the impact of another gust.

Fragger had the curious sense they were rising up in a balky elevator in a shaft very badly engineered by God. The sensation deepened as Ranglin increased the speed of the ship. Roiling clouds licked out at them, the turbulence causing sickening drops in altitude. Fragger fought the urge to unbuckle his safety harness and flee the ship.

To his astonishment, the pilot whooped, "Ride 'em, space cowboy!" and turned to grin at him.

"Keep your damned eyes on the controls," Fragger said through gritted teeth.

"This is flying, colonel, real flying!"

"Get us up out of this and through the blockade and I'll say you're a hotshot pilot. The real danger lies ahead, Ranglin."

"From the green shade of your face, you look like you're ready to die on the spot, colonel, so you may not live to see it!" the pilot chuckled before turning back to the controls.

Fragger gritted his teeth further when Ranglin began to sing in a tongue the translator didn't recognize. Worse, the Aiforian was badly off key.

A few minutes later, the singing stopped at the same time as the winds did. Blue sky rose across the screen. At that moment, Fragger didn't care if every fleet in the galaxy attacked them. He was just glad to be free of the turbulence. He took a deep breath and forced relaxation into every fiber of his body.

Then another jolt hit the ship.

"We're targeted," Ranglin shouted.

"Shit, out of frying pan and into the fire," Fragger said. "How many?"

"Just one. A scout ship," the pilot answered.

"Kill it quickly."

"Weapons already armed," Sturl said.

"Fire," Ranglin ordered.

The ship shuddered under the recoil of its cannon. Immediately, an actinic glare flashed on the screen.

"Target destroyed," Ranglin said.

"Did he alert his buddies?" Fragger asked.

"We can bet on it. That pilot spotted us first."

"Fuck! All right, what are they expecting us to do?"

"Head for open space and engage hyperdrive as soon as possible," Ranglin answered.

"Our chances with that tactic?"

"Slim, colonel. Sensors indicate enough firepower in orbit to blow the planet apart. Plus, their attack fighters have much superior speed. They'll have two very good options in hand because they'll have us in their sights well before we reach a hyperdrive point."

"And those options are?"

"Capture us if they're feeling magnanimous. Kill us if they aren't."

"Any holes in their defense?"

"As expected, they're massing ships over your friends' position. But, I don't see any gaps. They've got vessels to spare so they're able to maintain a picket line around the entire planet as far as I can tell."

Fragger drummed his fingers on the arm rest of his chair while he considered his alternatives.

"Orders, colonel?" Ranglin asked anxiously.

"Can you drop us back into the clouds?"

"Of course."

"Low enough to mask our signature?"

"Yes, but it'll be another bumpy ride. You won't like it."

"Beats the alternative."

"We can't stay in the clouds forever."

"I don't plan on it," Fragger said. "Head toward Radmuller's base and the battle."

Ranglin raised an eyebrow. "We're going to fight?"

"Not unless we have to. We're just going to join the confusion, that's all. Carry out my order."

"Yes, sir."

The ship dropped so quickly into the clouds Fragger thought his stomach would come out his mouth. He held on to the chair as the ride became everything the pilot had promised. The vessel, bucked, yawed, rose and fell on the violent currents of air. Around him, Fragger heard several men puking and wished he

could join them, but he held his gorge in check to concentrate on the screen.

Twenty minutes later, the ship burst out of the clouds and into open air. Turbulence still knocked their vessel about, but on both the viewscreen and the tactical screen, Fragger was able to see the battle taking place above Radmuller's base. Unchecked, enemy fighters strafed the jungle tree lines with PPC cannons, laser fire, and plasma bolts to protect the landing areas in which troop carriers had landed. Through the smoke, he could see silent red, orange and black explosions obliterating the remaining buildings of Radmuller's former base. Blinking lights from the ground indicated return fire from Red and Bucaram's Ranger force.

"Are you able to tell me the disposition of the enemy aircraft?" Fragger asked.

"I see Ricer and Corpse ships," Sturl, the co-pilot, answered and then added in surprise, "Also Aiforian configurations. Colonel, you have a remarkable ability to unite enemies against you. You've achieved a first. Aiforians have never fought with the Great Powers before."

"I could do without that ability," Fragger replied dryly. "Can we join in the attack without being detected?"

"What?" Ranglin exclaimed.

"You heard me, mister. Can we get into the attack formation without alerting the enemy?"

"For a few minutes, yes," the pilot answered. "If they're caught up in the heat of battle and concentrating on nothing but the ground."

"Do it, then. Fire your weapons into the jungle. Just make sure your aim is wide of the target. Fly low enough to draw fire."

"That's dangerous, colonel. Even with your force's limited weaponry, there's a chance they might get lucky and hit us."

"Hopefully not," Fragger said. "However, I do want you to make it look like we've taken a hit from ground forces, Ranglin."

"Then what?"

"Use the skills you're so proud of. Send this ship corkscrewing out of control and up toward the orbiting fleet. Broadcast your emergency call on all commlink bands. Paint them a picture of panic."

"And once we get to the fleet?"

"Send us tumbling right through them. Let's hope they're too busy concentrating on the ground action. And, Ranglin..."

"Yes, colonel?"

"Don't do anything stupid. The death of Lady Lesto would not look good when you return to your people. If that's not a convincing enough argument, remember that Watanabe still has his pistol trained on you."

"Yes, sir."

"Execute my order then."



Ranglin responded by sending the ship swooping up into a formation of circling fighters. Noises of surprised irritation squawked over the commlink.

"Aiforian pilot," a voice said, "maintain flight discipline. You're disrupting the attack formation."

"No time for talk," Ranglin replied. "I've got enemy to kill."

He turned the ship on edge and knifed downward behind a Corpse fighter. In the view screen, the jungle grew larger and larger until Fragger could make out individual enemy soldiers deploying out of the clearing. Beyond the perimeter, streaks of light stabbed upward at the fighter they were trailing. Laser fire splashed harmlessly against its hull as it launched its missile package. When the package hit, the jungle blew upward in a tangle of shattered trees and dirt. Ranglin flew into the cloud of debris and fired his own weapons blindly. As soon as they were out of the cloud, he threw the ship into gyrations that pinned Fragger against his seat. Ranglin angled his vessel down toward the ground and then whipped it upward. A Corpse fighter flashed by only meters away.

Angry chatter broke out again over the commlink. "Aiforian pilot, get your ship out of the attack zone! You're more of a menace to us than the enemy!"

"Damage to ship," Ranglin responded. "I'm returning to orbit if I can make it."

"I don't care where you go, you idiot! Just clear the area. We've got Sparks's men on the run so we don't have time to waste on you."

"I've lost stabilizer capability," Ranglin shouted. "Warn the others."

The voice cursed hard, then said, "Understood."

Ranglin drove the ship upward in an erratic pattern, yawing it from one side to the other until the sky began to darken. When weightlessness lifted Fragger against his safety harness, he took a deep breath of relief.

Another, deeper voice spoke from the commlink. "Aiforian ship, this is the EarthCorp cruiser, *Challenge*. You're on a collision course. Alter your heading."

"Challenge, this is the Aiforian ship," Ranglin responded. "Heavy damage to my vessel. Gravity off. Am correcting my course as best I can."

"Get it done then, or we'll be forced to target you for the safety of our vessel."

"Don't even think about it," Ranglin shouted. "You trigger-happy Corpses would love nothing better to obliterate one of our ships and blame it on us."

"Amateurs deserve what they get, Aiforian."

"And only cowards destroy a helpless ship! We're on your side or have you forgotten that?"

"Alter course within the next minute or those words will be your last," the Corpse voice said.

"I'm trying, I'm trying," Ranglin said in a high-pitched screech as he cut the link.

"That's a helluva job of acting," Fragger said.

"Who's acting?" Ranglin said. "If that cruiser unloads on us, we'll end up as so much dust orbiting the planet. Hang on."

Ranglin worked at his console. A second later, the ship shifted course and went into a severe tumble. Fragger's relief disappeared. He felt as if he'd found himself in the spin cycle of a demented washer. This time, he couldn't help himself and vomited over the side of his chair. Globules of puke orbited around his head, smacking him in the face. He puked again. The sole comfort was that his voice was only one in a chorus of regurgitation. Forcing his eyes to stay on the screen, he saw the hull of the *Challenge* spin by at a safe distance.

"*Challenge*," Ranglin said. "I lost all control in that last maneuver. Request assistance."

"Aiforian ship," the *Challenge* responded. "Orders are to maintain position. You're on your own."

"You bastard! You motherloving bast—"

Ranglin turned to Fragger. "He cut the link. You can always count on a Corpse to let you down."

"You did a helluva job," Fragger said. "How long do we have to spin like this?"

"If you want to be convincing, it'll be a while, colonel. A crippled ship doesn't just suddenly stop its spin and go into hyperdrive."

"Great," Fragger muttered.

"I'll maintain passive monitoring to see if any signal locks on to us. Once we're reasonably safe, I'll inform you. Enjoy the ride!" he added cheerfully.

"It beats death," Fragger said, "but not by much."

Ranglin laughed, and the Ranger wished a club were on hand so he could beat the pilot senseless for his insane enjoyment of the situation.

Fragger glanced at his watch to track how long his misery would last. It felt like a century, but when Ranglin fired the attitudinal jets and straightened the ship out, only thirty minutes had passed.

Fragger blew out a grateful breath as the pilot restored gravity. All around the bridge, vomit dropped to the deck.

"You're a mess, colonel," Ranglin said with obvious delight.

Fragger wiped at the vomit staining his clothes and answered, "Yes, I am, but a free one. My thanks, Ranglin. You did a heckuva job. There's always room in the Jivaron Rangers for a good man."

"I'll have to decline the invitation, colonel," the pilot answered. "I'm loyal to my people and my world. I hope to see them again."

Fragger noted the uncertainty behind the last remark and said, "I've given my word, Ranglin. Get us out of here and safely to a planet, and you both will be released."

"It's not quite that simple, colonel. I can get you away from Jivaro, but we have to know where we're going."

"Take us where my enemies can't find us or at least won't be able to find us with ease."

"That could be any one of a thousand planets!"

"You're an Aiforian, Ranglin. You know all about evading the Corpses and Ricers. It's your stock in

trade. Take us deeper into the Gulag. Find a Class M world, preferably one that's not another jungle world."

"Class M's are the first ones to be checked by any enemy."

"Then find one that's at least livable, damn it!"

"Colonel—"

"Shut up, you two!" the co-pilot Sturl shouted. "Someone is targeting us."

Ranglin swiveled back to the console and surveyed his instruments.

"It's the Corpse ship that let us by, the *Challenge*. Either, they've been alerted, or they just decided to take us out because they think little of Aiforians."

He checked his instruments further. "They know you're on board, colonel."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know, but they're bringing everything they have to bear on us. They wouldn't waste armament on a simple Aiforian dropship."

"Then a specific destination is irrelevant. Get us out of here!"

"Power up for transition into hyperspace," Ranglin ordered his co-pilot as an actinic glare flooded the view screen. A second later, a shock wave shook the dropship with the viciousness of a terrier killing a rabbit.

"Damn!" Fragger swore. "I told you to get us out of here."

"It'll take another five minutes, colonel!" the pilot yelled at him. "The drive needs time to power up and coordinates as well. Initiating evasive maneuvers."

Acceleration pinned Fragger against the seatback.

"They've launched missiles," Sturl announced. "A spread of six."

"Type?" Ranglin asked.

"Nuclear signature. Not subtle, but effective. They're looking for a wide blast area."

"Time to detonation?"

"An estimated two minutes at our present speed."

Ranglin punched at his console again. The acceleration pushed Fragger even deeper into his chair. Sweat beaded his forehead as he helplessly tried to watch the pilot and the screen at the same time.

"Update," Ranglin ordered.

"We've gained a minute on them," Sturl reported. "One minute to hyperspace transition. The lead missile will detonate before we reach that point."

"Survivability?"

Sturl shrugged. "Depends on the payload."

"All right, everybody brace for impact. We're either going into hyperspace in one piece or millions of tiny ones."

"Encouraging," Fragger grumbled. To take his mind off the impending blow, he got on the ship's commlink.

"Brig, this is Colonel Sparks. We're expecting more impacts. Make sure Lady Lesto is secured."

"Colonel, this is Corporal Iggim at the brig," a high-pitched, nervous voice answered. "The lady is secure in an automatic foam pod."

"How is she?"

"Uhh..."

"Answer me, corporal!"

"I'm no expert, sir, but I believe she's in labor and not very happy about it as you can hear."

Fragger heard his name being cursed in an extraordinarily creative fashion for a woman.

"Is Buurk there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Put him on."

"Colonel," Buurk's acknowledged.

"What are you doing to help Andriana?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Nothing?"

"Colonel, get hold of yourself. It's a birth. There's not a lot I can do. The baby comes when it comes."

"We're under attack, Buurk!"

"I can't do much about that, either. If we survive, I'll be right by her side to make sure the infant isn't smothered by the foam."

"Smothered?" Fragger's voice rose close to a near-hysterical pitch, and he gripped the arms of the chair hard to get himself under control.

"These protection devices aren't designed for pregnant women, colonel, so there is that possibility. I'll do my best to prevent it. You do your best to keep us alive. Buurk out."

*As if I can do anything to get us the hell out of here!* Fragger cursed silently.

"Detonation," Sturl reported unnecessarily as the blast glare flooded from the screen into the ship. The tortured shriek of metal mingled with the pained shouts of the bridge crew. It felt to Fragger as if the ship had been drop kicked by a giant boot. It rolled and tumbled, sending epads and loose equipment flying about the bridge. Men flailed at the debris trying to keep it from striking their heads. A second later,

another concussion hit the ship. A massive groan ran through the hull, and Fragger was sure it'd been breached. He braced for explosive decompression, but the only sound he heard was a small hiss as if a snake was signaling its displeasure from the wall above his head. Styluses, small commlinks and other debris rose toward the tiny breach until Iso unbuckled himself, launched himself upward and slapped a glove against the hole. Cussing himself for not having Iso's presence of mind, Fragger asked the pilot, "Can we make it into hyperspace?"

"Yes, sir," Ranglin answered. "Now it's more of a question of can we make it *through* hyperspace. Let's hope the damage is as light as it seems. Hyperspatial distortion is like Lady Lesto, very unforgiving."

"But we have no other choice?"

"None. The remainder of the missiles are on the way."

"Make the jump then, damnit!"

Ranglin punched at the console. A warning signal sounded through out the ship. Then, the pilot pressed another control, and hyperspace greeted Fragger with its usual nauseating consequences. It took his brain out of his head, slapped it heavily from side to side, then stuffed it back into his skull through an ear hole before clubbing him into unconsciousness.

When he woke, the usual storm troopers of pain goose-stepped on his brain. Sound soared into color, and color dribbled down across his vision like spilled paint. From a distance, Ranglin's voice blared insanely.

"WEEEE'RE ... thrOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUGH!"

Fragger puked and asked in the same absurd tone.

"THROUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUGH WHAT?"

He slapped his hands over his ears, trying to stop the awful noise bruising the inside of his skull.

Gratefully, he passed out again.

He opened his eyes to the face of Ranglin grinning at him behind a pulse pistol. The barrel pressed hard against Fragger's nose.

"Congratulations, colonel! We made it through, and we're safe. Well, I am, anyway. You, on the other hand, are in a very bad position."

## Chapter 30

"You're a very fast man, colonel," the Aiforian pilot said. "But I can pull the trigger before you move, so I suggest you stay very still."

"While you do what, Ranglin?" Fragger croaked. He felt as if the hyperspace transition had sandpapered his vocal cords with heavy carborundum. "You can't hold the pistol on me forever, and there's only two of you against all of us."

"Three of us," the pilot corrected. "There's Lady Lesto, and we're going to see her right now."

Andriana's name jolted Fragger out of his stupor. "Is she okay?"

"That's what we're about to find out. Get up out of the chair slowly, please."

Fragger rose and stumbled when his foot landed on something soft. The Ranger looked down. Iso lay sprawled on the deck. Instinctively, he reached down to help, but Ranglin kept the gun planted firmly against his head.

"He's fine, colonel. Just unconscious. He and I had a bit of a struggle over the pistol."

Fragger gave the Aiforian a skeptical glance.

Ranglin laughed. "On my best day, I couldn't take the Ricer, but there are advantages to being a pilot, colonel, and that's repeated exposure to hyperspace transition. I'm as good as immune to its effects. Watanabe wasn't. Now, move!"

Fragger surveyed the bridge quickly as he was shoved toward the door. Wik was still strapped into his chair, unconscious. Two guards also sat in their chairs, but the bloody holes in their foreheads said they'd never see consciousness again.

"Get the handcuffs," Ranglin ordered, pointing toward the belt of one of the guards. "Put them on."

Fragger obeyed as he said, "Like I said before, there's only two of you. Lady Lesto won't be in any condition to help you."

"Doesn't matter, colonel. Or have you forgotten we're the only pilots aboard? Kill us, and you kill yourselves. You'll drift in space forever and starve to death if you don't space yourselves first. An unpleasant way to go."

Fragger couldn't think of any answer to that statement and let the Aiforian shove him to the lift. When the door opened to the brig area, Corporal Iggim, a thin soldier with a short crop of black hair, reached for his sidearm as soon as he saw the restraints on Fragger.

"Turn over your weapon, corporal," Fragger ordered.

"Sir?"

"You heard him," Ranglin snapped. "Put it on the deck and slide it over here—carefully. Then, open the brig door."

The corporal bent and shoved the weapon across the deck.

"Now get on the deck face down."

When Iggim was slow to obey, Ranglin pulled the trigger. A dazzling beam lanced through the corporal's head, and he flopped motionless on the deck. The smell of scorched flesh filled the room.

"That was unnecessary," Fragger shouted.

A quick bark of laughter came from Ranglin. "The great Colonel Sparks lecturing me on ruthlessness? I always make it a point to learn from the best. Get inside, you hypocrite."

Fragger entered the brig. Buurk sat on the far bunk. A tiny infant boy lay squalling in one of his massive hands. With his free hand, the Martian cleared mucus from the protesting infant's mouth. Andriana Lesto lay on her bunk, blood and afterbirth between her legs. Exhaustion had drained her face of color, but the blue eyes glittered with the ever-present hatred of the Ranger. When her gaze caught the handcuffs around Fragger's wrists, a smile drew her lips into a rictus of triumph.

"Shoot him!" she commanded Ranglin. "No, no ... shoot the baby first and then shoot him! I want him to die knowing his bastard son went before him."

"My Lady," the pilot responded. "I'm not in the habit of shooting infants—"

"I said, shoot them both!" she said, raising on her elbows to scream the words at him.

"My Lady—"

"Shoot them, damn you! That's an order!"

Fragger watched the pilot shift uncomfortably as indecision rippled the muscles of his face.

Andriana thrust an arm toward Ranglin. "Give me the weapon, then, coward. I'll do it myself."

The insult hardened the pilot's features, and Fragger braced to throw himself at the Aiforian. Ranglin detected the movement and shoved the pistol close to the Ranger's head.

"Get over in the corner, Rerun, and don't even think of trying anything."

"You can't kill a baby!"

"Oh, yes, I could."

"Yes, yes, do it!" Andriana ordered.

"But not this time," Ranglin said as he lowered the pistol to a ready position.

Andriana glared at him. "You bastard, do it. Do it! Don't lose your nerve now!"

"I haven't lost any nerve!" Ranglin responded. "I respect your wishes, Lady, but the needs of Aifor outweigh them in this case. Don't you understand? We've got this Rerun and his abilities and the baby in our hands now."

Andriana spat at him. A globule of spit landed on his cheek. The pilot reddened with anger but kept his composure as he wiped it away.

"Take heart, Lady. You've got control of this Rerun. Once we extract his secret, you can do with him as you like. I'm sure you'll be able to come up with ways to prolong his agony."

Andriana slumped back down on the bunk, spent of energy. "You don't understand," she whispered.

"He always finds a way to escape justice."

"Not this time," the pilot said. "I'll see to that. When we get back to Aifor, you'll be able to deliver all the justice you—"

"She's too tired to listen," Buurk interrupted. "Save your words."

The giant Martian rose from his knees, tucking the infant protectively against his body. "And if you plan on killing the baby, you'll have to go through me first."

"Don't tempt me, you Martian freak!" Ranglin said. "But I'm not going to harm Sparks' bastard son. If he possesses the same abilities as your Rerun colonel, then we'll extract the genetic mechanism from him if Sparks won't give it up."

"I've told everyone until I'm blue in the face, I don't know the secret," Fragger said.

Ranglin shrugged. "Doesn't matter. One way or the other, our scientists will find out."

"Our immediate concern is the infant," Buurk reminded him. "We can't leave him in the care of the mother; she'll kill him for sure. I have to take him to Bucaram's daughter, Amalia, so she can nurse him and give him care."

"Do it, then," Ranglin ordered. "And send men to take Lady Lesto to sick bay. Tell them to come unarmed."

"You," he told Fragger as Buurk left, "get over to the free bunk and sit down."

The Ranger obeyed. Ranglin backed across the room and kept the pistol leveled until two soldiers appeared at the brig door.

"Take Lady Lesto to sickbay," Ranglin ordered.

The two men gave Fragger a questioning look.

"He's got the gun," the Ranger said. "Do as he says. Orders will be coming."

"Damned right, they will," Ranglin said. "In fact, they're coming right now. I'm in command. Once you're delivered the Lady to sick bay, collect all arms and deposit them in the armory or Colonel Sparks dies. Then, gather all personnel in the mess hall. I'll address you there."

The two men picked up Andriana, and carried her from the room.

Ranglin stepped out of the brig after them. Before he pressed the door control, he smirked and said, "Enjoy the rest, Rerun. You won't be getting any for a long time unless it's a permanent one."

Fragger accelerated off the bed. The door met his face as it slid shut with a solid thunk.

"Shit," he muttered as he rubbed at the cheek that'd jammed into the metal. He turned around to survey the bare functionality of the brig.

"Okay, Fragger, you're a Ranger, and a Ranger always leads the way. What do you do now?"

His mind came up with no answer.



## Chapter 31

Iso didn't have any answers either when he was tossed into brig the two hours later.

"What's the situation?" Fragger asked him.

Iso looked at the bloody sheets where Lady Lesto had lain and tore them off in disgust before sitting down.

"Bad," he answered.

"I already know that," Fragger said. "Give me some specifics."

"As far as I can tell, Ranglin and his buddy, Sturl, are planning to drop out of hyperspace in order to find our position so they can plot a course for Aifor."

"Any idea of how long it'll take to get to their planet?"

"None, colonel. From all the technical jargon flying back and forth between them, my guess is that the hyperspace generators took some damage and need repair. They didn't seem too worried about it, so I'm assuming the repairs won't take long."

"Any sign of help from our men on board?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, colonel. I haven't seen any sign of fighting back. Rangel and Sturl have disarmed everyone apparently."

Fragger rose from his bunk and began pacing. "Shit, this is one helluva fix. We've got to get out of here."

"Not much chance of that," Iso pointed out.

To take his mind off the situation, Fragger asked, "How's the baby doing?"

"Good, from what I hear. Amalia seems to have taken to the infant."

"At least that's one bit of good news," Fragger said as he continued his pacing trying to think of a way out of the cell.

"What are you going to name him?" Iso asked.

"What? Who?"

"Your son."

Fragger came to a halt. "I hadn't even thought about it. I was too busy making sure his mother didn't kill him."

"How about Isoruku?" Iso suggested.

Fragger glared at his friend until he saw the impish smile crease the underslung jaw.

"You bastard, you enjoy yanking my chain, don't you?"

A puzzled look came into Iso's eyes as his translator implant struggled with the meaning. "Yank your chain? What is that?"

"You're joking, that's what it means."

"Ah," Iso said. "Yes, I was joking. Still, Isoruku is an honorable name, and it beats no name at all, doesn't it?"

"Not by much. To me, it sounds like your snoring."

"All right then, you come up with a name," Iso challenged.

"I will. Damned right, I will."

Mentally, Fragger ran through the names of his family, unable to decide on the Irish side, the Mexican side, or the Native American side. Finally, he threw up his hands and said, "I'll call him Patrick."

"Why that name?" Iso asked.

"It's a good Irish name, and it means 'noble' or something like that. The name oughta piss off all the so-called royalty in this time. They won't like a Rerun calling his son nobility."

Iso chuckled. "Another Sparks, causing trouble right from the start."

"This era could use a whole lot of trouble," Fragger said.

"Well, colonel, keep pacing like that and eventually you'll wear a hole through the deck, and we can escape."

"Very funny," Fragger said sourly.

The problem is, he thought, I can't stop pacing. Confinement is maddening. The inability to come up with an idea is maddening. Rangers don't sit around and do nothing. They lead the way!

His frustration got him nowhere, and eventually, tired legs forced him to lie down and listen to the snoring he'd complained about earlier. Fragger glared at Iso, hoping the force of his stare would wake his friend up. Iso had the irritating habit of being able to sleep under any circumstance. It was a survival device all combat soldiers had.

Except for me, Fragger complained.

He was still complaining when a sudden shaking woke him up.

"Knock it off, Iso! I just got to sleep."

Fragger swatted at the hand rousing him from sleep, but it wouldn't leave him alone.

"You sonuvabitch!" he swore and sat up to give Iso a piece of his mind. He blinked and found the sergeant wasn't standing over him. He was across the room, sitting on the edge of his bunk, groggy with sleep.

"It wasn't me, colonel. Something's happening outside the cell."

Fragger swung his feet to the deck and listened for another sound. It wasn't long in coming. Around them, the ship shuddered and rang with the shrieking groan of tortured metal and composites. Within seconds, the Ranger knew the source of the sound.

"Goddamnit, we're under attack again," he swore. "I thought Ranglin said we were clear of enemy

forces."

"They had us targeted before we went through hyperspace, colonel. Maybe they jumped and got lucky with the coordinates."

"Those Aiforian pilots better know what they're doing," Fragger said. "From the strength of those impacts, we'll be dead meat soon."

Iso rose and began pacing the cell as Fragger had done earlier. Clenching and unclenching his fists, he said. "Why the hell don't they get us out of here? If I'm going to die, I want to do it fighting."

"I hear you," Fragger said as his stomach knotted. "Let's hope they're more interested in capturing us than blowing us out of existence."

As if determined to prove there was no interest in capture, the pounding increased in intensity until it knocked both men hard to the deck. Woozy, Fragger looked up to see the door slide half-open, slam shut, and then slide open again. At first, he thought the circuitry had been damaged. When a large hand grabbed him by the collar and dragged him free of the brig, he knew there was more going on than interrupted circuits. Only one man on board had hands that size.

"Buurk!"

"Get to the bridge, colonel!" the Martian shouted as he stepped over the Ranger and pulled Iso clear of the brig. "Both of you, get to the bridge."

"Who's attacking us?" Fragger shouted as he scrambled to his feet.

"I don't know," Buurk answered. "But Ranglin has freed everyone. Get up there. I'm headed back to sickbay to prepare for casualties."

Fragger didn't wait for more information. He ran to the lift with Iso close on his heels. As soon as the doors opened on to the bridge, Fragger burst into the room and shouted, "Situation report."

A white-faced Ranglin answered from his position. "It's a Ricer ship, colonel. Tanto class. Very fast. We can't outrun it."

"I'd say that's pretty obvious," Fragger said as he surveyed the bridge and found it crowded with armed Rangers. "Any communication from them?"

"Yes. Stand down and prepare to be boarded or die. And one more thing."

"Which is?"

"If we hand over Watanabe, lives will be spared."

"Iso?" Fragger looked at his friend. "Why do they want you? It doesn't make any sense."

"I'm buruku, remember, colonel? An untouchable."

"So?"

"No army tolerates people they consider deserters, you know that as well as I do. But they especially despise buruku who flee the military."

"Bad for the 'natural' order of things," Fragger said.

Iso nodded. "They will make an example of me in the most public way possible. I will be sliced into tiny pieces over a long period of time. My eyes will be the last to go so I can see the full extent of my 'crime'."

"We'll all be joining him," Ranglin said. "There's no love lost between Aifor and the worlds of the Royal and Imperial Commonwealth of Nipponese Empires."

"That's why you got me out of the cell," Fragger said. "There's no choice but to fight."

"Yes. They'll shoot any Aiforian down as a matter of course."

"You were a smart man to free me, Ranglin. Do as I say, and I won't have to kill you before the enemy does."

Ranglin shrugged. "I'm no match for you in combat, colonel, but you still need my skills no matter what the outcome."

"Not if I get a Ricer pilot as a replacement."

The Aiforian pilot laughed. "My life is safe then. They'd suicide before they'd give up to you. Besides, what makes you think you can get at them? They're going to board us."

"Not if we board them first."

"What? Are you crazy?"

"Yes. Now do you want to sit here and continue to be bombarded into oblivion or do you want to close with that ship as fast as possible and get inside its heavy weaponry?"

"Tell me when."

Fragger turned to Iso and ordered, "Distribute arms to every soldier."

"It's already being done, colonel."

"Tell every soldier to meet at the airlock for the briefing. Get yourself down there now and suit up. Have my armor ready to go."

"Yes sir," Iso acknowledged and was out the door.

Fragger got on the commlink to sick bay. "Buurk, are you there yet?"

"Here, colonel," the Martian's deep voice responded.

"Is Patrick there?"

"Who?"

"The baby."

"Oh, he's got a name now? Congratulations, colonel."

"Shut up, you moron and listen. I want him and you and Amalia in the safest place possible, and that's sick bay. And make sure Andriana—is she there?"

"No, colonel."

"Where is she?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, send someone to find—"

The dropship shuddered under another impact. Fragger cut the connection to Buurk and ordered Ranglin. "Take us in now."

"Yes, sir."

"Iso, you're with me," the Ranger said as he rose and strode toward the lift. "Let's get it done."

## Chapter 32

"The enemy knows your MASER abilities, colonel. The element of surprise is gone."

Fragger peered through his visor at Iso. The two of them flanked the hatch with power swords at the ready. Before replying, Fragger scanned the soldiers gathered about them quickly and was satisfied at the calm checking of plasma weapons, the lethal flechette-spraying shredders, and power maces.

"Knowing about my abilities is one thing, Iso. Experiencing them is another."

Vibrations clanging through the hull told Fragger the Ricers had docked and were in the process of cycling through the airlock of their ship.

"True, colonel, but the late Lord Lesto adopted a successful tactic against you, and it's likely the enemy has learned of it."

"A mass charge was effective, Iso. There were too many for me to handle, but such a charge can't be mounted in these close quarters. They have to come through in small numbers, and we can chop them up piecemeal."

"If they come through."

"What do you mean?"

"A standard Ricer tactic is to open the airlock hatch and toss in a grenade or two to clear out an area."

"Simple grenades aren't going to make a dent on our armor, Iso."

"They won't be simple grenades, colonel. They'll be sophisticated assault versions of the 'flash bang' grenade you spoke of using in your time."

"How sophisticated?"

"They're designed to overwhelm suit defenses and immobilize their systems temporarily. In effect, they stun the suit, not the soldier inside it, and this provides a crucial window for attack. Soldiers can pour through the hatch in numbers, and there's nothing we can do about it."

"So, there's no explosion as such other than electronic?"

"It's accompanied by a light and noise show," Iso answered, "but there's no serious damage done by that."

"What if I'm outside my suit? Would I be okay?"

Iso's eyes widened with alarm. "You're not thinking of—"

"Answer the question," Fragger ordered.

"With suitable protection against the flash and bang, yes." And if that's the only weapon my former comrades decide to toss in. There may be others."

Fragger made a decision quickly as the clanging grew louder. "Withdraw the men to the far side of room. Get two or three troopers shoulder to shoulder so I can hide behind them."

Fragger wriggled out of his armor. When Iso had himself and two other in position, the Ranger lay behind them on the floor with the power sword gripped tightly by his side. Despite the chilly metal of the deck drawing heat from his skin, Fragger sweated heavily, the fever of combat gripping his body. To keep nervousness at bay, he focused on Bucaram's talisman gifts. He'd taken the time to don them before getting into his armor, feeling the need to honor the uwishin's actions. He stroked the toucan feathers of Shuar breastplate, then patted the Aiforian knife strapped to his thigh.

Bucaram said they would bring luck and transfer the power of my enemies to me. Let's hope he's right.

Fragger tensed as the thumping and clanging grew louder then ended with a hiss of air as the hatch opened.

Two heavy, metallic clunks sounded on the deck. The Ranger hugged the floor, closing his eyes and clapping his hands over his ears. A second later, light seared through his eyelids, and concussions lifted him off the deck. He felt as if every bone in his skeleton had been broken and then rudely shoved back into place at bad angles. Through stunned ears, he could hear the faint protesting whine of power armor as his soldiers' armor froze into place. Willing himself erect, he peeked around Watanabe's shoulder, expecting to see Ricer troopers pouring into the ship.

Instead, there was only one intruder.

A deadly one, he realized. One I faced on Mars.

It was a RAM unit.

Automatically, he translated the military designation in his mind. Robot Assault Mobile. Shit, just another word for lethality.

It was a smaller version of the hulking machine he'd encountered in the armory on Goldilocks, but it floated above the deck with the same deadly armament—medium, multi-barrel Gauss weapons. He ducked down as the RAM targeting system sprayed slugs into his soldiers and accelerated around the room until he was behind the machine. When he decelerated, the RAM swivelled barrels at him with unnerving speed and continued firing. Fragger accelerated instantly, feeling the heat of the slugs as they tore into the space he'd just occupied. He accelerated to the other side of the room, seeking shelter behind stacks of cargo. As soon as he stopped, the RAM opened fire again.

Fuck, this damned machine is programmed to never let me rest! They know I have to tire sooner or later. Clever thinking on someone's part.

He accelerated once more, trying to think of a way out of the situation while on the move. I need someone to engage that thing's attention in order to have a chance.

He kept on the move until he heard his soldiers' power armor whine back to life.

"Iso!" he yelled into his wrist commlink. "Concentrate fire on the RAM!"

Iso barked an order, and a volley of fire struck the machine. Plasma bolts splashed against its tough hide. The RAM staggered in the air under the force of the attack. When its weapons fire became erratic, Fragger shouted "Cease fire!" and accelerated from behind cargo boxes. He sliced his sword through the projecting weapons' barrels until all firing ceased. Then, he dropped to one knee and drove the blade up into the vulnerable bottom of the RAM. It emitted an electronic shriek and dropped to the deck.

Fragger barely had time to pull his sword from the wreckage before the pounding of armoured feet sounded behind him. Still on his knee, he turned to see Ricer soldiers in their characteristically graceful

Samurai armor, on the dead run, bent on overwhelming him. It was the same tactic used by Lord Lesto so many months ago on Jivaro. To his surprise, Corpse and Aiforian soldiers were mixed in with the attackers. With their blunt, functional armor, the Corpses and Aiforians looked like rhinos running amongst deadly Ricer tigers.

Fragger jumped to his feet, ready to retreat to a more strategic position. If the enemy soldiers got him down under a pile of armor, he knew there would be no getting up again. Before he could move, a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back. Iso and the rest of the Jivaron Rangers stormed past and met the enemy in a violent melee. At close range, axes chopped and shredders emitted flechettes in deadly bursts. Two packs of soldiers pushed against each other as if they were in a brutal rugby scrum. Fragger evaluated the situation immediately.

"We're outnumbered. They'll push us back eventually unless I do something."

He accelerated into the melee, plunging his sword tip into the vulnerable neck areas of the front-rank enemy soldiers, and then darting back before launching the next attack. Some men died in instant surprise; others gurgled helplessly, clutched at their throats, and sank to the deck where their bodies tripped and slowed their comrades.

Fragger's blade jabbed into several bodies before the enemy's advance began to slow. The hesitation was noticed quickly by his Rangers. A triumphant roar rose as they surged forward and broke through into the Ricer ship. Fragger burst through with them, then stopped at the sight of the man calmly awaiting him.

"Radmuller!" he shouted.



## Chapter 33

Tyco Radmuller had exchanged his jungle garb for armor. The suit was gleaming white and obviously custom-designed for the small frame inside it. Arrogance kept Radmuller's face-plate open so it was easy for Fragger to re-acquaint himself with the doctor's features—the arched eye brows, the thin, aristocratic lips, and the grey-blue eyes that still held their perpetual contempt. As before, Fragger had the impression that Radmuller perpetually held a microscope before him and was peering into its eyepiece to examine the eternally irritating flaws of the universe. His gaze said that Fragger was a major flaw.

A reserve force of silverbacks surrounding Radmuller and towering over him were no laughing matter, either. Grunts of eagerness escaped their mouths along with the drool of madness that the doctor had engineered into their systems.

"Dr. Shaper," Fragger said to gain time to assess the situation, "you look like one candy-ass soldier."

"The name is Radmuller," the doctor said coldly as he fastidiously brushed a loose strand of blond hair from his forehead and back into place. "And you'll find out that I'm far from being a soft soldier. After all—" he swept his hand around the room—"you're not the only one with the ability to capture enemy vessels and to lay traps."

"I wish I had time to be impressed," Fragger said. He gestured at the odd mix of human soldiers and Radmuller's engineered beasts. "I'll give you credit for one thing, though—you've assembled the worst-looking group of misfits I've ever seen as a combat force. It couldn't have been easy."

Radmuller chuckled. "Oh, it was remarkably easy, thanks to you, Rerun. Once I had the ship in hand, I simply mentioned that you were the prize, and, just like that, I had a fighting force."

"A very unwilling one, I suspect," Fragger said.

Radmuller offered a sardonic grin. "They succumbed to my usual wit and charm. After the attack you engineered on my base, there were many stragglers who came around to my point of view."

"You gave them a choice. Life or death."

"And a considerable financial incentive, Rerun. After that, it was simply a matter of preparing this ship and a matter of time. You had to engage your enemies at some point. You had no other choice."

"You stood outside the battle and kept watch."

Radmuller nodded. "All I had to do was to wait for one of your patented escape attempts. I salute your ancient Ranger training. As much as it pains me to say it, they obviously were an elite force."

"They still are," Fragger said.

"And you'd like nothing better than to set them loose in our century, wouldn't you, Rerun?"

"I'm just trying to survive."

Radmuller smirked. "False modesty doesn't become you. The only way you can survive is to build an army around you."

"And that's why you're here. To stop me."

An airy wave of a hand dismissed that thought. "Oh, I could care less about your plans for an army.

They're not going to come to fruition, anyway. What I care about is you."

"Not me. My abilities. You want to take me apart just as you do with your animals."

"Of course."

"Well, I salute your misguided ingenuity as well, Radmuller. But a pack of untrained rabble is hardly a match for the Jivaron Rangers."

"Oh, I have other resources," Radmuller responded blandly as he flipped his faceplate shut. "This ship has unexpected delights at my disposal."

An invisible signal parted the soldiers about Radmuller. Their heads turned back toward the main hatch. Fragger expected more silverbacks and troops to come running through the open entrance. Instead, the hiss and whirr of hydraulics sounded from the bulkheads. Flanking the main hatch, two doors slid aside to reveal concave storage spaces. Inside each was a RAM unit. Fragger's heart sank.

*Full-blown battle RAMs!*

"As you can see from their military designation, these are the *Raijin* models," Radmuller said. "The gods of thunder and lightning in Ricer mythology."

The RAMs were monsters, nearly four meters tall with massive metal-composite chests. Above the chests, gleaming skulls pivoted between overlapping shoulder plates as they assessed the situation. From the shoulders, thick arms hung close to articulated knees. Fragger glanced quickly at the hands, afraid they'd hold weapons that would blast holes in the hulls of both ships. His relief at not seeing a magnetic accelerator cannon or heavy gauss weapon in their hands was short-lived. One RAM held a short-shafted war hammer. It reminded Fragger of the claw-hammers of his time, only the claw had been molded into a single sharp point and the head was at least 15 centimeters across and fitted atop a thick, short shaft. The weapon design shouted its one purpose—close combat in confined spaces. Held in the hand of the other RAM was another in-fighting weapon, a flail with 7-centimeter spikes studding a metal ball attached by a chain to a steel bar.

*Metal grunts with a hundred times my strength*, Fragger thought as he readied for their attack. *And my sword might as well be made of paper against their armor.*

As the RAMs whirred into action and started out of their compartment in his direction, Fragger activated his commlink.

"Iso, engage the human troops, but stay away from the RAMs. Create as much congestion as possible. At my command, fall back into our ship and stay ready."

"Yes, sir," Iso answered. In the next instant, the Jivaron Rangers charged forward. The blast of weapons and the clash of swords and axes echoed in the chamber, punctuated by the grunts and curses of desperate soldiers. Fragger accelerated away from the advancing RAMs toward the rim of the chamber. He cut his way through several Aiforian soldiers before hacking into the Corpse troopers flanking Radmuller. They fought fiercely and stubbornly to keep him away from their leader. Fragger sliced into the weak spot behind the knees of a tall soldier. The man howled and buckled to the deck. Two of his comrades stumbled over the downed man in their eagerness to get at the Ranger. Fragger hacked their heads off as they fell. Their comrades shouted with anger they fought to get over the bodies.

Out of the corner of his eye, the Ranger caught a looming presence and ducked just as the flail-wielding RAM swung its weapon at his head. The studded ball whizzed by Fragger's ear and caught one of

Radmuller's men flush on the chest. The man flew backwards into the ranks and took three men to the deck with him.

"Get away from the Rerun!" a furious Radmuller ordered. "Clear a space for the RAMs!"

Fragger gave his own command. "Iso, retreat to the air lock now and hold your position."

"Understood, colonel."

The Ranger accelerated again, dropping under the swing of the warhammer by the second RAM. He raced away from Radmuller's position and engaged Ricer troops to draw attention away from Iso's retreat. They were lighter and more nimble than their Corpse counterparts and fought more intelligently. They thrust their swords at him, jumped away, and thrust again. Fragger parried their thrusts until he realized they were playing a waiting game, trying to keep him busy while his back was exposed to the RAMs. He went along with the game for a few seconds until he felt the heavy presence of the machines close to him, then accelerated hard into the pack of Ricers and burst through their line. The remaining Ricers parted quickly to let the RAMs through. Fragger raced to the main interior hatch, opened it, and slipped through into the corridor of the Ricer ship. A millisecond later, the flail smashed into the bulkhead where he'd been standing. Too large to get through the hatch, the RAMs swung their weapons through the opening, attempting to reach him with their blows. Fragger waited patiently for Radmuller to realize the futility of this action and order the machines to stop damaging the ship. Within a minute, his patience was rewarded. The RAMs dropped the weapons to their sides and straightened into immobility as Radmuller's troops swarmed around them and toward his position.

"Attack their rear, Iso," Fragger ordered and brought his sword to the ready as the enemy troops ran at him. He scythed the legs out from under the first screaming soldier and thrust the blade into the armpit of the second. They both fell in a tumble, partially blocking the entrance. Behind them, their comrades stacked up against one another, cursing at each other as they sought to get free of the tangle of armor and weapons. The curses turned to shrieks of fright as the maddened silverbacks turned on them and tore at their armor. Then, Iso and the Jivaron Rangers slammed into their rear.

The smell of burnt flesh and eviscerated entrails filled the corridor as Fragger carried the attack forward. Sandwiched between him and the Rangers, the enemy's ranks crumbled, and they died in a heap. Fragger leaped over the jumble of bodies and re-entered the chamber. He scanned the room quickly for Radmuller. It didn't take long to find him.

Cornered by Rangers, Radmuller and the creatures guarding him fought desperately and with surprising skill. Around the chamber, scattered Corpse, Ricer and Aiforian soldiers died under axes and blades or dropped their knees to the bloody deck and begged for mercy.

Fragger stepped warily around the inert RAMs and snapped an order at the doctor.

"Surrender, Radmuller."

Through his visor, the doctor glared at him.

"You surrender, Rerun. I still have the RAMs at my command."

"They're useless," Fragger said. "I can get back out the door before you activate them."

Radmuller smiled and shook his head. "You still don't realize your accidental importance, do you, Rerun? I'm willing to sacrifice this ship and everyone on it to make sure I either have you or you're dead. I'll send the RAMs after you, and they'll tear every bulkhead apart until they find you and kill you."

"I don't think your fellow shipmates would agree with that tactic," Fragger said.

Radmuller shrugged. "They have no choice. And if you think you can get back onto your ship, the RAMS will batter their way in and destroy everything and everybody. Are you willing to sacrifice all your friends?"

Fragger swore. "You haven't learned anything, have you, Radmuller? In your hands, we're as good as dead anyway. We haven't got anything left to do but fight. So, it doesn't really matter what you do with those robots."

"Let's see if that's true, Rerun."

Behind him, Fragger could hear the two RAMs whine powerfully back into life. He turned to see the flail-wielding robot raise its weapon in the air and whirl the blade-studded ball into a deadly whistling blur before advancing toward his men on the right flank. The second RAM took the left flank. With a quick swipe of its war hammer, the unit took out one of Fragger's Rangers and two of Radmuller's own soldiers.

Fragger opened a commlink channel to his pilot. "Ranglin, disengage the ship. Lay off the hull far enough to prevent RAMs from boarding. Stand by to receive our men."

"Acknowledged," the pilot said.

Fragger turned back to face Radmuller and found him gone. He searched among the soldiers scrambling to avoid the RAMs, but the search came to a quick end as the ball of the flail hissed by his head and thudded into the bulkhead. Fragger accelerated past the RAM and into the path of its partner. The point of the war hammer slammed into the deck between his feet, sending a shower of sparks into the Ranger's face. Fragger cursed and accelerated again toward the side of the room farthest from the airlock to his ship. Both RAMs swung their heads in his direction and advanced again.

Fragger issued his orders. "Iso, Radmuller's got both robots keyed on me. Get the men off the ship. Tell them to be prepared to jump. I ordered Ranglin to lay off to keep the RAMs from coming on board."

"What about you?" Iso asked.

"Believe me, I'll be right behind you!"

"Understood."

"And, Iso, concentrate your fire on Radmuller as you retreat."

"Acknowledged, but I don't see him, colonel."

"Damn, he's got to be here!"

"Maybe he's dead."

"Not a chance," Fragger said. "It's never that easy with Radmuller."

"Unfortunately, he has as many lives as you do, colonel."

"Ain't it the tru—"

Fragger leaped back as the flail-wielding RAM swung his weapon in a vicious horizontal strike. At the same time, the war hammer of the second RAM tried to drive its point straight into his ear. Fragger

ducked, but the edge of the weapon clipped the top of his head. He staggered against the bulkhead. The insane chatter of a concussion lit up his mind. The warning shouts of his men melted into red, blue and silver fireworks which turned into the smell of spilled intestines, blood, and the far, far away sighing voice of Radmuller.

"Goodbye, Rerun. It's a pity for you to die. What I could have done with your abilities."

Fragger tried to shake his head free of the chaos inside it to locate Radmuller.

*It's no use*, he despaired as his limbs refused to obey his order to move. He sank down with the two RAMs towering over him. Sparks flew from their metallic shells as his men fired a concentrated volley.

*How silly, Iso!* he thought. *Your fire won't do any good. It's like using pea shooters against rhinos. Get your ass and the men back to the ship!*

Fragger watched with bemused detachment as the RAMs raised their weapons for the death blow. He knew he should be afraid, but it seemed a waste of time.

*Besides, I'm kind of looking forward to death. I deserve the rest.*

This thought struck him as tremendously funny, and he giggled as if he were a schoolgirl instead of a hardened combat veteran. The laughter snapped him back into seriousness.

*Embarrassing! Go out with some dignity, you fool!*

He straightened his shoulders and attempted to stand up so he could die with a semblance of pride. His legs still wouldn't obey him. It was easier to close his eyes.

A thud on the deck beside him and the rattling of a chain opened them again. Fragger stared numbly at the ball of the flail as it rolled to a stop beside his right hip and dropped its broken chain across his leg. He looked up and saw that the RAM seemed as confused as he was. Its head was turned toward the shaft in its metal hand as the robot sorted through its command program for the next appropriate action. Beside it, the second RAM was in the same mode. Its focus was on the broken shaft of the war hammer still clutched in its fist. The hammer head lay on the deck near its feet. Fragger lifted his gaze and looked past the robots.

Near the airlock, Iso and several Rangers stood and poured fire at the weapons of the RAMs.

"Fragger," he heard Iso shout over the commlink. "Get your lazy ass up off the deck and over here."

"What?" Fragger said blankly.

"You heard me. That's a direct order, soldier."

"You can't order me, Iso. I order you!"

"Colonel, snap out of it! Now!"

The sharp tone cut through the confusion in Fragger's head and he rose up shakily.

"Now, Fragger! Before those damned robots process the situation!"

Fragger lurched forward, staggered against the leg of one of the RAMs, and stumbled toward his men. He tripped and slammed into the deck. The action cleared his head enough for him to roll over on his back and ask, "Where's Radmuller?"

"Out of the room and back into the main part of his ship."

"We need to get him, Iso."

Iso hauled Fragger to his feet. "We can't, colonel. He's locked down the hatch door."

"But we'll be right back where we started from. He'll blow us out of space once we're free of his ship."

"We'll keep him occupied with other matters so we don't have to worry about it."

Fragger regarded his friend with confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Just watch the RAMs."

Fragger wiped blood from his eyes and obeyed Iso's command.

The robots stood where he'd left them, seemingly immobilized.

"You froze them?" he asked.

"For a moment," Iso answered. "I ran a tactical analysis on these models. They're vulnerable to an EMP pulse generator."

"But RAMS are hardened against such attacks."

"This is an older series of *Raijin*, colonel. The circuitry is lightly shielded in the neck so I ordered the men to concentrate fire on that area while I deployed EMP weapons. These two men here are doing the real damage."

Iso gestured at the two troopers flanking him, and Fragger saw that each knelt with weapons resembling elongated M79 grenade launchers of his Vietnam days. They kept the barrels focused tightly on the RAMs.

"Well, thank God, you've damaged them, but how is this going to keep Radmuller's attention off us?"

"Patience, colonel. EMP weapons don't work quickly. We need time to enter our own command into their brains."

"Which is?"

"Berserker mode. It's seldom used because of the expense of replacing these beasts, but there are special circumstances."

Fragger guessed, "When you're losing a battle and need a last-ditch effort to cover a retreat?"

"Right."

"Will it work?"

Iso shrugged. "You never know with damaged circuitry. We'll soon find out, though."

"You're playing a dangerous game."

Iso grinned at him. "Kept you in one piece, didn't it?"

"Look!" one of the men shouted.

The RAMs jerked out of immobility, their heads swiveling toward the main hatch into the ship. Their bodies straightened, and they strode with powerful purpose to the door. Massive arms hammered at the hatch. Metal crumpled inward, accompanied by a harsh clang that assaulted Fragger's ears.

"It won't take them long to get through that," he said to Iso.

"If they stick to it," Iso responded. "It's time for us to get out of here because when they're in berserker mode, those RAMs don't care what's in their way."

Fragger pointed out the obvious. "I don't have a suit."

"You told me you crossed space once before with Red, colonel."

"Yeah, but I don't care to repeat the experience."

Iso nodded toward the robots. "If you don't get moving right now, we may have an unrepeatable experience with the RAMs."

One of the robots had straightened up from its task of hammering in the door, turned and fixed its sensors on the Rangers. It rotated around clumsily and started toward them.

"Let's go!" Fragger said.

"Grab my utility belt and hang on," Iso ordered.

Fragger obeyed, inhaled deeply and held his breath as the air lock door slid open. Iso launched himself straight out the door and at the grey, battered hull of their dropship. It was hard to judge distances in space, but Fragger estimated that they had 30 meters to go and hoped he could hold his breath that long.

*As if I had any choice!* he thought as he felt the cold bite into his body with sharp force. The blood on his head froze quickly into a crust that threatened to pucker the skin right off his scalp and face. Fragger forced his mind away from the pain by looking back at Radmuller's ship.

Most of the Rangers floated safely about his position, but a RAM had clamped its hand around a straggler and, with casual strength, tore him in two. The soldier's head and torso drifted off into space, followed closely by the legs and an accompanying spray of frozen blood and entrails. For a second, Fragger was afraid the RAM would launch itself after them. He breathed an internal sigh of relief when it slammed its fist into the bulkhead, as if in frustration, and disappeared back into the ship.

Fragger was even more relieved when Iso flew through the open hatch of their dropship and thrust him through an emergency air lock door and dogged it quickly behind him. Fragger dropped hard to the deck on his hands and knees, grateful for the sudden impact of heat and air. He gasped, drew in a deep lungful of oxygen and then another. From his experience with Red, he knew the shivering would start as soon as his skin began to thaw, but he didn't really care. It was good to be alive.

*The question is, how many more lives do I have? I've really got to stop doing this!*

"Colonel, colonel, are you there?" an urgent voice sounded over the commlink.

"I'm okay, Iso. Thanks."

"It's not Iso. It's Buurk."

"Buurk? This had better be important. I'm not in real good shape right now."

"It's Lady Lesto. She's after your son!"



## Chapter 34

"Goddamn it, I told you to keep her away from the baby!" Fragger swore as he forced his chilled limbs into action and got himself up off the deck.

"We lost track of her during the confusion of the battle."

"Where is she?"

"In sickbay. I am too. She killed the guard, and now she's got us cornered in the pharmacy. I have the door blocked, but she's got a gauss rifle and is blowing holes through it right now!"

A sudden blast over the commlink confirmed the Martian's statement.

"Buurk, Buurk! Are you okay?" Fragger shouted.

"...I'm still here, colonel. So's Wik, but he's down. I took some shrapnel in the back from the door. The baby's ... okay."

Fragger cursed at the slowness of his legs as he limped into a corridor and found a lift. As it shot toward the center of the ship, he rubbed his arms and legs vigorously to restore warmth. When the door opened, he'd restored enough feeling to break into a run toward sickbay.

A blast from the gauss rifle impacted the bulkhead next to him as he came through the door. He dropped, rolled behind a desk, only to have it shatter apart in front of him. Splinters of metal drove into his body. The sharp stinging pain drove him back into motion. As he accelerated, he located Andriana. She had the rifle braced against one hip while she tugged fiercely at Buurk's arm. The Martian had his back to her to shield the wailing baby. Blood dripped from the arm, and a twisted grimace on the Martian's broad face told Fragger his friend was in agony. Andriana jerked hard at the arm again, and Buurk screamed as he toppled on to his back. The baby lay helpless and exposed on the Martian's chest. A wild cry of triumph came from Andriana as she swung the rifle away Fragger and aimed at Patrick.

"No!" Fragger cried as he accelerated toward the insane mother of his child. His abilities gave him incredible speed, but there was too much distance to cover before Andriana's finger pulled the trigger. Andriana turned her head toward him, and he saw the terrible gleam of vengeance in her narrowed eyes before she swung her head back toward the baby.

Andriana started in surprise as a small body clambered across Buurk, past the baby and launched itself into her chest. A blast from the rifle hit the ceiling as she stumbled and fell backward. Watrun Wik grabbed the rifle and tried to tear it from Andriana's arms. She drove the stock into his throat, but the vidman hung on, and they rolled over and over on the deck.

Fragger reached them an instant later and drove a short punch into Andriana's jaw. Stunned, she released her grip on the weapon and fell back onto the deck. Fragger pulled Wik up by the belt, tore the weapon out of the doctor's hands, and threw it across the room. He dropped the vidman gently to the deck.

"Wik, are you okay?" he asked. "Wik?"

The vidman gasped and nodded as he raised his head. Fragger saw purple bruising on his neck.

Wik struggled to get words out. When they finally did, they had a constricted tone.

"Buurk? How's Buurk? And the baby?"

Fragger stepped across Andriana, went to the Martian, and knelt. "Buurk, Buurk, are you okay?"

The medic smiled weakly. "I need a new arm, I think. Tell Wik the baby's okay. And tell him he's a crazy little bastard."

Tears stung at Fragger's eyes as he checked the ragged wound that had torn away half of Buurk's upper arm.

"You're both crazy bastards," he said, and I owe you everything. I want you to know—"

The wail of the baby cut off his sentence.

"I think Patrick is hungry," Buurk said. "You should get him some—"

The Martian's head dropped to one side. Fragger bent quickly and put his fingers to Buurk's neck. Relief flooded his body when he felt a pulse. He quickly spoke an order into the commlink.

"Iso, get medics to sickbay ASAP. Buurk is down and injured badly."

"Understood," Iso answered. "How's the baby?"

"Unhurt."

"And Lady Lesto?"

Fragger glanced at Andriana. She'd rolled onto her hands and knees and was attempting to crawl toward the rifle.

"Fragger?" Iso asked. "Are you there?"

"Yes."

"What about Lady Lesto?"

Fragger hesitated, then answered. "I'll take care of her."

Andriana stopped crawling at his words. She turned her body and slid her back up against the wall. Her eyes tracked his movement toward her. They held no fear, only acceptance.

Fragger stood over the mother of his child. "I would have loved you, you know," he said softly. "It would have come with time."

"Your love disgusts me," she said. "I'd sooner rut with a pig."

"I can't let you live," he said, gesturing toward his comrades and the baby. "You cost me and the others around me too much."

"Then I hope you choke on your guilt, Rerun."

"I can promise you two things, Andriana. Your son will live, and he will be exceptional. And ... your death will be quick and painless."

Andriana laughed bitterly. "As if I care about either one! I hope you and the little bastard—"

Fragger accelerated. In one motion, he drew Wenghorn's Aiforian blade from its sheath and drove it hard into her heart. Andriana's ice-blue eyes widened for an instant, softened, and then closed as blood

gushed from her mouth. The Ranger drew the blade out and drove it in again to make sure.

"My God, Fragger," he heard Wik gasp. "My God, what did you do?"

"I simply couldn't take any more," Fragger said as he dropped the knife. "What mother would kill her own baby? And keep on trying?"

Wik had no answer, but his eyes showed the revulsion the Ranger felt for himself.

"Get yourself looked at when the medics arrive," Fragger snapped at the vidman as he walked past him and lifted Patrick gently from the chest of the unconscious Buurk.

Cradling the crying baby in his arms, he walked from sickbay and took the lift to the bridge. Heads turned as he walked in.

"Report," he ordered Ranglin.

Patrick wailed suddenly, and the pilot eyed the Ranger with uncertainty.

"You've never seen a baby before?" Fragger barked.

"Uh, no, not on the bridge, colonel."

"Well, get used to it. What's the situation with Radmuller? Is he still a threat?"

"No, colonel. We're well away from his ship. There were a few salvos after you got back on board, but targeting has ceased altogether. From the erratic movements of their vessel, I'd guess they have internal troubles, but it wasn't from us. We didn't inflict any damage. Any idea what caused it?"

"One of Iso's tactics," Fragger answered. "He suborned two battle RAMs and turned them loose in the ship."

Ranglin gave a low, appreciative whistle. "I'd say Radmuller has his hands full."

"I'd like to go back after him and kill the bastard. Any chance of that?" Fragger asked.

"None, colonel. As you know, we couldn't match up with his firepower in the first place, and we've sustained damage that needs repairing."

"Any of it impair the integrity of our ship?"

"No," Ranglin answered.

"We'll be able to enter hyperspace?"

"Once repairs are made, yes."

Fragger sat in a chair and gave Patrick a finger to suckle on. It quieted the crying. The men shifted uncomfortably, and Fragger knew they found the sight of a hardened combat veteran tending a baby disquieting.

"Ranglin," Fragger said. "You remember the promise I made to you and your buddy?"

"Yes, sir. Do what you say, and we'll have our freedom."

Fragger fell silent for a moment, distracted by the sudden hard suckling on his finger. It brought back

memories of his children, lost six centuries ago.

"Sir?" Ranglin asked hesitantly. "Do you intend to keep that promise?"

"Don't worry," Fragger answered. "I fully intend to keep it. There's only one thing you need to do."

"What's that?"

"Find me a planet, pilot."

Find a home for me and my son.

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