

SHADOWWORLD

NOVELLA



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THE NOVELLA

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for KRISALIS SOFTWARE
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Your Novella is designed to enhance your enjoyment of Shadowworlds. The characters depicted, along with their skills and weaponry are not available to you in the simulation and furthermore no clues or hints are contained within.

PROLOGUE

A shard of bright red sunlight fell across a huge glass dome, adding its hue to the other five colours already playing over the man-made surface. In a few weeks, the exceedingly rare rainbow sunset would break over the fossil-planet of Bardot IV. Scientists had calculated that this spectacular display of natural beauty would only be seen once every hundred thousand years and so the colonists of the testing site, they said, were privileged to be there to witness it.

None of them did.

Within the immense colony complex no signs of intelligent life remained. Robots scuttled about their work, watering the plants, dusting the unused furniture, cleaning the spotless floors, repairing those machines that did not self-maintain. Banks of computer screens churned out endless results of tests, but no-one monitored them. Occasionally, a stream of print-outs was swept up and recycled by the maintenance robots.

Outside of the dome, huge craters in the world's surface betrayed the motive behind building on this barren, isolated planet. Weapons testing, banned by universal

agreement, had not died out completely. Indeed, it had merely been driven underground: even as the ink from hypocritical pens was drying on peace treaties, new sites were being researched and new testing colonies established. Bardot IV was one of the first chosen and it had provided some interesting results for those who set it up. Due to its extreme distance from Earth (which, despite being abandoned centuries ago due to ravaging pollution and overcrowding, was still sentimentally used as a political base by humankind), communications from Bardot IV took five weeks to reach headquarters.

It took five weeks for them to realise that something had gone badly wrong in the testing colony.

Five weeks is a long, long time.

CHAPTER ONE

Inwood Dalgetti drummed his fingertips on the remote control panel of his swivel chair as he surveyed the information in front of his left eye. He and his two companions were wearing the latest in contact lenses, the lens monitor. This allowed information to be displayed on it, while leaving the other eye free to focus on something else. Potentially, it let the mono-focussing human brain concentrate on two things at once. Accidents in the airways around planets, caused by pilots watching soap operas at their controls, led to the devices being banned.

This law, like all others, only affected those who could not afford to be above it. Dalgetti and his partners could well afford to run the risk of being caught by the police. They owned them.

Dalgetti finished reading the report and waited for the others to do the same. They switched off their lenses and a silence fell. Finally, Dalgetti spoke.

"Gentlemen, we have a problem." He was a master of understatement.

"I'll say we have! This cannot get out. We must act, fast."

Sproake was a huge, greasy man, balding and obese, whose hair had gone grey very early in life. He perspired almost constantly, despite having had removed by laser surgery all of the sweat glands possible within reasonable safety limits.

"Layik. What's your reaction?"

Hessel Layik was a sharp contrast to Sproake. He was tall and wasted-looking, had raven-black, slick hair and thin, piercing eyes. He finished inhaling deeply on a cigarette and blew seven smoke rings into the air before answering.

"I suggest that we send out a team. If something's gone wrong out there, I want to know what it is. If the project is a write-off, that's one thing, but if the site has fallen into the wrong hands... well, you don't need me to list the implications of that outcome."

Dalgetti shifted in his seat and pondered. His chiselled features, framed by shocking red hair, were set. He nodded. "I don't see that we have a lot of choice."

"We could nuke the site," Sproake suggested fervently. "Pass it off as an act of God. Better still, send a team up there to examine the debris and claim that it's one of *theirs*!"

Layik leapt in angrily. "What, draw attention to our own testing site which, may I remind you, is as good a proof

of our betrayal of the UCG treaty as signing a contract in our own blood? Are you mad?"

The fat man's face reddened as blood rushed to it. "Which end are you talking out of, Layik? If this is going to get written off, we may as well..."

"Hold it right there." Dalgetti cut off Sproake's words as efficiently as a garotte would have done. "Layik's right. No-one is going to nuke anything - especially anything with two hundred million of *my* Unidollars in it - without finding out as much about it first as is possible. I think the idea of sending a team out is a great one. All we need now is the team to send. Who could we trust with so delicate a mission?"

Yalik spoke up. "We should keep the team small, say four members at the most. That way, they won't draw attention to themselves. I have a man who can be trusted. He's the best in my inventory, a real pro. Skarto Krang."

Sproake snorted. "Krang? He's a religious freak!"

"He saved your precious butt more than once on your tour of the outer colonies!" retorted Layik. "Who do you think took out that assassin on Geranus III?"

The big man looked troubled. "I asked you to tell me who was behind that. I wanted to reward him."

"Fine undercover agent he would have become, seen decorated by you." Layik found it hard to keep his con-

tempt for Sproake out of his voice at times.

Dalgetti broke it up again. "Fine, Krang it is. Sproake? Got any ideas?"

Sproake steeped his fat fingers under his many chins and stared at an imaginary spot on the table. "I've got two men who would be...disposable," he said, "but tracking them down might take some time. Not impossible, though and they can be trusted."

"Can they?" Layik grunted, unconvinced.

There was no hint of malice for Layik in Sproake's voice when he spoke again. His voice was soft, like a fresh corpse is soft.

"Don't worry. They can be trusted. I know about them, you see. I know their past, what makes them tick. They'll be in on it."

Yalik felt a cold shiver pass down his spine and goose pimples broke out on his flesh. He rubbed his arms involuntarily.

"That just leaves me." Dalgetti regarded his partners-in-crime with a slight smile on his lips. "There is only one man: Hans Breekan."

The name came as no surprise to the others. Breekan was infamous in the upper echelon of the corporate world as the best hitman in the business. If there was

a dirty job that needed doing, Breekan was the person you called. Or rather, he called you. His fees were said to be astronomical - which, when someone was desperate, was acceptable.

It had to be.

"Well, gentlemen," Dalgetti drew the meeting to a close, "I suggest that we assemble our team for a briefing. In a week's time, they should be ready to depart. Any questions?"

There were none.

The men left the room and went their separate ways.

One white, bloodless hand glided over a switch and turned off the monitor. The image of the three super-powerful men faded as they left the room. The hand lay very still on the tabletop as its owner pondered for a moment. Then it pressed another switch. A buzzer sounded and was answered almost instantly.

"Yes Sir?" A lean, middle-aged face appeared on the monitor. Its most notable feature was a tattoo in the middle of the forehead: a scorpion.

"Get me Hans Breekan." The voice was quiet, assured, firm.

"H... Hans Breekan? Are you sure, Sir?"

There was silence for a moment.

"Do I have to ask again?"

"No, of course not Sir." The capital letter in the address to his superior was clearly audible. "I'll do it right away, Sir."

The hand flicked the switch again and the screen went blank once more.

CHAPTER TWO

The bar was, as ever, packed. Most of the drinkers in The Old Moon Stopover were tourists on their way to Jupiter for the surfing, or politicians going to Earth for a conference. People were attracted to the Old Moon. Even when generations of Earth-dwellers had emigrated to planets as far away as Neptune, had settled on the various planets in the solar system and raised true Saturnians, Jupitarians and Uranians and sent missions on into deep space, Earth's old sentimentalities counted for something. Hence the Old Moon had not been replaced by something more efficient, or just scrapped altogether.

The old joke about it being made of green cheese had, thankfully, died long ago.

Most of those people working in the Stopover were prostitutes, including the owners, those working behind the bar and the various security men about the place. They worked in shifts of half an hour working and half an hour on the job, which meant that everyone stayed happy. The Old Moon Stopover had become known as the largest natural brothel in the universe.

It was here that Layik's personal spacecraft landed, with a blast of retro-rockets, some three days after his historic meeting with Dalgetti and Sproake. Skarto Krang would most probably be here - and if he wasn't, someone here would know where he was.

Layik avoided meeting the gaze of the three psionic prostitutes - who made a living by auto-suggesting to their customers with their minds, then finding out their bank details while they were in the throes of ecstasy - and began the war of attrition which was the only way to enter the Stopover.

Progress was slow. It was a Friday night and the place was full to the rafters. Layik tried scanning the place for any empty seats: that was where Skarto was likely to be found. Fortunately his height gave him an advantage over most of the other patrons and Layik soon found what he was looking for.

In one corner of the bar, there was indeed a near-empty space. Its sole occupant was a huge, heavily-muscled man wearing, by comparison to the coolly-dressed trend-setters everywhere else, very conservative garb. Strangely, people were avoiding him. As they noticed the space they made for it with a look of relief: then, that look turned to dismay and they fought to get

back into the crowd.

Skarto Krang had the sort of voice an evangelist dreams of: penetrating, tireless, enthralling. As he approached, Layik felt the endless scriptures hit him, question his very moral fibre, turn his mind in upon itself, to seek the answers to the most painful of questions, even before he heard the words form properly in his ears.

Krang was preaching. And, in that hotbed of sin, the New Scriptures were a very unpopular form of entertainment. Hence, the customers (and, of course, the staff too) were staying well away. If they wanted to be preached to, they'd go to Space Church. They were here for quite another reason.

Layik smiled at his old friend, who returned his smile. *We'll go outside*, he told him with his mind, without pausing his preaching. *Very well, after you*, Yalik replied with a little effort. Their mindlink was a little 'rusty' due to disuse. As they moved back towards the door, a huge rent in the crowd opened up before them. People jumped onto the bar to get out of the preacher's way or ran back outside.

As he left, the crowd gave a tangible, collective sigh of relief and the previously empty space filled up instantly.

"So that, as they say, is it." Layik watched Krang's face for a reaction, but the impassive features revealed nothing of his thoughts about the proposed mission - or indeed, if he had any at all. Although the friends shared a mindlink and could use it to communicate roughly, neither man could read the other's mind as such.

The preacher sat in silence and regarded his old friend for a moment. When he finally spoke, the words were far from what Layik had expected to hear.

"You're afraid, aren't you? You're into something bigger than you can handle and you're scared half to death." He spoke as if he'd just had his eyes opened to something after long years of pondering, but Skarto Krang knew Layik very well by now. He sighed, shaking his head.

"I had hoped that you'd get back onto the right path, Layik," Krang said sadly.

"You always were getting yourself into a mess. And who had to bail you out every time?"

Layik's brow furrowed. "Come on. It wasn't always like that. I know you as well as you know me: you came to me, positively pleading for work, more than once. You've not made yourself the most popular man in the universe, Skarto. There's been many a time that I could have made myself look better by conveniently forgetting your name - at the recent meeting, for one - but I have always used you."

"Because I am the best."

"And because you are my friend." Layik relaxed a little and sipped at a drink, left by the customers that vacated their table when the two men came outside. "My friend," he repeated, smiling.

Skarto Krang smiled and placed his hand on his companion's arm. "Friend," he echoed, "count me in."

"What the hell are we doing on this dump of a satellite?"

"Shut up and drive." Sproake's right hand man, Bestroth Kniip, wasn't known for his patience. "We're here because Sproake sent us to find someone. We're not here to question his orders and we're not here on vacation, hence the fact that you're not enjoying the trip."

Kniip's companion, Blinth, stared out at the acid rain-storm and shuddered. "I don't like this place. It's not just that I don't want to be here, there's a feeling about it I don't like."

Kniip didn't answer straight away. He had got the same feeling when their inter-satellite shuttle had set down on the landing pad and they had borrowed one of the Sproake surface-buggies. It was like they were being... watched.

All he said out loud was, "Don't be ridiculous. You're getting the jitters. Too many sessions in Sensi-Horror moviedromes, I reckon."

Blinth ran his fingertips subconsciously over a small pattern of pinpricks on his neck. "I don't log in that often," he tried sheepishly, "but it really does feel like you're there." He put his hand back onto the joystick and said no more.

Kniip had tried Sensi-Horror only once. It had sparked off a minor heart attack which had led to his doctor banning him from using the Moviedromes again. Not that Kniip had needed banning: he had been truly terrified. For all of his bravado as Sproake's Numero Uno, he had the same fears as any other mortal. Death was one.

If Blinth was an addict, then he must have a very strong heart indeed. That would explain his wasted appearance. The constant rush of adrenaline through the system meant that addicts would age unnaturally fast. Blinth's historical record showed him to be twenty-six old years of age: his physical condition hinted at somewhere nearer to forty.

Kniip was about to ask his co-pilot how often he logged in when a missile hit the buggy and turned it over.

Kniip awoke to find a bright light shining into his eyes. The pain in his head was caused by a wound which, even now, was leaking blood into his eyes and making them sting. He blinked and tried to speak.

His head was smashed sideways by a stinging slap across it. It hung to one side while he tried to recover his composure: but two more slaps jolted it fiercely back to the right and then left again. Finally, he felt a hand take hold of his hair and yank his head back by it.

"Who sent you?" The accent was thick, typically Jupitarian, though from the dark, dangerous side judging by the gravelly undertone. The stink of illegal drugs and liquor on the breath of those three words made Kniip's head spin and he had to concentrate before answering.

"Sproake." He said it in a way which he thought would convince his captor that he was lying. Instead, whoever it was who had hit him seemed disturbed by the news. Some quick words were exchanged in a dialect which he didn't recognise. He heard Sproake's name mentioned more than once. Finally, a different voice spoke.

"He sent you to... to find us?" The owner of the voice sounded like the idea didn't exactly make him feel comfortable.

Kniip pressed home his advantage. "Drakth and Colinski?"

Indeed. He wanted me to bring you back. He said something about collecting what you owe him."

There was a silence, then another heated exchange in the strange language. Finally, he felt the bonds on his wrists being cut and water was thrown in his face.

"You had better take us to him, then," grunted the first voice.

When the light was taken from his eyes, he saw the faces of the people who he'd been sent to find. The owner of the deep voice was a massive creature, half-man, half... well, Kniip had never seen anything which could have bred with a human to produce *this*. His friend, the slighter of the two, bore the bluish tinge of a born Jupiterian. From the look of their attire, the two were mercenaries, living in some poverty.

"Well, gentlemen, if you show me a way back to the shipport, I'll take you to Sproake." His voice oozed sarcasm.

Kniip looked at their grim faces. "What's the problem?"

"We can't enter the spaceport by the normal route. We're outlaws. You'll have to smuggle us in."

Kniip sighed inwardly. Why was nothing ever easy?

"We'd better get a plan together, then," he said resigned to his fate.

As he listened to the two men talking, he wondered what had become of Blinth, then thought better of asking.

CHAPTER THREE

"And so, gentlemen, that is our little... dilemma." Dalgetti, Yalik and Sproake sat, half-cloaked by shadow, facing the rag-tag team that they'd put together.

The best men for the job.

Hans Breekan was the most mysterious figure, dressed in black leather from head to foot, his trademark, the super-powerful infravisioned rifle slung, as ever, over his left shoulder. Predictably, he knew of the meeting before any of the others had been informed and was waiting in the room when the three big cheeses had arrived. In the five minutes before the other mercenaries appeared, he'd already negotiated his contract and now sat, patiently waiting for the off.

The others were not so much at peace as Breekan.

"No way am I going there with these two." Skarto Krang jutted a thumb at the Jupiterians, Drakth and Colinski, without trying to hide his distaste.

"Breekan, I can live with. These scum, I cannot."

Yalik looked pained as he leaned forward. "You wouldn't be out there for long. All we want is to find out what hap-

pened. Then, if possible, secure the site again and return home. If the place is a write-off, then fair enough: but we must know - and you are vital to the mission. Without you-

Yalik swept a hand around him to include the whole group in his statement.

"-any of you, the mission is lost."

Krang didn't look convinced. "I want to reconsider my contract. You'll need to pad it out a little more if you still want me to go. God's work is costly these days."

A barely imperceptible sigh passed the lips of Yalik before he nodded his agreement. "So be it."

Drakth spoke. "It goes without saying," he grinned, "that we get the same treatment..."

Sproake cut in. "Of course. I'll settle up with you both later, in private."

Something unspoken passed between Sproake and his men. Whatever the message had been, they seemed satisfied enough. "Very good," Colinski concurred, with a nod.

Krang glanced at Yalik. *Mindlink ?* he asked telepathically.

Yalik replied. *No. He just knows them well.*

Too well.

"Then we can set off, at last." Breekan spoke in front of the others for the first time. His voice was dry and sharp,

like an icicle in the winter wind. "I trust that everyone has finished, asking their questions?" he added.

It seemed that everyone had.

"Very well," Dalgetti finished. "Anonymous bank accounts have been set up for you all. Your ID for them will be given to you on your return with the required evidence. "Oh, good luck by the way," he added, as the four mercenaries upon which he was relying so much stood up to leave. "I hear that part of the galaxy is lovely at this time of year. Something about a rainbow sunset?" The looks of contempt from all four of the hired killers managed to unsettle even the ice-cool Dalgetti, causing him to blush hotly.

The men gathered their few possessions together and left the room.

As he walked, Hans Breekam's index finger traced the pattern formed by a tiny silver logo on the butt of his rifle. The logo would have been mistaken for a rivet unless someone got close enough to Breekan to see it better - and no-one ever did.

It was a silver scorpion.

CHAPTER 4

"Migdaan-12 high impact laser rifles: three."

An orderly read out equipment from a long, long list, while the mercenary soldiers oversaw the loading of the starship *Duskin*. Occasionally, one would inspect part of the equipment and either toss it off the ship again, or approve it as of suitable standard. Only Hans Breekan did not involve himself in this part of the operation. He seemed disinterested in the weapons offered by the partnership of intergalactic tycoons, safe enough in the confidence inspired by his private arsenal.

This behaviour did not go unnoticed by the other three. Skarto Krang watched the mysterious assassin polish his rifle with some curiosity. Finally, he spoke.

"That's a very unusual weapon, Breekan. Mind if I take a look?"

The other regarded him for a moment before answering.

"Only I touch this weapon. Anyone else who touches it, dies. Understand?"

Krang seemed to find this attitude amusing.

"I'm merely interested as a fellow conspirator. What harm can it do?"

"The only way you'll get a better look at my rifle is down

the wrong end of the barrel. That, I can arrange. You only have to ask to see what harm it can do."

Breekan had a curious, broken way of talking, which made the shortest sentence seem long and unwieldy.

Krang smiled thinly, the cold smile of those who have cheated death many times, who welcome death as a friend to be trusted.

"You may be the best there is, Breekan. But if I were you, I'd watch my back. No-one is without their price - and no-one is invincible. Remember that."

Breekan's eyes narrowed to slits as Krang turned and walked away.

A medical orderly addressed the troops.

"You will be held in a state of suspended animation - Hypersleep - for the duration of the three-month voyage. This allows you to survive the journey with the minimum of supplies on board to weigh the ship down.

"Should anything go wrong with the life support systems, you will be awakened. Some emergency food supplies will be available which will keep you alive - just for one week. After that, we've estimated that you'll take about ten days to starve, but there will be water in plentiful supply. The atmosphere on Bardot IV's not fit for breathing, so we have provided you with Artificial Atmos suits.

Once inside the complex, the air should be breathable, if the atmosphere generators are operative."

The orderly looked up from his checklist computer and scanned the expressions of the four men. "Any further questions?"

Drakth spoke. "Where are you going to stick that thing?" He pointed to the needle in the medic's hand.

"In your left wrist. It will be covered by a bandage."

The big, dirty Jupitarian went slightly pale.

"Just don't let me see you put it in, that's all," he said with a shudder.

Skarto Krang caught Hans Breekan's eye and raised an eyebrow in amusement. If Breekan shared the joke, it didn't register even a flicker in his expression.

The preacher decided to have some fun.

"Come on, Drakth, it's not so bad. The only danger is that the needle will break and a piece will find its way to your heart. Odds of something like ten million to one against, of course..."

Drakth and Colinski both looked a little green, but made for their weapons all the same. The orderly cut in.

"Er, I should point out that the only sure way to survive such a long journey in suspended animation is to preserve as much energy as possible. If you excite one another, you'll be burning off precious reserves."

Yalik appeared then, despite his plans to stay away, slipping quietly out of the corridor and into the loading bay. He didn't seem very pleased to be there. His presence, while not overawing the mercenaries, cooled down the potentially violent situation and brought order back to the crew. He raised a palm in greeting.

"Remember, men - a lot rests on your success in this. Fail and countless millions of lives - and even more Unidollars - will be wasted. Your reputations are at stake, in case I need to remind such esteemed men as yourselves of the fact...He left the sentence hanging.

Surprisingly, Hans Breekan spoke then. "We have far less to lose than you, Yalik. Remember that."

His voice cut through the air like a throwing knife seeking a human heart. Yalik paled as he fought for control of his tongue.

The thin man finally ignored Breekan's comment and shared a brief mindlink exchange with Krang. *Good luck, my friend.*

The preacher replied using his mind. *We'll meet again, soon. Count on it.*

Yalik blinked, nodded to the other three men and left.

CHAPTER 5

Four slim, cigar-shaped glass objects ran along the centre of the control room of the *Duskin*. Anyone who walked over to the objects and took a closer look would have just been able to make out four faces through the thick glass-like substance. No-one was there to observe them, however: a single computer, with emergency back-up, monitored the artificial sleep of the four mercenaries.

If the observer had pressed his nose right against the glass and taken a really *close* look, he might have noticed that the eyelids of Skarto Krang were open a fraction of an inch. The preacher might have been asleep, but it was not due to the drugs which had put the other three under.

The small, insignificant ship began accelerating away from Earth, slipping unobserved through MegaRadar shields and out, past the planets which, for so long, had been considered the backbone of the human universe: Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, Pluto. On and on and off, out into the realms which had only been discovered in the last millennia or so, skirting the edge of a so-called Black Hole, which had finally been confirmed as a mere bending of light, caused by the sun's heat rays around the

centre of the solar system.

Still accelerating, gaining the required light speed rating to pull clear of the sun's massive gravitational force, the *Duskin* began to take on a blurry quality about the edges.

Light speeds were still used as little as was absolutely essential, as insufficient research had been done into the full effects of light speed on living matter. Light speed travellers experienced feelings of disorientation, giddiness, nausea and, in extreme cases, blackouts and amnesia, which was why the universal superpowers finally called for a ban on conscious light speed travelling.

Breaking the law was not something to which Skarto Krang was a stranger, so it was with a clear conscience that he opened his eyes, removed the needle from his wrist and sat up in his capsule. He closed his eyes, concentrating hard on something, then leant to one side and spat: a long, thin stream of clear fluids, the drugs which had been seeping through his system for the last six weeks, drained from a gland at the back of his mouth. He grimaced.

Ah well, at least the bad taste is better than the way you feel after a while of actually ingesting the stuff he thought.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes where it had crusted across the corners, Krang pressed the release button on the capsule and it hissed loudly before opening.

He looked across at the other three life-support capsules instinctively, before realising that their occupants could scarcely have heard him if he got involved in a heavy artillery fight.

Shaking the cobwebs from his mind, Krang stretched himself and walked across the oddly warped floor of the ship. Three times light speed was their current velocity and the ship was now cruising, no longer accelerating. In another two weeks' time, the retro drives would subtly begin slowing the ship down, until it would cruise quietly into the desired universal sector.

To awaken himself (and out of curiosity), Krang attempted to send a message to Yalik through their mindlink. For the minute or two that he was 'tuned in' to the wavelength, he felt more comfortable and less alone: but no message would transmit, which he didn't find surprising in the least. Mindlinks were very rare and untested beyond narrow limits. The preacher wasn't about to expend all of his spare mind powers in becoming a research scientist.

Krang hadn't woken himself up to do some sightseeing in this universal sector. Nor did he merely detest suspend-

ed animation sickness. He had chosen to stay in a demi-wakeful state for a reason. That reason lay in the capsule furthest from his own. Hans Breekan.

What was so special, he wondered, about the man's gun? No living creature had got close enough to the great assassin to find out the truth. Krang intended to rewrite history and find out right now. Summoning up his reserves of adrenaline involuntarily, his heart began to beat faster as he walked slowly and quietly over to the capsule.

He reached the lid and looked inside. Hans' blond hair and eyebrows were in stark contrast to his black leather suit. His face was thin, almost wasted and even in sleep he looked alert, dangerous. Krang knew that this was the most dangerous thing he'd ever do. If Breekan were to awaken, he would kill the preacher in moments. Krang knew that he must handle the weapon with care, too.

An assassin rarely leaves his most prized weapon easily vulnerable.

Krang held his breath and pressed the release switch. The capsule hissed open and Krang helped the lid to rise. He knew that, in normal circumstances, the life sup-

port system would keep the man asleep even with the lid open, for at least one hour. But Hans Breekan was no ordinary man. He could be as wide awake as Krang himself had been before.

But Breekan did not stir after the lid had finished its ascent. Krang let out his breath in a single, thin whistle and wiped the back of his hand across the beads of sweat on his brow. The rifle lay along Breekan's left side, the strap wound tightly around the wrist. The preacher disentangled it slowly. He stopped work once when he thought Breekan's eyelids moved a fraction. But, heart in mouth, he finally lifted the gun by the strap and closed down the lid again.

Krang gingerly laid the unique killing tool down on an observation bench in the sick bay. He pressed a panel in the wall and a set of tools emerged, presenting themselves in an ergonomically-designed fan for easy access. Krang selected a pair of pliers and a scalpel. Using the pliers, he eased open the loading chamber. It sprang back suddenly, causing him to jump violently and a shell was catapulted into the air. Krang grabbed it before it hit the bench and then quickly put it down.

A searing pain shot along the palm of his right hand. Krang turned it over to reveal a black scorch across the

centre. He could feel a burning sensation in the veins of his wrist.

Poison! That was what caused Breekan's victims to wither after he killed them, his trade mark. The preacher was astonished at the speed with which it worked. His arm was beginning to age before his very eyes. As it was, he almost forgot to save himself. Coming to his senses suddenly, he closed his eyes and began to concentrate. He felt the world begin to turn grey and heard a singing in his ears. Briefly, he wondered whether he would indeed die, when at last he felt a rushing in the back of his mouth.

He staggered to the sink, forced the liquid through the special gland at the rear of his mouth and sprayed the evil substance down into the disposal unit. There it hissed and bubbled its way to a collection point, to be vapourised safely later.

Krang's vision blurred for a last time before he began to feel his strength returning. The poison had been removed via his mutated gland, but his arm was still injured. He opened a medikit with the other hand and applied it to the vicious wound. Pink skin and flesh grew over the affected area and he felt his strength returning to him.

Despite his recent brush with death, he had to put the gun back. He made himself reload the shell into the gun's chamber. Then he carefully picked it up again, still by the strap and was about to leave the room, when something caught his eye.

On the base of the butt, Krang had noticed the rivet, shaped like a scorpion.

He wondered what it meant. Breekan did not display openly any sign of belonging to an organisation. Why, then, did he bear one on his weapon? Could it be the mark of a riflesmith? He didn't think so. Krang had posed as a weapons apprentice when on a mission some years before and the mark was not familiar to him for that reason.

He pondered the problem while returning the gun to its owner's grasp. The symbol looked vaguely familiar for some reason, but Krang could not put word or name to it. The question nagged at his mind while he straightened the grip, closed the lid and got back into his capsule.

It wasn't until his own hyper-sleep was beginning to steal through him again that he realised that he had just passed up the best chance that anyone had ever had to kill Hans Breekan.

In the third of four life support capsules, Colinski's hyper-sleep wasn't as deep nor as comfortable as that of his companions. He was trapped in rapid eye movement, forced to sleep through the nightmares which always woke him up during his normal sleep.

His usual dream began with him running across a moon, wearing a full space suit. He would turn and look over his shoulder, where a huge pile of Rake, the hallucinatory drug upon which he and Drakth were hooked, would be horribly animated and pursuing him.

The hypersleep dreams were far worse, but when he awoke in orbit around Bardot IV, Colinski was not able to recall any details. He'd be running across the same moon that he usually did, chased by the pile of drugs. But, in the new dream, as he turned to look over his shoulder at the monster, its hideous expression began to alter and shift. Its usual look of anticipated triumph faded and it, too, looked suddenly terrified, as it glanced over *its* shoulder at something which was hunting it in turn.

Colinski's dream replayed itself again and again. Each time, the dream advanced another stage. As the spy ship streaked towards Bardot IV, slowing down all the time, the dream increased in frequency and detail. Now, the drug-creature's face split into a terrible mask of pain:

now, the pile was ripped apart by some sort of green and blue appendage: now, there was a glimpse of an eye.

Colinski only saw the face of his doom once. And, mercifully for him, its image faded from his conscious memory, as the four researchers reached their destination.

Bardot IV.

CHAPTER 6

"The question is, how are we to best approach the planet?"

Skarto Krang surveyed the image of Bardot IV on the ship's monitor. Analysis showed that the air indeed unfit for them to breathe. "Atmos suit time, I'm afraid," Krang said.

Five of the seven spectacular suns were still casting their light onto its surface and so it was difficult to determine the planet's true colour.

It looked peaceful enough.

"Why not just approach and land on the touchdown site?"

Colinski looked haggard and worn on a good day. After three months of uninterrupted nightmares, he looked a lot worse. Drakth and he had perked up very quickly after coming out of their state of trance, but only after leaving to relieve themselves - a fact which Krang and Breekan had not missed. "Going to shoot up, I think," Breekan offered, as the two Jupitarians made their excuses and left.

Krang smiled at Breekan and nodded. "Addicts, no doubt. That's why Sproake has such a strong hold over

them.”

Breekan said no more. But, in the hours following this exchange, Krang caught the blond hitman looking his way thoughtfully, as if trying to place him.

Maybe the two could get along after all.

“No, the direct approach is too risky,” Breekan disagreed. “If there is a force in control of the colony, the chances are that we’d never make it down onto the surface. They’d blast us out of the air as we went in for landing.”

Krang punched a few keys and an analysis of the planet appeared on the screen.

“There’s a suitable landing site about thirty miles from the colony. We could touch down there and make our way into the colony by stealth.”

Drakth shook his head and grunted. “You’ll show up all over the radar. If there is something which has taken the place by force, they’ll know we are here by now anyway. A major power would have challenged us, or shot us down with missiles long ago.”

Breekan looked bemused. “Is it possible that there is no problem, that the colony has just experienced communication difficulties? If so, I know of some executive heads which will roll, when I return home.”

Krang held up a palm. “That’s not possible. You don’t think that Yalik and his companions would have paid us

as much as they have, unless there was a real need for us?”

“Unless they planned to get rid of us all. Has anyone thought of that?”

Three pairs of eyes swivelled to rest on Colinski’s distorted features. For a while, no-one spoke.

All four men stared at the monitor again. Krang punched a few controls and the colony appeared in close up on the screen.

Krang finally broke the silence.

“A weapons testing site. Who knows what is waiting for us down there? And if we were victims of a trap, why send us all the way out here to finish us off? Why not just slip some poison into the sleep-inducing dope, or detonate the ship?”

No-one answered. There was nothing to say to that. Breekan fingered the butt of his rifle and kicked the toe of his boot on the floor, searching his thoughts. He looked up.

“I say we go, into the landing site. What we find, we find.”

Drakth and Colinski exchanged glances.

“I say that this is a good idea as well.” Colinski spoke for Drakth too, it seemed, as the other Jupitarian nodded his agreement.

"Then it is settled. We go in." Krang instructed the computer to take them on a slow descent to the planet. "Heading on a course for Bardot IV weapons colony. ETA: seventeen hours and eight minutes. We'd better prepare ourselves."

The image of the colony on the screen began to grow as the ship manoeuvred around the planet's orbit.

The *Duskin* began its final approach to the landing site of the Bardot IV colony.

On board, the four men sat watching the monitor, waiting. Breekan polished his rifle tirelessly with a soft grey cloth. Krang sat checking the instruments and pondering the symbol on the butt of Breekan's rifle. The man's unexpected show of tolerance (if not friendship) had also bothered Krang more than a little and so he mulled this over, too.

The Jupitarians disappeared together more than once and came back happier than when they had left. On one such occasion, Krang mentioned it to Breekan.

"This could turn into a problem for us as well as them."

"How do you mean?" There was a guard in Breekan's voice once more, as if he had realised that he'd earlier let

the preacher see too much of the real Hans Breekan for comfort.

"If they start getting out of control and there *is* a situation down there, we could be put in danger." Krang looked surprised at the other's nonchalant shrug. "That doesn't bother you?"

"I can look after myself. If necessary, a couple of stoned Jupitarians could make a very useful decoy." Breekan smiled, a cold, crocodile grin. "Then, their problem could prove very good for us, no?"

Krang nodded without replying. He didn't know what to make of the man in black. And that worried him as much as Drakth and Colinski's drug problem.

The Jupitarians came back, smiling maniacally, just as the speaker on the communications console burst into life.

"This is the Bardot IV Botanic Research Centre. This centre does not welcome uninvited intrusions. Please leave our landing area and consult the Universal Council for Botanic Life to make an appointment. If you persist in your trespass, defensive actions will be taken. This is a recorded announcement."

The men exchanged glances.

"What do you make of that?" Krang asked.

"Thith ith the right plath?" Drakth found himself slurring

and giggled suddenly.

Breekan looked at him coldly. "Do you think that they would announce that this is a weapons testing site to anyone passing by?" he retorted.

Krang frowned. "Do you think there are defenses here?" he asked.

"I doubt it. Just a threat to scare people off." Colinski didn't seem as affected by the kick of Rake which he had hit as Drakth was. His eyes, though, had a glazed-over look.

"I hope you're right," said Breekan. "Because I don't want us to get torched by a bunch of people we're supposedly trying to save, from whatever fate they might - or might not - have befallen."

Krang looked uncomfortable. "If there are automated defenses, they would be switched off for us, wouldn't they?"

Drakth snorted, a horrid, phlegmy sound. "Nah. They can't even get word to the people here, tho how could they thwiteh off the defentheth?"

There was a long, cold silence.

Then a siren sounded and a blip appeared on the short range scanner.

CHAPTER 7

Fortunately for the crew of the mercenary ship *Duskin*, the ship was so close to the surface of the planet that it didn't have far to fall when the missile struck its port engine. Sirens sounded and fire extinguishers burst into life as the ship rolled over twice on impact, then righted itself, never to move again.

Drakth's arm was grossly misshapen: he had a badly dislocated elbow, but thanks to the Rake still working its way through his system, it wasn't bothering him yet. The other three crew members suffered minor cuts and bruises and were a little shaken up.

The first blood had been drawn by the defences of Bardot IV.

Krang took command of the situation.

"We'd better move, now. The defences have scored a hit and they'll send out a salvage squad to search the wreckage. We had better not be caught in the ship like rats in a bucket."

"Very apt phrase, Krang." Breekan swung his rifle further around his back and made for the airlock. "I just hope that we can get through the doors. Are there any cutting

tools around here?"

Colinski cut in. "No way. This little heap of a starship didn't have anything more non-standard than the life support systems. The class A4N-2s were never very self-sufficient."

Breekan returned. "The airlock is jammed. We're shut in."

"Oh great." The crash seemed to have taken away some of Drakth's euphoria. His voice lost its slimy lisp and took on an edge of fear.

Breekan broke one of his own rules and spoke to Colinski. "You. How thick are the doors in this pile of crap?"

Colinski searched his thoughts. "About a foot, maybe fifteen inches. Tempered steel and AluZinc alloys. Very tough."

Breekan smiled. "A foot, maybe fifteen inches, I can cope with. Follow me."

The blond professional killer led them to the airlock, then snapped the heels of his boots together. One detached itself and a thin black tube, about a foot long and half an inch in diameter, slid from its place of concealment. Breekan slotted it into place under his rifle's main barrel and took something from a pouch in his belt.

"Watch." The man took three steps back, aimed his gun at the airlock door and pulled the trigger.

The missile was small, but it punctured the metal door as though it were made of paper. A small silence followed, then was broken by a kind of hissing noise.

Smoke began issuing from the hole in the airlock door. Finally, the reason for the sound became apparent. As the hole widened, the watching men could see acid puddled inside the metal of the airlock door, eating its way through the strongest alloy mix known to man.

Breekan walked to the door and fetched it a kick, another, a third. It fell outwards with a boom and Breekan, smiling, patted his rifle with mock affection and ran through the gap.

The door was still sizzling where it lay.

The others followed him into the airlock, put on their Atmos suits and then went out onto the surface of the planet. A long scar wound its way through the rocks behind them, where the *Duskin* had crashed and dragged its carcass along. Three hundred yards ahead, an outcrop of rock would hide them from view of the colony buildings and it was to here that Breekan was leading them.

They stopped to get their bearings.

"Damn those defenses." Krang communicated via the suits' teleconferencing mode. He was holding a damaged map of the colony, all the data which had survived

the crash. "We had full blueprints of every inch of that place. All destroyed. This will let us find the best way inside the complex from the front, which, I believe, is quite a bad move, now that they know we are here."

Colinski shook his head. "What a mess. What if we let them come to inspect the wreckage and then leave? Will that work?"

Breekan snorted. "What, wait until they find no remains of life, save for a few drops of our blood, then let them sound an alert? What if the defenses were not really automated at all and there are troops in command here? We should try to make our way in, while the salvage crews are busy."

Drakth nodded. "A very good plan, I think."

"Then we need to get closer to the colony," Krang finished. Breekan, you take the lead. Colinski can bring up the rear. Remember, no firing unless it's a case of life or death.

"If we alert them to our presence, we're history."

The company began making its way towards the colony buildings. It was a slow, laborious journey. The team covered most of the distance in a half-crouch or bent over to avoid any watching eyes or scanners. This was not a comfortable way for the party to move in their atmosphere suits. At several points, Krang got a glimpse of the buildings and began to make a mental map of the

front of the complex.

The whole structure was built from glass and alloy, a similar compound to that from which the airlock door was made, only thicker. One huge, tinted glass dome arced up into the atmosphere, covering the centre of the complex. All around, outbuildings and support centres flanked the main building. The whole place was massive, some five miles across from corner to corner diagonally. All of the buildings were interconnected by corridors, walkways and tunnels. Some were suspended in the air, while others were on ground level.

The glass was carefully designed to allow maximum sunlight to enter without glare and to protect the researchers from any flashes that their weapons produced. This meant that, to anyone looking into the complex, the glass reflected a lot of the light, while those looking out could see quite clearly.

This was bad news for the team of mercenaries making its way towards the complex. Seeing into the complex was made impossible. Krang sat down to study the precious piece of paper that was their only clue to the shape of the complex.

"Look, here where the entrance is, there's a side door.

We could make our way towards it and wait for the salvage crews to arrive.”

Colinski cut in. “Where are these fabled crews? We’ve been here half an hour at least, but there’s been no sign of them.”

“That’s right!” Krang exclaimed. “I thought something was missing. Maybe it’s just the defenses which are automated, while the rest of the system is controlled by the colonists.”

Breekan frowned. “That doesn’t make sense. If I were building a system, I’d want emergency services to be automatic and the defenses to have a human override.”

“True. Which leaves me with one conclusion: something has definitely happened to the colonists. As to what it was and what we do about it, I don’t know, other than that we should start with getting inside the complex.”

Krang looked around the three faces intent on his words. “Any ideas?”

Drakth spoke slowly. “If the defenses are on alert, but not the other systems, we will need to be very careful. We’ll also need a way to get inside without the defenses detecting us.”

“It would help to know what’s in there, waiting for us. Has anyone been briefed about the systems in there?”

No-one spoke. Breekan’s question was treated as rhetorical.

“We will solve nothing, sitting here like rocks. I say that we should create a diversion for the security systems. Something like an explosion, at the side of the complex. Then, while the systems go to deal with it, we walk in the front door.”

This was the most that anyone could remember Colinski saying. It was apparently quite an effort for him and he seemed drained afterwards. Both Jupitarians bore the marks of coming ‘down’: sweat beaded on their foreheads and they looked very pale and drawn.

“A good plan,” agreed Breekan, who seemed to have warmed to his task, if not to his companions. “The explosion, I can arrange. I will meet you back here within ten minutes.”

He didn’t wait to offer more details, running off almost immediately.

Breekan didn’t appear to be carrying anything capable of producing a decent explosion, but Krang didn’t expect that the assassin would disappoint them.

Hans Breekan slipped behind the cover of some rocks, a quarter of a mile from the hiding place of the other three. He checked that he was alone once more and then reached inside his suit. In the palm of his hand, he held a black symbol. It was heavy-looking, with two green LEDs at one end.

It was fashioned in the shape of a scorpion.

Breekan held the symbol in his hand and raised both arms upwards in appeal.

"Oh master, Melgroth the Almighty, lend me thy power so that I might defeat your foes! Grant to me the words that will crack stone, snap bone and sinew, drain blood and shake mountain! Give me the power of fire!"

His voice was strained to its limits as he screamed his request, loud to his space-suited ears, silent around him. The scorpion image in his palm glowed red, then white, as the power began to build in it. Soon, the assassin shook with the unleashed fury of his weapon. When he could bear the pain of power and anticipation no longer, Breekan hurled the powerful symbol towards the outbuilding six hundred yards from his place of concealment.

Back in hiding near the entrance, the other three men saw a sudden flash on the near horizon. They looked after it in wonder.

Powered by the force of his self conviction, Breekan's symbol flew with unnatural speed towards its target. It was not magical, but it would have seemed so to any observers.

It hit the outbuilding and did not stop, tearing clean

through it and into a fuel generator beyond the building. There was a blinding flash and the generator exploded violently.

Somewhere close by, a siren began to blare.

Breekan lowered his head in exhaustion, took a moment to compose himself and then began to run back towards the main entrance.

CHAPTER 8

The colony had been plunged into darkness. Camera-monitors were in place, but the lack of operation lights on them suggested that they were shut off. Sirens sounded from the distance and the team were presented with a choice of four doors.

"It seems as if my little explosion has shut off the power." Breekan looked smug.

"Very good," intoned Drakth, "but now we can't see."

"You have a light on this suit. The power packs are below your waist, but they don't last very long." Colinski's knowledge of technology had saved them again.

"Which way?" asked Krang.

"Not that way, at least." Breekan pointed to the left.

"That leads to my little, er, decoy."

"Right then. Straight on seems wrong, somehow. There's two of those. So, right, unless anyone else has a theory?"

Drakth did. "If we are here to find out who or what is in charge of this place, should we not go directly to them, straight ahead?"

Breekan waved his hand towards the right. "This way is the stealthy way. If you prefer to walk straight into their

hands, you go alone, or with your friend, but count me out. Whichever you choose, choose now, because I am not standing in the front door any longer." With that, he set off. Krang seemed unsure. "We shouldn't split up..." Drakth snorted. "We go with the black one. He, at least, will be at home in the dark. After you..." he finished, sarcastically polite.

Breekan led the way into a corridor. His light revealed a choice of left, towards the centre of the complex or right, away from it. The latter seemed like the most subtle option and so he took it, not bothering to conceal himself too much - there was nowhere to hide that would grant much cover and their lights would give them away anyway.

The group came across a strange machine in the corridor.

"What on Jupiter is that?" asked Drakth, incredulously.

It was fashioned from a white ceramic material, curving upwards from the ground, with a small metal handle at waist height, next to a bowl.

A drinking fountain.

"It looks like something out of the history books. Like a refreshment centre, except much less sophisticated, of course." Krang scratched his head. "Though why it should be here is a mystery to me. Look, here's a

plaque on the stand.

'Antique Drinking fountain, circa 20th Century'. Weird."

They continued on. Rounding a corner, they encountered their first inhabitant.

A figure sat on a machine. It was, according to what they could read of the sign above it, a working, antique automatic shoe polisher. Some of the sign was obscured by the blood of its victim. The arms of the machine had pinned the unfortunate colonist to the seat, before polishing his - or her - face vigorously with a rotating wire brush. The shadows cast by the machine writhed like a spider on the wall behind.

The brush was still polishing the victim's skull. Flesh had withered and decayed on the bones of the corpse some time ago.

"What is this machine? Shoe polishers are no longer necessary - shoes clean themselves these days." Breekan appealed to the others to help him solve the puzzle.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but this part of the place seems like a museum," Krang pointed out. "It seems as if some middle period artifacts, from the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, have been put here to give the

place a theme, make the colonists feel more at home, perhaps."

Colinski nodded. "Back on Jupiter, they have machines like this one in a museum. Not that I go there," he added hurriedly, as if visiting museums showed some kind of weakness, "but I have heard of this kind of thing."

Drakth went to take a closer look at the body. "Why would a machine kill them?"

He jabbed a thumb at the body.

"Malfunction maybe?" Krang offered.

"If so, why didn't the maintenance droids, or the other colonists, clean up the mess?" Breekan asked.

No-one could answer him.

Drakth walked around the machine, careful to give its arms a wide berth, found the fuse box and stuck a knife through the shielding over it. Sparks flew in the dark.

The machine shuddered, coughed and then stopped working at last. Its arms relaxed and the body held within them slumped down.

In the corridor beyond the polishing machine, there were two doors, about twenty metres apart. Breekan moved to the first and put his head against the door. Satisfied that all was quiet within, he pressed the pad to open it. The door opened on its electric hinges, then tried to slam shut on Breekan's head as he went to walk through. His

boot was already defensively positioned near to the hinge and so he saved himself a fractured skull.

The room within appeared to be some kind of sick bay. But it no longer could be used for caring purposes. Three more corpses were within, lying on beds designed to rest the ill or injured. These beds had strapped them in securely and left them to starve, from the looks of the grim scene. The four men glanced at each other and made to leave.

As Drakth walked past a Medi-Diagnosis machine, it suddenly burst into life, issuing a scan ray. But, instead of performing its usual function of locating an area of damage and finding a careful microwave frequency to treat an injury, it had the effect of a Swedish massage from a brain surgeon in the middle of an operation on his patient.

Drakth's dislocated arm, which had not bothered him up to now, suddenly and in no uncertain terms let him know of its existence. The rays began to twist the bone in its unnatural out-of-joint position.

Drakth screamed and fell to the floor. Colinski, without hesitating, drew his pistol and laserbolted the machine into silence.

Krang dragged Drakth out of the room (with Breekan

keeping the door open) and took a look at the Jupiterian's arm. It looked to have rotated almost all the way around in its socket. He set his face. "Drakth, I'm going to have to snap this back into place. This is going to hurt. I want you to disarm yourself first."

The man looked at him with a foul expression on his face. "You don't trust me?"

Krang's expression remained mild. "Not when you're in as much pain as you will be in a moment. It's your choice. If you want me to do this, throw your knife away."

The burly soldier pulled out his eight-inch blade, which looked as if it could do with a clean and threw it a few feet away. It skated over the floor and came to rest against the wall.

"Now, I will count to three and twist it back into the joint. It may require more than one turn because it's well out of place." He began feeling Drakth's arm through his suit. "You'll need to hold your breath. I have to open the suit up and, with the power off in the colony, there's no atmosphere."

He depressurised the suit and rolled up the sleeve, hesitating as he encountered the first batch of ulcer-like needle marks.

"Afraid of syringes are we Drakth?" Breekan asked sarcastically. "Looks to me as if you've been trying to get

over your phobia by exposure therapy.”

“Shut up.” Drakth spoke through lips clenched against the breath fighting to escape his lungs. He looked very nervous of the pain he was about to feel.

Krang took hold of the arm above and below the elbow.

“Ready? On three. One, two...”

He twisted the arm around and Drakth screamed, passing out shortly afterwards.

When the man had recovered his consciousness within his atmosphere suit and felt fit enough, the team continued its search of the living area of the colony.

Everywhere, the story was the same: machines had apparently gone berserk and attacked those who they were supposed to serve. Old or modern, practical or for show, the mechanical contingent of the colony had seemingly rebelled against a life of servitude. Which implied intelligence.

“That’s crazy,” Breekan snapped, when Krang suggested the theory.

“It may be crazy, but it’s the only answer I can come up with. How else would the machines know who had ‘enslaved’ them, for want of a better word? Why else would they start attacking the colonists?”

“We did not come here to find out about the latest in booby-trapped technology,”

Colinski grunted. “What relevance has this on our mis-

sion?”

Krang looked at Colinski in amazement. “What relevance? What if it so happens that the machines are running this place now?”

“How is that possible?” Breekan asked. “There must be something more logical to suggest than the machines decided to show the colonists who was boss.”

“It would make sense of our reception, though,” Krang added. “We decided that any human being would not shoot first and ask questions later. So maybe a machine IS behind all of this.”

“Some kind of computer virus?” Drakth offered through teeth clenched against his pain.

“Pretty damn devastating, if it is,” Breekan answered derisively. He slung his rifle back over his shoulder and made ready. “Whatever is behind this, it isn’t in the living quarters. We are going to have to explore further. Let’s head back into the centre of the complex.”

“There’s one more thing,” said Colinski. “We’d better be careful about using recharge points on our suits. If they’re anything like the other machines in this dump...” He left his sentence hanging.

CHAPTER 9

Breekan scouted ahead but soon came running back to the other three.

"There's some kind of robot, guarding the main entrance."

Krang frowned. "Is it hostile?"

"I didn't get close enough for it to detect me, but it's armed with a light laser rifle." He frowned. "I assume that it's not equipped to deal with the dark. It didn't detect me, that's for sure."

"Laser rifle?" Colinski whistled. "That's pretty heavy duty for a doorman."

"Precisely." Breekan nodded his agreement. "We may be in more trouble than we first thought. If the lowest security level has access to lasers, the big guys are going to be packing some dangerous firepower."

Krang nodded. "Let's proceed with care and try to take out the guard without a lot of fuss. We don't want it to raise an alarm."

"Let me show you something else that this little baby can do." Breekan patted the butt of his deadly gun and pressed a hidden catch. A silencer smoothly and silently appeared from the end of the barrel and fitted itself automatically into place.

Breekan walked ahead silently and rounded the corner with care. He stopped, went down on one knee and raised the rifle.

Although he couldn't see the target from his standpoint, Krang knew that Breekan had hit his mark as surely as he knew that the bullet had flown - not that he heard anything either. There was a small *Ping!* from the lobby as the bullet hit home, but Krang didn't think that it would arouse any attention.

Breekan had struck again. A cold, measured kill, without feeling.

Just another reflex, like a sneeze.

Krang fancied that he caught a glimpse of the scorpion-shaped rivet in the eerie half-light as the hitman swung his rifle back over his shoulder. "We go, now. While we have the advantage."

Breekan led the way through the lobby and to the left-most of the two doors which led straight into the complex. As they trotted by, Krang swung his light across at the burned-out guard. It still stood to attention, as if scanning the outside of the colony buildings for intruders. But just at the point that the scanning unit, or 'head', met the 'body' of the robot, there was a small round impression, with a blackening around it. This was the only visible sign that the guard was no longer functioning.

As they made their way down a corridor into the complex, the lights flickered on a couple of times and then went out again.

Drakth looked upwards as they carried on towards a door blocking the way. "What caused it, anyway? Do they know we're here or something?"

Breekan laughed. "What, turn on the lighting for us? That would make some sense, I think, to a Jupiterian, but not to normal people." He turned angrily. "Why are you asking such stupid questions all the time? It is due to the fuel generator which I detonated to create the diversion. The reserves of power are probably beginning to kick in. OK?"

He didn't wait for an answer, slipping off into the half-light like a shadow.

The others caught Breekan up at the door. He was looking at the control panel at the left, trying to figure out a way to open it. Colinski stepped forward.

"If you'd care to let this stupid Jupiterian through," he muttered, not bothering to disguise his feelings of anger towards Breekan, "I might just be able to get us in."

"After you." Breekan smiled his luminous violet smile again and his eyes flashed. "I'm intrigued at how you intend to get it open."

"This lock is a piece of piss. Series 5000-3. Wired up direct into the network of security, but the designers

unknowingly left a trapdoor in the circuit board. Which," he said, popping the casing off of the lock without any difficulty, "is just... here." There was a buzz from the circuits as he crossed a track with his laser pistol's steel barrel and the door slid open.

"See?" he offered smugly, just moments before his suit helmet was blown off by a laser blast.

"Get down!" The other three men hit the floor just instants after Colinski, weapons at the ready. Krang sent three laser blasts off down the corridor through the open doorway and there was an explosion as one hit something. All around them, blue-green pulses of high-energy laser fire flashed through the air, striking the wall behind them and causing the corridor to fill with smoke.

Breekan shouted over the din. "This is an ambush! We're outnumbered. Fall back!"

Drakth screamed out. "I'm not leaving Colinski! We don't go anywhere. He may still be alive!"

Breekan's face twisted into a terrible mask, pitched somewhere between a smile and a sneer.

"You go up there for him, then!"

Drakth spat and leapt to his feet. He was outlined by the glowing laser pulses which flew about him in all directions. He held his laser pistol in one hand and a massive laser cannon in the other, blasting indiscriminately into

the void beyond the door.

His fire seemed to have some effect, as the intensity of the laser shots lessened and he did not get hit. More explosions sounded in the blackness beyond the door. One droid burst into flames and lit up the corridor for a moment. It revealed Drakth as a sitting duck and he took a laser bolt full in the chest.

Krang didn't hesitate. He was up on his feet, offering covering fire for Breekan, who had at last decided to help out. Krang threw a magnetic grenade at the source of the firing and it struck home with a *Clang!* The two men grabbed the unconscious Colinski and his screaming Jupitarian companion and dragged them back from the doorway, crouching instinctively against the blast which followed soon after.

The whole corridor shook as the grenade detonated.

The rubble settled and there was silence.

They had survived. This time.

CHAPTER 10

Krang straightened up from his examination of Colinski. "He'll live. I've dressed the wound and patched up his suit as much as possible. There'll be a scar and he'll have a headache when he wakes up, but he's otherwise sound."

"What about me?" Drakth's breath whistled in his throat and sweat stood out on his brow. He looked ghostly white.

Krang nodded. "You should be able to walk alright in a few minutes. That medikit I've put on you should see you through alright. But Colinski won't come around for an hour or two."

Breekan shook his head. "We don't have that long. Already, the guards must be flocking towards us. Unless we move, we're history."

Drakth was defiant. "We don't leave him."

"Very well." Breekan grinned. "You can carry him, then. If you lag behind, so be it."

Krang nodded. "We can't afford to lose much time. We'll take it in turns to carry him. I'll take first shift."

Breekan scowled. "I will not carry that scum. If you care to, then do so."

He stalked off into the adjoining room which had so nearly proved fatal to their mission.

Drakth got shakily to his feet. "Don't worry, I will carry him myself. You go off with your friend and we will follow."

Krang stopped him with a touch on his arm. "Look, we're all in this together. I know you and I are never going to be friends. But if you think that Breekan allies himself with anyone but Breekan, then you're more short-sighted than I gave you credit for being. And I won't leave a team member for dead, so we take it in turns to carry him. OK?"

Drakth seemed pleased, if put a little on his guard, by the preacher's words.

"OK. You can manage him first, while I get my strength back?"

"No problem." Krang's physique didn't leave the Jupiterian with any doubts about the value of this claim.

"After you," Krang said, smiling.

They found Breekan sitting with his back to the wall, beside another similar door in the next room. He was tapping his feet thoughtfully with his laser rifle barrel and glanced up at them, almost in surprise when they entered.

"We have a problem. One more door and one less lock-picker."

Krang's glance left Breekan and focussed on the lock. This one looked more complicated than the last. He

doubted if Colinski would have a way to open it as easily as the previous one anyway.

"There's nothing else for it. I'll open it with a Supalok."

The smell of burning robots was distracting to Krang as he focussed his thoughts fully on the lock. He had to clear his mind of all other distractions.

Breekan wasn't helping.

"I find it hard to believe that you'll have any effect on it. Your mind power's useless in practical life. Use it to hold a silent conversation, maybe. But open a door barred against you? That is a different matter."

Krang ignored him, concentrating on feeling his way around the lock with his mind. The Supalok fused itself with the user's mind and allowed him to 'get into' the system of any lock and see his way around it, as if he were the lock's designer. Like the Mindlink system, it was unknown in most circles and, like all things treated with ignorance, it was scorned by scientists and public alike.

As he concentrated, sweating freely, the keys on the electronic pad began to move. Finally, the door slid open. Krang and Breekan had the strength of mind to shrink back from the opening, but Drakth, in his dazed state, merely stood looking into the new room.

There was silence. No firing, no waiting ambush.

Breekan moved forward to scout in the room. In his

clear-minded state, Krang once again momentarily pondered his secret.

The silver rivet, shaped like a scorpion, floated into his mind.

The sign of a new religion.

The Legion of Death.

CHAPTER 11

The discovery sent a cold shiver through Krang. Previously, he'd believed that the Legion of Death was just a mythological outfit invented to frighten potential bounty-hunters. The Legion was legendary for its ruthless slaughter of anyone who tried to stop it from achieving its goal: which was, in a nutshell, to bring down every major organisation in the universe. Working on the principal of safety in numbers, powermongers banded together in an attempt to rule.

Dalgetti, Yalik and Sproake were perfect examples of the breed for which the Legion was reputed to have a death-wish and so would have been prime targets for Breekan.

If that was the case, why didn't Breekan just kill them outright? The answer had to be that he was seeking to expose them for what they were to the universe.

That meant blowing the cover of the mission and letting the public know what the so-called power merchants were *really* discussing in their private meetings.

Breekan surely could not have foreseen the outcome of his inclusion in the mission's team: stranded, so far as they all knew, on a planet way out on a mostly-uncharted arm of the galaxy, with no way of communicating with

anyone and facing God-only-knew what in command of the colony's defence systems.

They were now working on the assumption that the colonists had already fallen foul to the defenses and that whatever was in control was seeking to gain the power that access to the test weapons would naturally grant it.

Breekan's plan had gone terribly wrong.

But then, what did that matter? They were all in the same boat.

All that remained was to get to the bottom of the mysterious 'ruler' and try to find a way to escape. Krang thought that even Breekan would have no argument against that. Still, he had to be watched even more than ever, particularly if they made it back to Earth and he got a chance to blow this thing wide open.

That sort of publicity, Krang could do without.

Krang felt his always-slim life expectancy wasting further towards the bone.

Breekan re-appeared from the darkened room beyond the doorway.

"It's deserted. I don't like it - the place is too quiet.

How's sleeping beauty?" Breekan nodded towards the still-unconscious Colinski.

Krang didn't meet his eye. "He'll come to in time. We'd better move on."

Drakth had been well and truly spooked by recent events. His frail grip on reason was slowly being loosened. "Why don't we just call it a day and get out of here? I'm tired of this place. We're going to run out of luck soon and get a laser bolt between the eyes..."

Breekan noted the hint of hysteria in the Jupitarian's voice and grinned. "If you go out in such a quick, painless way, you'll be a lucky man." He patted his gun proudly. "I prefer to let my victims feel their life force ebb away."

Krang shuddered inwardly, but didn't let his fear show. That would be a fatal mistake. Krang could not let Breekan know how much he had on him. Surely the man would not think twice about killing him?

The three conscious mercenaries carried the injured one through the next room - a command room, somewhere near to the centre of the complex by their reckoning - and out into another long, open corridor.

That was when the laser fire lit up the air again.

Breekan was hit in the left arm. Even though the pain

must have been intense, he did not waste time in crying out. Instead, he rolled to his right and loosed off three quick bursts of fire. Explosions at the other end of the corridor told them that Breekan's aim had been true.

Colinski was dropped immediately and Krang and Drakth fell to their stomachs.

Between them, laser fire ripped holes in the steel alloy flooring and skimmed off of the ceiling. Then one of their enemy appeared. It seemed to be a simple maintenance robot, twisted by some sort of circuitry over the 'head' and highly modified. That was all of the detail that Krang and Drakth could make out before the robot exploded, destroyed by a shell from Breekan's rifle.

The mutated robots sustained more and more casualties as they (or their controller) threw caution to the wind and tried to force their way down the corridor. Laser fire lit up the prone men: red, green, blue, orange. Fires threw thick smoke up in a blanket, which helped and hindered both sides. Then Breekan reached down into a pouch and drew out a discus-shaped metal object.

Twisting a dial, he threw it down the corridor towards the nearest of the robots.

It attached itself to the robot's torso with a *clang!* and the mechanoid was attracted irresistibly to the nearest other

droid. One by one the robots grouped together, drawn by the hyper-powerful magnetic device.

"Back!" yelled Breekan, waving Krang and Drakth through the doorway, before scrambling to his feet and diving back through.

Drakth dragged Colinski by his legs and Krang leapt round the corner of the portal.

Breekan watched the approaching mass of robots with relish, waiting and watching for the right moment. Then he pressed a button on his rifle butt.

The mine exploded, ripping the robots apart. One 'head' rolled all the way up the corridor to where the men crouched, stopping inches away from Krang's foot.

He had no time to examine it. Rolling into the smoke as soon as the shrapnel had settled, he blasted five shots out of his laser rifle.

The shots whistled down the corridor, discharging on the walls at the other end.

The wave of robots had been halted.

"We'd better find somewhere to rest, then take a look at this." Krang tapped the 'head' under his arm.

"There was a ventilation duct back down the corridor from this room," offered Drakth. He sounded all but dead. "Good idea." Breekan slipped from the room, checking that they were alone and that their route was

safe. He hadn't mentioned his wound, seemingly untroubled by the stream of blood running down the sleeve of his suit.

CHAPTER 12

Krang shook his head. "This beats me. Colinski? You seen anything like this?"

The newly-revived Jupitarian grimaced. "It stinks. Whatever this stuff is," he said, touching the crusty, metallic growth on the head with a tool, "it has shorted out the servitude circuits and has programmed the robot to become a killing machine. To achieve that, from so simple a robot design, is a work of genius."

The collective hairs on four necks rose up in alarm, as a terrible wail emanated from the duct behind them. "What the-" shouted Drakth, as something black leapt out from the shadows and attached itself to him.

Breekan pulled his rifle and was about to use it when Krang shouted "No! It's a man!" Breekan grabbed at the top of the black shaggy mass and pulled. A face emerged from beneath the mass of hair. A very frightened man's eyes stared out from a madman's face.

The stranger froze momentarily, as if to assess his situation, then suddenly began a violent struggle. It took all four men to hold him down.

Wary as to why he seemed unaffected by the noxious atmosphere, Krang flicked the external communication switch on the side of his helmet in order to reassure and calm the man. Although twitching uneasily, the stranger's agitated body began to relax and the others released their grip on him. Even in this semi-relaxed state, the stranger wheezed through laboured breaths. Krang's instincts told him the man's state was too extreme to be reversed and between the man's paranoid laughing and gestures, he strove to get some sense from him.

His name was professor John Vengellis, he was a colonist and sole survivor of the research centre.

"Some of us like to call ourselves scientists, or rather did like to, as the others are rigormortis, rigormortis....."

The rest of his sentence was lost in an uncontrollable and meaningless babble. Krang persevered, encouraging the Professor to continue. The shaggy head jerked back up, scanning the four men.

"Where was I ?, Ah yes. Pick up your notebooks, students. So, what happened ? We were blowing things up as usual. Ah yes ! Good at that, we were. But not good

enough to kill *it* ! Clever it is, clever and more terrible than bubble and squeak, more terrible than Godzilla and the dinosaurs, worse than King Kong. Remember the stories about him ? I do."

He paused for thought.

'But it came one night, while we were playing poker. I was up fifty unidollars and had a *brutal* hand, would have won a fortune.....but it didn't care whose game it disrupted. It smashed in, flailing arms and it was creepy, slimy and green."

"What was it ?"

Krang seemed disturbed by a thought. Breekan didn't miss this, but the preacher indicated that he should let the madman speak again.

"But, OOOh, he came, he killed. We shot him, blasted him with bombs, but he just gets faster and stronger ! Keeps using their minds as machines, putting his dirty circuits in their ears. Like this".

Vengellis suddenly moved forward as he grasped the left side of his scalp. All four men felt the taste of bile rising from their stomachs simultaneously. A large part of his skull was missing where his ear would have been, the gaping hole revealed the blackened and bruised lobes of the Professor's brain. Krang's eyes met the expectant gaze of Drakth before settling for the final time on the deranged face of the Professor. Krang flicked the voice

control on his helmet back to internal communication mode and muttered a silent prayer.

No one questioned Drakth after the sound of his laser pistol had died away and the madman lay dead in the duct.

They all understood

"So we're dealing with something really dangerous here?" Breekan, as ever, didn't give a hint about whether this was an idea which bothered him or not.

"Krang. You're the man with the knowledge of centuries at your disposal. What do you think it is?"

The preacher didn't answer for some time. He seemed bothered by an idea which had occurred to him, reluctant to bring it up.

"Well, there's either some kind of native alien presence at work here, which doesn't necessarily account for the intelligence we've encountered, or..."

Breekan looked up. "Or?"

Krang met his gaze at last. "Or, the colonists have unearthed something which they should never have done. Something so awful that its exile from Earth saved the planet back in the 21st Century."

Drakth swallowed, a guttural sound in the silence of the ventilation duct.

"What was that?" he asked, nervously.

"Not many records remain about the creature. It was found in the Amazon jungle, some years after the massive Iranian nuclear accident of 2013. Some kind of plant life which fed on energy, which was about the size of a man, but of genius intelligence, incredibly strong and brutally evil."

The silence was a living, pulsating presence all around them.

Krang continued, staring into space, sending himself through time to the awful era. "The creature single-handedly enslaved every member of the Xanthi Amazon tribe, with mind-influencing circuits such as we've seen here. By then, even the Amazons had become technologically aware and, of course, everyone had access to nuclear weaponry. Thanks to the- what was it called?- Fernaroth, the Amazons were almost responsible for the destruction of the planet.

"Only an agent who escaped the Fernaroth and told the Western superpowers what he had seen saved the human race. The UN sent in a massive 'peacekeeping' force to destroy the overpowered Amazons and the Fernaroth. They finally tracked it to its lair - the inside of

an extinct volcano - and subdued it with acid. Weapons of any other sort it just absorbed."

Krang looked up. "They could not destroy the creature. Instead, they shot it off into space. The last they saw of the craft was when a meteor storm hit it and it disappeared."

Colinski grunted. "Pah! So it was destroyed. What does that have to do with us?"

Breekan spoke slowly, deliberately. "No. The energy from the meteor would have fed it, not destroyed it. Maybe, it is still alive somewhere.

"Maybe, it is still alive *here*."

No-one had wanted to hear him finish that sentence. But he did anyway.

"Then, how has it remained alive all this time?" Drakth asked, quickly glancing over his shoulder as if expecting to see the creature scuttling down the duct towards them.

"How come it has woken up now?"

Krang began piecing the truth together in his head.

"They subdued it with acid. Perhaps the acid contained it until now. Perhaps it was disturbed."

"By what?" Colinski asked.

There was a short silence.

Then Breekan spoke their thoughts for them.

"The weapons testing. The underground weapons testing."

No-one spoke for a while.

Finally, Colinski broke the silence.

"Is there anything we can do?" he pleaded, appealing to all of them as well as to Krang. "Can we fight it? Can it be stopped again, or destroyed? Does it know we are here?"

The four looked at one another.

No-one spoke. There were no answers.

Outside on the surface of Bardot IV, the last of the seven suns began to set.



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