

The Cruel Sky

By

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The Cruel Sky

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Chapter One

Bel Ridge

From Collected Papers

We stopped for water at Bel Ridge.

Sergeant Dameron let the tail gate of the truck down, so we could jump out and stretch our legs. My mother and father gave him the news that Mrs. Davis had died. Of the twenty people in the truck, she had been the oldest. The heat had been far too much for her to bear. He paused for a moment to consider what to do. The other travelers were blank faced, like so many dolls. There had been so much death that nobody really cared any more.

“I suppose we should bury her. No good leaving her in the truck,” he said.

“She would have died in Adelaide.” My father, Doctor Richard Anvell, said. “Anybody got the strength to dig a hole?” he called out cheerfully.

Nobody volunteered, so he grabbed a small shovel from the tool-kit and thrust it meaningfully in my direction. “Come on, Mike. If you’re going to grow up to be a big man...”

“You’ve got to get your hands dirty,” I said. Every time there was a job to do, it seemed that Dad and I got stuck with it. I felt that by now I should be ten meters tall. My father was a small man, and I took after him. At fourteen, I was the runt of the family, scarcely bigger than my ten year old brother, Danny. He sat in the back of the truck with Susan, my Mum, who hugged him

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protectively in her arms. He gave me a cheerful wave and I grinned back at him. He always got out of hard work, because he'd contracted the Exovirus as a newborn baby. It was a miracle that he lived, because the virus usually killed children, and there was no cure. A very small percentage lived. Dad said that amongst millions of people, a very few would have some immunity, and we just happened to be lucky.

Mum said Danny was very frail, because his heart had been damaged. I doubted it, but Mum insisted. Nobody with a bad ticker could be so boisterous or full of mischief. There weren't many children left in the city. During The Chaos, many had died of starvation, or were stolen and eaten. The army sent most civilian survivors North in the supply convoys to Omega Base where manpower was desperately needed. Some convoys had carried nothing but children - orphans who had become an enormous drain on our resources. It wasn't only kids that died during those terrible years before reconstruction.

I learnt to use a shovel early in life. We had to grow our own food. Our penthouse was on the top of an Adelaide skyscraper, and Dad had bagged soil brought in by barge to establish a rooftop farm. He erected a large shade-screen to protect the plants from the sun. We grew tomatoes, beans, and peas - the intensive cropping vegetables. Seawater was pumped directly from Rundle Canal into a solar distillation plant. Fresh water was strictly rationed. Our plants got first call. We were often thirsty.

Digging the grave for Mrs. Davis made me thirsty. We didn't go deep. Dad said it was just for appearances - a shallow grave covered with a mound of sand. I was glad when we finished and got back to the truck. Mum had saved some water for us. After all that work, I got half a litre. I knew Danny had more than that.

The trip from Adelaide to Omega Base would take us two days. We followed the old road which was all that was left of the

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Northern Highway. Huge lumps of concrete, large craters, and wide chasms made an obstacle course of what had been a concrete four lane highway bisecting the continent. It petered out somewhere North of the base, lost below a sea of sand. It would be impossible to travel much further North than we were going. Above sixty degrees Celsius, the body starts to break down and cook in its own juices. Everyone knew that the Omega Project was a last ditch attempt to reverse the Greenhouse effect.

At the height of the Space era, as the industrial age reached its zenith, pollution of the Earth's atmosphere also reached a peak. A Global economic depression occurred with little warning. There were too many people, food was scarce and starvation created social disruption and anarchy. A project to create rings around the Earth by exploding an orbiting Ice Moon, named "Omega", was the last desperate attempt to engineer a way out of the environmental crisis.

It failed.

The detonation of the nuclear device went horribly wrong. The automated delivery system malfunctioned. Instead of disintegrating Omega, the blast merely slowed it down, causing its orbit to decay. The radioactive satellite was moving gradually towards the Earth. When it fell, it would cause enormous disruption; perhaps the extinction of mankind and most species of life.

To avert the catastrophe, the United Nations had created "The Omega Project" a final attempt to blast Omega back into position and disintegrate it, causing it to form rings around the Earth. The shadow of the rings would cause sufficient cooling of the Earth's atmosphere to enable mankind time to recover from environmental collapse.

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Civil wars, famine, social disruption and the disintegration of order followed. Nobody noticed, amidst the turmoil, that the grass was dying. Some said it was a plant virus that evolved within the species. Bamboo went first. It dried out and withered away. Lawns in well kept gardens turned yellow, over time, then ceased to thrive, and died. When wheat, rice, and other grain crops failed, scientists blamed the weather, pollution, acid rains - everything but the real cause - the Earth had become so environmentally unstable, that the frail web of life was coming apart. Grazing herds died. Billions of people starved to death. Civilisation plunged into a new Dark Age that people called “The Chaos”.

In the deserts of Australia, the last glimmerings of technology raced against time to build and launch a manned space mission to Omega - a second, and final attempt to avert catastrophe. Our family was to be a part of that second project.

After a long argument with Mum, Danny was allowed to leave the truck to stretch his legs - providing I looked after him. My mother was a nervous woman. During Chaos, she had shown a fierce determination to survive, but after Danny’s illness, she had changed. It was as if she held the weight of the world on her shoulders. There was an inner intensity surrounded by a hard, remote shell. Danny was the centre of her world and I was an outsider.

Danny and I wandered along the length of the convoy - four trucks bearing essential supplies for the Omega Project, and two with human cargo. We were a rag taggle lot, looking for all the world like the refugees that we were. Danny spent some time chatting amiably to the soldiers who were our armed escort. We were used to soldiers. Our skyscraper island had once been captured by bandits and was wrested back to army control after a fierce battle. It happened before we were born. The building became a hospital, and then a farm area was built on the roof. The

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local warlord stationed a permanent guard on the building. When Exo, the kinder-plague struck, Mum and I were evacuated to a camp in the hills, but returned when Danny was born with the exovirus. She couldn't leave me alone in the camp where I would probably have disappeared. Despite the risk, she took me with her, and I stayed on the roof of the hospital with the tomatoes beans and the soldiers, while our family medical drama took place on the crowded floors below. My father was always busy, so I grew up with the soldiers for company. They always had time for me. They taught me how to read and write, to count and use a calculator, to repair a car or boat and drive both, and how to shoot.

Often, I used to wish that Danny had died. I always felt guilty afterwards, but he was such a favourite with Mum that I never felt really close to her. I wonder sometimes that she allowed us to walk off together, but she did. If she had stood her ground, you wouldn't be reading this now. We would all be dead.

The convoy troops were a friendly bunch. Danny was a con-artist from way back. He would walk slowly with such an expression of fatigue, that even I wasn't sure if he could make the next step. Sure enough, every now and again, a soldier would offer us a few centimeters of ration cake. Like most kids, my ribs really stuck out, but Danny kept his well hidden beneath his solar-suit. I knew, that beneath that silver grey outer cover, there was a sheath of healthy skin bordering on fat. He shared his spoils with me, after I threatened to punch the shit out of him while Mum wasn't looking. He looked about for her, but I had led him away from the trucks to where we had buried Mrs. Davis.

"She'll be eaten by desert rats, soon as we've gone," Danny said, poking the sandy soil with his gum-booted toe.

"The rats won't get a look in," I said haughtily. "Do you think those Outsiders will let a fresh bit of meat go to waste?"

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“They’re not - cannibals,” Danny said, looking with some hesitation towards the cluster of buildings.

“They’re Outsiders. They could be. You stick close and I’ll look after you.” I said. An idea had occurred to me - It would be fun to look at the settlement to see what the locals did live off. I started to stroll towards the huts. Danny moved quickly to keep up with me.

“Mum said to stay near the trucks.”

“We are near the trucks. There’s nothing around here for miles, but the huts and the trucks.”

“What if they are cannibals?”

“They won’t hurt us. We’re with the army don’t forget.”

Bel Ridge was called a “Road House” - which means a hotel selling mind enhancing substances. A long time ago, some engineer had sunk a bore into a clean supply of fresh drinking water. Later, others had tried to find similar wells, but had no luck. On the long haul between the Base and Adelaide, Bel Ridge became a regular watering stop. The collection of huts was surrounded by a defensive ring made up of old car bodies and junk. A watchtower at the entrance guarded access, but the guard ignored us as we passed through the gate.

“Are we allowed in?” Danny asked.

“Nobody said different,” I assured him, pushing open the shuttered door of the roadhouse and leading the way into the large bar room. We stepped inside and were enchanted by what we saw. The interior was painted white, and groups of round wooden tables surrounded by chairs were neatly set out as if expecting a hundred or more customers to arrive at any time. The walls were covered with the bric-a-brac of more glorious times. There were etched

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mirrors, advertising posters, Travel advertisements. Old photographs and mimeographed letters or documents were presented as a collage of past century paperwork pasted into frames.

Glassed cupboards held small tape recorders, computers, calculators, video-phones, cameras, food processors, coffee makers - a virtual small goods store of museum artifacts. They were all priced but, as there were no batteries, they were absolutely useless.

Some of the soldiers, and a few adults were at the bar. They had money or barterables to trade. The soldiers were drinking Techbrew - alcohol and flavoured water - which was advertised as being "Made on the Premises". They paid in ammunition. At five rounds a drink it was expensive. We had nothing to trade.

Sergeant Dameron was bargaining with the proprietor - a tough old lady known as "Auntie Millie" - for our convoy's water supply. He had four grenade launchers and a box of grenades on the table.

"You kids get to hell out of here and stay with the trucks!" he shouted belligerently.

Chastened, we turned to leave, but Auntie Millie had other ideas.

"Children," she gushed. "You have children on the convoy?"

"Only two. Get under foot all the time," Dameron said, which was totally unfair because we had stayed out of his way most of the time.

"Eddie, get the kids a drink of water," she said.

"There'll be no favouritism from me," he said. "Next you'll be wanting me to shout the whole bloody bar."

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“He’s such a bear,” Millie complained. “I wouldn’t have married him if he hadn’t promised I could eat him when he goes,” she winked meaningfully at Danny, who stepped back in alarm.

"She's pulling your chain," Mike whispered.

"Now let me see," she said, "enough for four hundred litres. You sure this is all you can trade?"

“We have to be prepared for contingencies. We could be attacked,” Dameron said. A waitress appeared with glasses of Techbrew.

“Thanks, Mary,” Millie said taking charge of the tray. “No charge for these. I always seal business with a nip,”

“I thought I told you brats to buzz off,” Dameron said.

“Oh, don’t be so cranky. Mary, take the boys out the back and show them to Granny,” Millie said. She whispered something into Mary’s ear and they both giggled. “But before you go out there, give Auntie Millie a kiss,” she demanded, grabbing a rather surprised Danny and hugging him tight. “It’s all right, dear. It’s just that I haven’t held a child for years.”

Danny and I were used to being hugged by adults. Sometimes people would burst into tears while holding us, telling us we reminded them of their own long departed children or relatives, but we were hardened to embarrassment. Millie let him go and motioned us to follow Mary into the kitchen behind the bar. As we walked away, I looked at Dameron, expecting to see annoyance, but he merely winked as if to wish us good hunting.

I had never seen unlocked cupboards so full of food before. Pre-chaos tins and jars of everything from Apple Sauce to Vegemite were stacked onto the shelves. Tins of biscuits, jars of preserves, pickles, coffee and spices stood in rows. It was all

preserved by canning, drying, or in vacuum packs, and the sheer colour and variety of the labels was magic to the eyes.

“Where did you get all the stuff?” I asked in amazement.

“That’s our secret, Honey. A lot of it’s traded - for drinking water, mainly. You can drink rainwater if you want to die from radioactivity, but if you want to reach a ripe old age, you have to get water from a good bore.”

There was a sudden commotion, and a small furry object - a mammal - hurtled into the room making a terrific racket. Danny leapt up onto the table in alarm.

“What is it?” he shouted.

“Why, it’s a dog.” Mary said, doubling up with laughter.

The little furball stopped at my feet and sniffed. I reached down and picked it up, holding it firmly so it wouldn’t bite.

“Don’t be so rough,” Mary said. The little dog was frightened and lay yipping and quivering in my arms, so I eased up on it, patting it and stroking it tentatively.

“Danny’s never seen a dog.”

“I have - I’ve seen pictures, Mike.” he said.

“That’s not the same. They’re good eating,” I said. “Better than rats.”

“Who’s talking about eating my little Scamper?” someone asked. I turned around to see the oldest, most wrinkled woman that I’d ever laid eyes on. Her hair was long and white, and she had a lumpy, hairy face. If ever there were witches, Grandma was one of them. She reached forward and grasped the little dog from my hands. It whimpered and shivered, then settled down quite happily while she held it.

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“Are you keeping it for Christmas?” I asked. I had heard that some people still held to such customs.

“Solar sakes listen to the boy,” Grandma cackled, cupping her hands protectively over Scamper’s ears so he wouldn’t hear. “Is food all you ever think of?”

“Mostly. I mean, I think about it a lot.”

“Well, don’t just stand there. Mary, get them some food. These two boys are obviously starving. This one,” she said, pinching my ribs, “is as skinny as a stick. How about a hamburger each with real meat and salad? I bet you boys never had proper food before. Lived on ration blocks all their lives by the look of them.”

I could have said that we lived on a rooftop farm and had eaten real food before, but Danny kicked my shin under the table and gave me one of his shut-your-mouth looks.

Even now, I can remember every last bite of that meal. We had hamburgers, tinned vegetables, preserved eggs, and real bread with pats of butter and strawberry jam from a glass jar. In actual fact, the servings were small, and the quantity of food was not so much, but after years of living on the borderline of starvation, it was a great feast.

“Well, did you like it?” Grandma asked.

“It was terrific, thanks.” I said.

“Thank you very much,” Danny said politely. “It’s really been very kind of you.”

“If you were to stay on here with us, you’d eat like that every day.” Grandma said.

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Her eyes shone with enthusiasm, and I looked at Danny with a sudden feeling of unease. We'd eaten a meal that would, normally cost hundreds of dollars. There was no way we could pay for it.

"Don't worry. I loved giving it to you. I enjoyed watching you eat it. You remind me of my nephew..."

So that was it - another lost relative.

"He's doing very well in the military."

Phew! At last - a relative that's alive, I thought.

"Come and give old Granny a hug, then." she said, putting Scamper down and holding out her hands.

She was very old, and very ugly, but neither of us hesitated. It was a small price to pay for the meal. As I said, we were used to giving affection to childless adults.

"I don't think we can stay with you, Granny," I said quietly into her ear. "We aren't orphans."

"You've a mother and father in the truck. Doctor Richard Anvell and his wife Susan. The bush telegraph knows all. Come and I'll show you."

She grasped our hands and led us through a door at the back of the kitchen. Behind the roadhouse was a collection of large industrial containers. Some were Freezers which worked off solar power. Others were used as bunkhouses for the guards and staff.

"That one is for communications." she said. "We manage to talk to Omega Base regularly. Now I'd like you boys to give Granny a helping hand to bring some sacks of food back to the kitchen. They're in this container."

She opened the door of one of the refrigerated boxes. Frosted air poured out like steam and we felt a cold draught.

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“See those long bags down at the back,” she said, reaching inside and switching on an internal light. “It will be a little heavy, but you should both be able to manage it.”

We stepped into the box and walked down the central aisle. On either side were shelves filled with long bags. I poked at one experimentally.

“Not the ones on the shelves. Get the top one off that pile at the back,” Granny said.

We bent down to pick it up. It was a Hessian bag, and very heavy. “What’s in it?” I asked. There was no answer. We turned as the door slammed shut, imprisoning us inside the container. As we raced for the only exit, we heard the terrible noise of the outer bolts sliding home. Danny and I hurled ourselves against the door, pounding on it with all our might. It was closed tight.

“Granny! Help! Let us out!” we shouted.

We screamed, shouted, and pounded, to no avail. We had walked into the trap like flies into the spider’s parlor. I began to have a terrible feeling about the long, heavy bags.

The cold began to tell on us almost immediately. We were dressed for high temperatures in light clothing. Our breath was turning to steam as we talked to each other.

“What are we going to do? Danny asked. “We’ll freeze in here.”

“The sacks,” I said. “We can use them.”

I cut the end off the bag with my penknife. Danny let out a gasp of horror at the contents, but I was already prepared for what we saw - the body of a boy, about twelve years old.

“They are cannibals!” Danny exclaimed.

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“Don’t think about it, Danny. We’ll unwrap some more and keep warm in the sacks. Luckily the light switch is inside. We won’t be in the dark.”

“We’ll die with the lights on. Oh, joy.” Danny said ruefully. He pulled the sack over his body and I cut slits for his head and arms. We soon had a dozen bodies on the floor as we wrapped ourselves against the cold. The work kept us warm, and I talked constantly to keep up our spirits.

“It’s lucky this is an atmospheric system. They compress ordinary air and let it out through an expansion valve to cool the box. It’s the simplest system. If they were using Nitrogen we’d be dead by now. We have to keep warm and last until we’re missed. The sergeant will turn the roadhouse upside down looking for us. Mum and Dad will never let the convoy leave without us.”

“They couldn’t attack the roadhouse, it’s like a fortress,” Danny said. He was always the practical one.

We sat on the corpses and waited, or exercised to keep warm. We would take turns hammering on the door or shouting at the tops of our voices, hoping to be heard. Time passed, and we began to tire easily. Danny sat quietly on the top of the pile of corpses and looked at me with despair. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and I hugged him protectively. “Just hold on, Danny. Look. Have a badge,” I said, handing him the cloth badge I’d worked loose from the sleeve of the uniform our dreadful frozen seat was wearing.”

“I wonder who he is?” Danny said, perking up quite suddenly. I’d given him a mystery to solve. He poked at the fabric. “It’s overalls. Has he got any I.D?” he said, searching the pockets. “Ration biscuit!” he announced, holding one up.

“You can’t rob the dead,” I protested.

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“Everyone does,” he retorted. “Think he’s going to eat it?”

We had another search of the container, and found a stack of boxes containing ration biscuits. We figured we were worth a few boxes each, and stuffed them into our pockets. Danny sampled one of the biscuits.

"It's got the same badge mark on it as that boy was wearing," he said.

I examined one of them, noting it had the Omega mark, and the number 27 on the back.

"Wonder what it means," Danny mused.

I was about to reply, when there was a tremendous shudder through the box. The lights went out. Another shudder, then another. It was a feeling I knew all too well.

“We’re being shelled. Get ready by the door. If anyone opens it, rush them.”

We moved in the darkness, positioning ourselves for an escape attempt if a chance occurred. A few minutes later, there was the sound of bolts sliding back.

“Now!” I said. We hit the door with our shoulders together. It swung open sharply, and we rolled out, knocking our rescuer to the ground. It was Sergeant Dameron who lay sprawled on his back. His rifle swung towards us.

“It’s Mike and Danny!” I yelled. The rifle stopped. We began to peel the sacks off our heads, revealing our faces.

“You’re not dead?” he asked in surprise.

“Not quite,” I said.

He handed his pistol to me. “Kill anyone you see who isn’t.”

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I checked the weapon professionally, cocked it, and took the safety catch off. “Did you come alone?” I asked.

“That was the only way. Knew we couldn’t mount a frontal assault, so I sneaked in and as soon as it was dark, the boys dropped a mortar and rocket attack to cover me.”

We moved cautiously towards the back of the roadhouse. A limp figure lay sprawled on the ground. It was Granny. Scamper stood over her, loyal to the last. I aimed my pistol at the dog, but Danny nudged my elbow and I held my fire. Cautiously, he scooped it up and tucked it into the top of his sun suit.

There was a brief exchange of fire at the front of the roadhouse, and then silence. Damaron moved forward carefully, probing the building. Aunt Millie, Mary, Eddie the barman and the guards were dead. The bar room with its priceless collection of useless techno-trivia was a shambles. Two soldiers burst into the room. I turned in fright and was about to fire, but stopped, I recognised them from the convoy.

“Objective secured.” one of them reported.

It was over. The roadhouse had been taken. I never had the chance to fire a single shot.

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Chapter Two

Ambushed

From Danny's Tale

Mothers can be impossible, sometimes.

I tried to tell her it wasn't Mike's fault that we got locked in the freezer, but you know how they can be once they get an idea in their heads.

The outsiders had decided that we would die of poisoning, a hundred or so kilometers along the track. Dameron told us that, if it wasn't for Granny's greed, and her attempt to abduct us while we were actually at the roadhouse, they would have got away with it.

It took all his powers of persuasion to get Mum and Dad to agree to leave without us and drive far enough along the highway to be out of sight and then some.

The soldiers had tested the water, even before the convoy left. Any doubts they had about attacking Bel Ridge vanished with the results. Dameron hid within the scrap pile that made up the fence and watched while the trucks drove away. He lay completely still until dark and commenced his attack from within the compound as the first mortar shells from the convoy exploded inside the perimeter. He took out the Guard tower, then dropped a few grenades into the bunkhouse and general confusion.

Much of the early morning was spent cleaning up the mess and salvaging what good stores there were. I salvaged several jars of strawberry jam. Scamper was tied inside the truck. Everyone naturally assumed he was an eating dog.

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Mike was just getting into the truck as we were about to leave. He made a remark. I knew he was only joking, but reacted.

“Bringing dinner?” he asked.

“You leave Scamper alone. He’s mine now.” I said.

That’s when Mum went off.

She gave Mike a roasting. “I told you to look after Danny!” She screamed at him. Then she slapped him - knocked him to the ground. Dad stepped in at once and there was a real shouting match. I’ve seen some arguments in my time, but this was one hell - dinger of a domestic.

You have to understand that Mum and I are really close. It bugs Mike no end, sometimes. He gets sarcastic and calls it “an incestuous relationship” when he’s really teed off. He never says that near Mum - only to me.

Getting hit really shook him. He went white with rage. I won’t say the words he actually used, but everyone in the convoy heard him, and it took Dad aback, too. He picked Mike up and dusted him off.

“You’d better sit in the front truck with the sergeant,” Dad said, “Because after what you’ve just said to your Mother, I’m likely to knock you down, too.”

Damaron accepted his extra passenger with good grace.

As the truck rolled down the highway, or bumped and rumbled over the rough bits, our family group sat in stony silence. Everyone else was gossiping and laughing. It was almost a party atmosphere. Food was being shared about, and for the first time, people seemed to be enjoying the trip with optimism. We were the miserable ones, and the rest of the passengers ignored us.

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An hour before noon, we stopped. Some of our fellow travelers brought out a solar stove to brew tea and coffee. Dad and I erected a light sun tent as the temperature was over fifty and climbing. Mike sat morosely in the cabin of the lead truck, and only came out when the internal cabin temperature reached sixty.

Tall columns of sand twisted their way across the horizon. A particularly vicious whirlwind passed nearby. We were worried that the tent might get carried away. Dameron checked the pegs and ties carefully. Scamper lay panting vigorously, and one of the women laid out a bowl of second-water that she filtered through a sand bowl. It was muddy, but cool, and the little dog drank it gratefully.

There was nothing to do, but lie in the shade. I sat polishing my sunshield. The clasp holding it to my hat was getting worn. Dad took out his suit repair kit, squirted a small amount of plasti-glue onto the clasp and held it while it set. At sixty, one of the soldiers turned on a water mister and sprayed us for a couple of minutes. It was deliciously cool, but dried out almost instantly. Mike's sun suit was crusted with a patch of fine salt across his shoulder blades. That reminded me that I would need more salt to avoid cramps. I took a salt pill and sucked it. It tasted sweet - a sure sign that I was low on sodium.

Three o'clock arrived. We struck the tent and the soldiers began to pack the gear back onto the trucks. We drank a half litre of water each and prepared to continue our journey. Mum went up to Mike and spoke briefly to him. They walked some distance away from us to talk, then returned. She had her arm around his shoulders. His eyes and cheeks were moist. I was glad that he had returned to the family fold.

The front flap of the truck's canvas cover was open, so that the hot air of the desert flowed through the back, pushing the tailing dust cloud away from the passengers. When we made speed, it

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was cooling, but as the vehicles slowed down to negotiate obstacles or crawl over sand dunes, the heat became intolerable.

Gradually, the sun began to sink in the sky and things improved. It was evening when we stopped on the road in the centre of a flat plain.

“We’re going to camp overnight and leave early tomorrow morning,” Dameron announced. “There will be no lights. This is Outsider territory. Anyone moving beyond the camp perimeter will be shot. We are deploying automatic infra-red targeting sentinels.”

“Dumb robots,” Mike muttered. “Keep dinner on a leash.”

“Don’t sleepwalk,” I said cheerfully.

“Are you two arguing again?” Dad asked.

“No. Just banter.” I assured him. I didn’t want another domestic. I checked the rope that held Scamper tied to the truck, then attended to my sleeping arrangements.

Night falls swiftly in the desert. The stars gleam with a clarity that can’t be matched on the coastal belt, where pollution yellows and clouds the atmosphere. Mike and I changed into tracksuits, for the air is also cold once the sun goes down. After the heat of the day, it is a great relief. Mum washed our sunsuits in second water and hung them up to dry.

Second water is water that has been re-used, not just twice, as the name implies, but over and over again. It is passed through a charcoal and sand filter - easily made by crushing charcoal and sand, mixing them together, and filling a fabric lined drum. The water is poured onto the top of the filter and is cleaned of most particles by the time it comes out of the bottom. It is good enough for washing or cleaning up in, but cannot be drunk. In an

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emergency, a steritab into second water made it fairly safe for drinking, but there was always the possibility that radioactive rainwater might have contaminated the supply.

Mike and I worked out the approximate position of the South Celestial pole and he calculated our latitude from its position above the horizon at approximately 30 degrees South.

We dozed off, but the cold woke me. I decided to visit Scamper, so rolled quietly off my sleeping pad and crawled over to the truck.

He had gone. It looked as if he had chewed through the rope.

“Scamper! Scamper!” I called.

There was a short bark from beyond the perimeter. My heart skipped a beat. Somehow, he had run off from the camp, and was probably out hunting rats or lizards. He didn't know about the ATROS - automatic targeting robot sentries. I stared with horror at the silver and black boxes mounted on their tripods.

I woke Mike up, and he came with me to assess the situation.

“Don't call him, Danny. If he tries to come back in, he'll be shot.” he advised me.

“But he might try to come back in anyway. I'm going to ask the Sergeant to turn the sentries off so I can go out and get him.”

“No, Danny. The soldiers will skin you alive if you wake them up. There's nothing you can do. Get back to bed and we'll try to find Scamper in the morning.”

It was easy for him to say, but it wasn't his dog out in the desert being scanned for by ATROS. He went back to sleep, and I sat down to think about how to save scamper. Atros scanned using Infra red light. Anyone could walk up behind it - it only looked to

the front. Simple, really. Our sunsuits blocked I.R. and U.V. radiation. Cover the lens with the sunsuit, and fetch Scamper. Nobody would know.

It was easy. The box was big enough for the coverall to slip over, and with Atros effectively blinded, I took my torch and set off after my dog. I wasn't shot at, so I was satisfied that my ruse had worked. When far enough away from the trucks, I began to call. It took a long time, but I found him patiently attempting to dig into an old rabbit burrow.

"There aren't any more rabbits, Scamper. They all died out long ago," I scolded him. He pointed his nose down the burrow, so I guessed that something was in the hole. It could have been anything, so I decided to cut our losses and get back to the camp before anyone spotted that we'd gone. I picked him up and we started back.

I realised I was in trouble. Lights were on in the camp. As I approached, a spotlight from one of the trucks picked me out. There was nothing for it, but to return and face the music. I walked doggedly on into the blaze of lights, which were suddenly extinguished.

"Just hold it right there," the sergeant said.

A bright spot appeared on my tracksuit. It was a laser beam.

"Just don't move, stranger."

I froze. A laser beam usually meant someone had you in their sights and I didn't know the odds of beating a computerized trigger.

"I had to get my dog," I said.

"He got away, did he?" Damaron said. "We can fix that. Get the tow chain, corporal."

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I brought Scamper to the back of the truck where the corporal attached the tow chain. Damaron took a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and secured Scamper's collar to the chain.

"He won't get out of that," I observed.

Damaron produced another pair of handcuffs and pulled me to the truck. He lifted my arms and secured my wrists behind my back through the tow shackle.

"And neither will you," he said.

Dad and Mum were furious.

"Hey, Damaron. Cut it out. He's only a kid."

"You vicious bastard," Mum said. "I'll have you charged over this."

She moved forward as if to go for Damaron, but the soldiers stopped her.

"Corporal, if the Anvells say anything else, or try to get near their son, you are to take four star pickets and stake them out two kilometers down the road. And that is a Battle Order. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

Mum and Dad stood with their mouths open in protest, but not a sound escaped their lips.

"And if I have any more trouble from you or your family, I shall charge you with conduct prejudicial to the safe conduct of this convoy and you will all spend the rest of your lives carrying rocks in the Penal Battalion. Is that clear Doctor Anvell - Don't answer, just nod."

Dad nodded.

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“Then get back to your tents, lie down and get to sleep. Sentry, shoot anyone coming within fifty metres of this truck.”

He walked off to his tent to go back to sleep. Mum blew me a silent kiss and Dad walked her back to the tent lines. Mike looked at me with disgust for a few moments before turning his back and walking off. Everyone who had witnessed the events of the night drifted back to their tents, and I was left alone with Scamper.

It was a cruel thing for Damaron to do, but he was a man of limited compassion. Perhaps he thought I needed to be punished and humiliated publicly. As well as risking my own life, I had endangered the whole convoy. I had never been forcibly restrained before. The handcuffs were hard against my wrists, and I soon found that struggling only brought on more pain. To attach me to the shackle, my hands had been lifted upwards behind my back. The upper part of my body was bent forward from the waist and I could hardly move.

It is clear within my mind - every sensation of that night. My tracksuit was soft, but no protection against the cold desert wind. My face was freezing, and I shivered. The soft sandshoes and woolen socks kept my feet warm, but standing in one position for hours made them very sore. I could not rest comfortably in any way. I tried standing on one foot, then the other. Nothing worked. It was a cold, lonely, painful and miserable four hours until dawn.

The corporal released me after everyone else had eaten breakfast. Missing a meal was like having salt rubbed into a wound. As soon as we were in the truck out of sight of the soldiers and on our way again, Mum rubbed my wrists and shoulders which were sore. Dad said he'd put in an official complaint in as soon as we reached Omega Base, but the other passengers counseled him not to take such an action. It wasn't likely to succeed. Indeed, in view of the sergeant's threats, it was more likely that we'd be the ones in trouble.

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The convoy commander had complete power over his charges. Theoretically, he could shoot a civilian if he thought it was necessary for good order and discipline. Some of the passengers thought that I'd come out of it rather lightly.

"He could have given him a good thrashing," one of the women said.

"Just like being put in the stocks, lad - like they did in the old days." another man said. "But without the rotten vegetables, eh?"

A few people laughed at this, and the remark did cheer me up - slightly. I agreed. It could have been worse - a lot worse.

"I'd have eaten the vegetables," I said.

Throughout all of this, Scamper, the cause of all my troubles, lay blissfully asleep at my feet. I was still wearing my tracksuit. My sun suit had been taken off the Atros by one of the sentries. Thinking it curious, he had alerted Damaron, who called the whole camp to alert status. My family was not exactly popular with our military escort. The whole incident was logged in the official diary, and my suit impounded as evidence.

A track suit is not ideal wear for desert temperatures. I took the top off, but after a few minutes, my skin had started to redden slightly in the harsh Ultra Violet radiation, and Dad ordered me to put it back on.

We entered hilly country. The sentries were on special alert. The trucks moved slowly, not only because the road was rough, but also to avoid kicking up a large dust cloud behind the convoy. Everyone was tense. The lead truck stopped. A message was passed down the line.

"Road blocked ahead. Prepare to turn around."

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An explosion in the hills above and behind the convoy put all doubts to rest. We were being attacked. A landslide, triggered by the blast, cut off any retreat to the rear. As the dust rolled around us, Dad grabbed the steel box holding the shovels and picks.

“Give me a hand with this, Mike and Danny. We may have to dig a trench.” he said. “Out, everyone. This truck’s a deathtrap!”

We needed no urging. large boulders had rolled down the hill, and Dad led us among them. We started moving stones into position to create some form of shelter.

“Why aren’t they firing on us?” I asked.

“There’s no hurry. They’ve got all the time in the world,” a soldier who had taken cover with us said. He looked around the boulder with his field glasses, then fell back with a startled cry. He started screaming and twitching, throwing himself around in the throes of death. A bullet had gone through his chest.

Dad emptied the tool chest and handed us a small trenching tool each. “Start digging, but keep low.” he said.

I knelt on the hard ground and started thumping a hole into the surface. Dad used the pick to smash some holes into the steel tool box. I wondered what he was doing, but kept trying to dig. It was impossible to get more than a few inches. The ground was all rock. There was a blast as the supply truck exploded.

“They’re using rockets,” Dad said.

“No they’re not,” Mike said. “Dameron said they had orders to destroy the supplies if bandits attacked the convoy.”

We waited in the heat. It got worse and worse. We had no water, and my throat was parched and dry. I stopped using the pant-breathing technique of blowing air over my moist tongue,

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because it started to dry out. Saliva started to stick in my mouth, and I realised I was shivering, a sure sign of heat stress.

The Outsiders started to fire on our position. Bullets whined off the rocks. I figured we had had it, but found I really didn't care. The sky had turned yellow, and I guess the heat had started to cook my brains.

"Come over here carefully, Mike. I want you to help me with this box." Dad said.

"What are you going to do with it?" Mike asked.

"Look inside it and see how many hand widths across it is."

Mike looked puzzled but bent over the box to look. Dad touched his jugular vein with his pneumatic injector. Mike looked at him in horror.

"We're finished, Son." Dad said, as Mike slumped into unconsciousness. He pushed him into the box. "Come here, Danny."

"No!" I shouted. "You've killed him."

"He's just unconscious, honey, darling," Mum said, sliding across to me through the fierce firefight that was raging around us. "If you're alive, they'll kill you. You have to tell Mike I love him. Tell him I'll always love both of you. Please, Danny. We know what we're doing. The Outsiders won't kill you if you're found helpless. It's against their warrior code. They'll take you into their tribe. Try to understand."

Dad threw the injector across to her and she caught it. He tried to crawl across to us, but a bullet took him through the head. He fell silently, as if in slow motion. I screamed and tried to reach him. Mum held me firmly. She was tremendously strong. My

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neck stung. I felt everything slowing down. The world and my whole universe turned brilliantly white.

I tried to move towards the light.

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Chapter Three

Patrol

Mary Blake's Diary

I remember that it wasn't an ordinary patrol.

The Outsiders had been very active and we were worried about the convoy. It was a day late - that wasn't unusual, but we were worried, just the same. Admiral Osark called a staff meeting of all the senior officers, and we decided to mount a two stage patrol. Two Armored Personnel Carriers would reconnoiter, and a backup battle chopper would be called in to assist if needed. Colonel Spicer was to be in command of the operation. He would ride in the 1st APC with his aide, Lt. Stanley Jivers and Captain Dawson. I would take the second with Lt. John Colson. If we had to use the chopper, the cost in fuel, our scarcest resource, would be enormous. It was our weapon of last resort.

Ormond Spicer was an incredibly neat man, a fanatical perfectionist, and very professional military officer. He was also ruthless and cruel to the point of being sadistic, but went by the book - so he always got away with everything he did. He was the project's second in command. I often thought to myself, God help us if anything happens to Admiral Osark.

The Admiral was kind, compassionate and a charismatic leader, and yet, with all the qualities of energy, enthusiasm and humanity that endeared him to us, he always thought of himself as a failure. As mission commander of the first Omega expedition, he was responsible for destroying the Ice Moon that had been brought into orbit around Earth. The shattered moon would create a band of shadow across the atmosphere, allowing it to cool so that global warming would be reversed. His mission failed. An enquiry

exonerated him of all blame - the robotics had malfunctioned.

Civil war across the North American Alliance prevented him from returning the shuttle to that continent, so he was ordered to land in the nearest friendly territory - Australia. We inherited a working and potentially launchable space shuttle.

The United Nations Command promoted Osark to Admiral, gave him plenipotentiary powers and ordered him to try a second time. As the tidal wave of 'chaos' swept the world, Osark accepted the burden. With the help of remnants of the scientific establishment, he tried to re-create a final mission using convicts for labor, scraps for parts, and a team of scientists, engineers, and chemists. With the fall of civilization, Omega Base became the Earth's last outpost of Nano - technology.

Apart from my military duties, my job was to look after the children. In the early days of Omega Base, somebody had the bright idea of combing the streets of Adelaide looking for lost, abandoned, or orphaned kids and sending them North to Omega for care and protection. They established a refugee camp on the edge of the township. It wasn't very well run or secure. I was one of the two thousand unwanted kids living around the project like rats in a sea port. We were able to move everywhere. The project was often stalled because of juvenile crime - stealing, looting, sabotage and malicious damage. They couldn't send us back - there was nowhere for us to go. One night, a senior scientist was murdered for his food coupons.

The military rounded up the orphans and imposed a Spartan culture of military discipline on us. It wasn't regular child welfare, but somehow it worked. How else could they care for so many children? The Base was unable to provide enough adults who could be spared to look after us, so we were divided into platoons and companies under the control of the strongest and hopefully, sanest, older teenagers. The resulting Cadet Army gave

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us order, discipline, food, clothing, shelter, and some reason for living, when most of us felt we had no future at all.

I wasn't 'sane', perhaps, but I found myself appointed as a Cadet Lieutenant in charge of a platoon of thirty girls. They called me 'Mother Mary' - out of spite.

Some of them knew that I'd lost a baby - my first and only - to the exovirus. I was bitter, but efficient. I took my anger out on that platoon. It became the smartest in the corps and I was promoted to Cadet Captain of the Girls' Company, then Cadet Major in charge of all the orphans.

We built our own dormitories and turned an old Launch Vehicle Hangar into the mess hall. A small plaque made from scrap metal commemorated the end of the task. "Built, by hand, and built by us." Our daily routine consisted of parades, drills, classes, work details, cleaning and light duties. The boys collected the town's garbage for re-cycling, dug ditches, cleaned drains, and did every job that permitted adults to work full time on the project. The older boys helped with construction work and were trained as welders, fitters, and artisans. Some, like John Colson, had special talents and were trained in engineering and astronautics.

At Eighteen years of age, I graduated from being Cadet Major in charge of the dormitories to life in the project's single quarters. I was made an officer in the regular military establishment, with the rank of lieutenant. My experience with the kids was invaluable. My nickname changed. I was no longer the hated 'Mother Mary'. the kids began to call me 'Ma'am' and the troops referred to me as 'The Den Mother'. At twenty-six, I had mellowed with age.

So what was I doing on active patrol looking for a lost convoy? The luck of the draw, I guess. Nobody was favored when it came to active duty, and my number came up.

We deployed an active defense. The first APC would move ahead, climb a ridge, and cover the second as it moved to a ridge further on. It was a slow leapfrog, but safe and efficient. The men were hot and uncomfortable. Without asking for my permission, one opened a side vent. If he thought a young female officer was a walkover, he soon re-considered. I made the miscreant run behind with his rifle at the extension. A couple of miles later he had obviously got the hint. I couldn't be a complete bastard. Spicer would have let him run till he dropped, but I did have a soul.

Spicer brought the A.P.C.s together at the top of a high ridge overlooking the South Road. A column of black smoke rose from Hill Pass. It was an ideal spot for any attack on the convoy. He stood on the ridge looking at the ambush site through his powerful binoculars .

“I suspect we're too late,” Spicer said. “By the time we get there, it will be all over.”

“Sir, Admiral Osark has ordered us to advance and secure whatever remains of the convoy.” Captain Dawson reported from his APC. It would be typical of Dawson to keep the Admiral informed. I suspect Spicer would have ordered us back home.

We adopted battle formation and approached the pass with a coordinated pass from the chopper. The hills shook with explosions as we blasted the sides of the pass. Suddenly, my APC lifted bodily into the air as a mine detonated under the right track. Fortunately, I was wearing my helmet, or I'd have lost my head. Some of the men were badly knocked about by the blast.

“Now what are we supposed to do?” I asked.

“I'll take the able bodied ahead to help clean out any problems while you stay here and look after the wounded,” John said.

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The APC wasn't badly damaged, but it would take time to repair. A short time later, the first APC and chopper returned. Spicer wasn't happy with me at all.

"You were in command," he said with irritation. "You should have led your men into the fight - not skulked back here with the wounded."

"It's getting on to dark, Sir," Jivers said. "Why not take the helicopter back to the base - it will be faster."

Spicer agreed, "Yes. We don't want to lose both APCs. Blake, you remain here with two men and see if you can salvage this machine. If you can't repair it by morning, destroy it and march back to base. Understood?"

"I'll remain and help," Lt. Colson said.

Spicer gave him a long look of contempt, before giving a curt "Carry on." and ordering the APC with its extra officers and troops back towards the base.

I looked once again at the damaged track. Colson and the two soldiers removed a toolkit from the side locker. We set to work, hoping the Outsiders would not re-group and attack us.

"I don't think they will," Colson said. The last I saw of them, they were streaming off Eastward with whatever they could carry from the convoy. They'll be far too busy to bother us."

"Was it bad?" I asked.

"Only two survivors. Kids. They were too shocked to tell us anything. Apparently their parents knocked them out and hid them in a box. Spicer won't let us take them back to base. Says they could be harboring Exo."

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The thought of the exovirus running unchecked through our orphans made me close my mind like a steel trap to any humanitarian thoughts I might have had. I shrugged and examined the plate one of the men handed to me.

“We’ll never straighten that out without a blacksmith’s shop.”

“Talk of the devil,” one of the soldiers said, looking over my shoulder.

I looked back at the pass. Two small figures were walking towards us from the deepening shadows. A very small dog trotted beside them.

“You’re the boss, Den Mother. Do we shoot them now, or let them perish?” Colson asked.

“Spicer’s a bastard. He knows we won’t - so if anything happens, its our necks. Reckon they’re infected?”

“There’s no way we could tell. Not without a med kit.”

The boys came within hailing distance. The older one held a small suitcase in his hand. Later, I found out that it contained their worldly goods - all they had salvaged from the wreckage of the convoy. I shouldered my beamer and walked to meet them. The little dog raced ahead and stood its ground in front of me, barking. The older boy stopped and held his brother back.

“I’m Mike, and this is my brother Danny That’s Scamper. It’s a dog.”

“What do you want with us?” I asked.

“Your warlord said - we couldn’t go to Omega Base because we don’t have medical certificates.” he said. “We haven’t got anywhere else to go. My brother needs help.”

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“What’s wrong with him?” I asked. He shrugged, but it was obvious to me - I’d seen severe shock before - “Shock. We should rest him. Are you boys infected? Have you been in contact with anybody who’s had Exo?”

“No. Our father was a doctor. He invented a vaccine for Exo. We were carrying it in our supplies.” He was at breaking point. Tears welled up within his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. His voice cracked. “It’s all gone. Now - my Mum and Dad - they’re dead. They’re all dead.” He sat on the ground and broke down, crying with a great sobbing sound. His younger brother stood staring vacantly at the horizon, his mouth hung half open, saliva drooled down his chin.

“What are we going to do with them?” Colson asked. He had come from behind and startled me. “They won’t survive a day out here.”

“We’ll have to take them back with us.”

“Disobedience. That’s a court martial offence. You could be shot - I mean - We could get shot.”

“But they don’t have Exo. They had vaccines.”

“Do you believe that?” Colson asked.

The boy sniffed. “Danny got Exo when he was a baby. He didn’t die. His blood made antibodies to the virus and he lived. Dad was able to splice Danny’s genes into a culture. We had gallons of the stuff in Adelaide - before the hospital farm got shelled.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Hospital farm - was your Father Doctor Anvell?”

“Yes.”

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“You were the little boy they kept in isolation on the roof?”

“Yes. How do you know that?”

“My own little boy died of exo in that hospital. Your father was his doctor. They kept you in isolation so you wouldn’t catch it.”

“He worked on the vaccine for four years. I was the first to get the shots. Now - they’ll have to start all over again.”

I turned to John. “This is incredible,” I said. “Spicer can’t possibly follow through his order now. These kids are vital resources for the colony.”

“You’ve got your excuse to take them back,” John said. “Now all we have to do is figure out how to fix the track.”

We took the boys back to the APC. John and the two soldiers managed to make a forge with two termite nests and some mud. A hose blew air into it from the air-conditioner unit, and a wood fire soon produced a good bed of burning charcoal. We heated the track plate to red hot and John set to work with a large rock and a standard hammer. The blacksmithing took all night. Mike and I spent much of the night with the soldiers gathering wood for the makeshift forge. Colson hammered the plate back into shape and tried to fit it.

“It’s no good. We need precision tools. We don’t have a micro welder or even a drill.”

“You could use your beamer.” Mike said. “The soldiers often used theirs at the hospital. You can make a really fine beam by closing off the aperture screw behind the primary lens. I’ll show you.”

I handed my beamer to him and he set to work converting my personal weapon into a precision cutter and demonstrated his dexterity by welding the track into its rightful place.

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I tested the repairs out with a short run up the road, and it held fine. Mike set about returning my weapon to its natural battle order state. I watched him work on it as we rattled and bumped our way back along the dirt road leading towards the base. He was intent on every detail of the delicate task, working silently, shutting himself off emotionally from the events of the previous day.

Danny sat on their small case staring blankly at the wall. His hands fondled Scamper's fur absently, but there was no life or feeling behind his eyes. Outside, the temperature began to rise. Dust devils began to swirl skywards. The monotonous desert vegetation lay parched and crackling under the relentless sky.

"We'd better stop at the gate and let the Admiral know about Danny and Mike." John said.

"Knowing Spicer, he'll be there to meet us. I wouldn't put it past him to ..."

"We'll pretend there's mechanical trouble and stop about a hundred meters short. We'll leave the kids in here and I'll keep Spicer busy while you get onto Osark from the security station."

"Are you sure that will be enough?" John asked.

It was a good point, so we changed our plans - just in case.

As we had guessed, Spicer was waiting for our return. We left the APC half a kilometer from the main gate and marched in. There was the traditional challenge and we identified ourselves.

"Having some trouble," Spicer asked.

"Afraid so, Sir. The track was temporarily repaired, but didn't hold out quite long enough." John said. I excused myself as he continued his report, and reached the phone at the guardhouse.

The Admiral wasn't available. I was sweating on contacting him. Finally, I got through to him at the Shuttle Assembly Bunker.

I filled him in on the details of what we had found. "Admiral, for some reason, Colonel Spicer doesn't want the two boys within the colony. I can't figure out what his fears are - both say they're immune to Exo.

"Doctor Anvell's boys, eh? He was posted here to set up an immunization program. If his kids have the genetic material already inside them to combat the virus, they're invaluable to this project. Tell Spicer that he's now got orders to allow the children entry to the base."

"I'm not sure he'll accept it from me, Sir."

"I'll get right over there." Osark promised.

I went outside and looked up to find Spicer and his men standing in the observation tower examining the APC via their powerful field-glasses. The elevator whisked me up in seconds and Spicer looked around at my entry with a sardonic grin on his face.

"It certainly looks like a dog sniffing around the vehicle. What do you think, Lieutenant," he said, handing the binoculars to me.

My heart sank. Scamper must have jumped out of the back of the APC. "Sir, I've informed the General of the importance of the two Anvell boys. He's ordered us to allow them entry to the base."

"Has he now?" the Colonel said tightly. "But being a good officer, you didn't bring them back into the base. You followed my orders to the letter if not the spirit, eh?" He turned to the Artillery Computer. "Two rounds armour piercing into the APC. Load, Fire!"

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“Colonel, No!” I shouted. The computerized artillery system fired on command, and I was seconds too late. I watched in horror as the shells hurtled towards the machine. It exploded in a gigantic fireball.

John held my arm “Too late. It’s gone,” he said.

At that moment, the Admiral arrived in his staff car

“What’s happened?” he asked

“I believe the APC contained something we didn’t want on the base” Spicer said. “Am I right, Lieutenant?”

“No Sir. The APC had a small dog inside. Apparently, it got out.” I said. “The Colonel has just shot it.”

“Some shot,” Osark said acidly, turning towards Colonel Spicer. “I’m sure you’ll be able to tell me all about it later. I’ll be fascinated to hear why you just destroyed a very valuable military vehicle.”

“Admiral, I...”

“I suggest you return immediately to your office and commence writing up a succinct report, Colonel. I’ll be wanting to read it very thoroughly, so I’d get on to it right away.”

Spicer glowered at me for a fraction of a second, then took the lift to the ground. I watched him until he entered the staff building.

“Right, Mary. I suggest we take my car and we’ll pick the boys up. How far out did you leave them?”

“About five kilometers, Sir. They had orders not to approach the base until I came to get them.”

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“Let’s go then, but before we do...” he turned and spoke directly to the artillery director: "Artillery, download and do not engage until you have a direct order from me. Confirm!”

“Order confirmed, Admiral.” it said.

“I’d feel very nervous out there in a car with that thing running amok.” he confided in me as we took the lift to the ground. The boys were waiting under the shelter that John and I had rigged up across an erosion gully beside the road. Scamper was sitting with them, chomping on a ration biscuit. He looked unharmed. He must have run all the way back along the road to where we’d left the boys. “What was that explosion?” Mike asked. “Were you under attack?”

The admiral looked at me and winked, then smiled at Mike. “I guess someone just shot his own foot off,” he said.

“Get in, kids. We’ll take you home.” I said.

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Chapter Four

New Boys

The Anvell Story

I was worried about Danny.

I sat on a hard chair in the hospital admission centre and waited while the army medics checked him over. He kept staring vacantly ahead of himself as if his mind was lost in space and he never spoke. His silence frightened me. The only relative I had left was going quietly mad. There was Scamper, the dog, but he didn't count. He was Danny's pet, not mine. I felt completely alone. A nurse in military uniform took a blood sample from a vein in my arm.

“What's wrong with Danny?” I asked. “Why doesn't he say anything?”

“Trauma. Shock. Lots of kids get it when they're in a battle, especially if their relatives are killed.”

“I was unconscious. I didn't see it happen. When I woke up, the army was all around us. The warlord wouldn't bring us back here.”

“Warlord? Oh! I see,” she said with a light laugh, drawing another tube full of blood, “You mean Colonel Spicer. He's the second in command of Omega Station. He was worried about the Exovirus.” She tapped the tube and sealed it. “Sometimes the army has to make tough decisions. You can't blame him for being careful. We'll soon know if you're infected. Meanwhile, you have to stay in isolation.”

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“We’re both immune to Exo. Dad made the vaccine.”

“We still have to test - just to be sure.”

“And if we have it?”

Her face clouded over for a moment. In that brief fleeting second I knew that if we tested positive, our lives wouldn’t be worth a candle. I looked at the heavy service beamer that she wore strapped to her belt.

She smiled tightly. “We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.” she said.

They took my clothing from me and sealed it into a bag with a name tag. I was shown a receipt, which was placed on my personal file.

"Will I get my stuff back?" I asked.

"It will be kept in the Baggage Store. You'll be able to claim it back when you get settled in."

I was worried about the ration packs I'd managed to keep hold of. Anything could happen to them in a store. They could get stolen, or eaten by rats...

A short time later, I was showered, given a set of unbleached canvass pajamas, then taken to a private ward and locked in. Later, I was to discover that this room was used to house people who had gone insane, but I retained enough of the innocence of childhood to accept the explanation that I was being quarantined. Insanity is the final stage of the Exovirus as the brain is torn to pieces by the invading organism. The plain, unfurnished room had padded leather walls and a soft floor. The barred window was set too high in the wall for me to be able to see through it or reach it by jumping, and I had no books or entertainment.

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The room was not air conditioned, and I perspired profusely. As the morning wore on, I was left to my own thoughts - memories of my family - and became thoroughly depressed to the point of tears. I cried myself to sleep. My dreams were of happier times - fishing from the roof of the hospital with my father and brother - visiting the water markets - riding in the speedboat with the soldiers and the ever present soft fragrance of my emotionally distant and enigmatic mother shadowing Danny's every movement, every second of the day.

The orderly woke me for lunch - a glass of water and two ration biscuits. He was affable and left the door open so I could visit the loo after eating.

"You and your brother tested clear, so you can visit him if you want to." He said. "He's down the corridor in room five. They've tranquilized him. He'll be asleep."

It was as he said. Danny lay like a rag doll on the ancient hospital bed that looked as if it had been salvaged off a rubbish tip. His canvas pajamas were damp with perspiration. Beads of sweat ran off his face. The printing on his shirt, "Patient" and the red cross insignia, were faded. The sheets were stained, but smelled clean. I was used to being around a hospital - after all, I had lived on top of one in Adelaide - but the one at Omega contained many surprises. It was a strange mixture of old and new.

Simple shortages could cause some machines to become obsolete - for instance, there was no paper available for making charts on recording devices. Equipment that required batteries would not function unless adapted to the thirty-two volt mains supply. I knew that all of our civilization's technological equipment was failing gradually. There were no replacement parts. Much of our technology had regressed to a basic Twentieth Century level. Sometimes batteries were improvised in jars filled with acid and two electrodes. Nothing was new.

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I couldn't do much for Danny, so I left his room and began exploring. Nobody challenged me. They were either too busy or not busy at all - like the security guards who were playing card games on their monitors, or ogling the nurses. I was able to slip quietly into the pathology laboratory and spent some time looking at the equipment. Much of it was familiar. Petrie dishes and optical microscopes do not require batteries. I was peering through a microscope when I heard footsteps approaching. Not wishing to be discovered, I looked about for another exit. There wasn't one. Two men entered the room and ignored me.

Rather than slink about, I sat where I was and continued to look down at the slide. I had long ago discovered that the best place to conceal oneself is in the open, as part of the environment. After all, what would one expect at a microscope station but to see someone looking at a specimen.

They were discussing a case: "That kid's in a state of shock. He's going to need a lot of careful management. If anyone tells him his real identity, it could push him over the edge completely."

"We don't know that. When are you going to tell Mary?"

"How am I going to tell her? That is more to the point."

"She's his mother. You've got to tell her..."

"That her kid was swapped. The good Doctor Anvell lost his son so he conveniently swapped the dead baby with a live one belonging to a street kid."

"You don't know that happened."

I was so shaken by what I had heard, that I turned around to face the men. I hadn't met Doctor Morrison before, but my father had talked about him. He was a short, stocky man, with grey hair and a large beard. On seeing me, his face went white with surprise.

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“What are you doing here? Who is this, Saunders?” he demanded of his companion. “How long have you been listening?” he asked me.

“Since you came in.” I replied. “Are you talking about Danny?” I asked. “He’s my brother.”

“We’d better have a talk about that - later. Right now, I want you back in your room until we clear things up.” Morrison said.

They refused to answer any of my questions, but firmly escorted me back to my room. After a few terse words with the orderly, they left me to his care once again.

“Who said you could wander all over the place,” he demanded. “Now you’ve got me into a real mess of trouble.”

Once more, I was locked in the security ward. I was angry, but a little hurt and frightened at the same time. Something was going on which concerned my family, and I was being left out of it.

Despite the oppressive heat, or because of it, I must have dozed off again. There was nothing much else to do in that tiny hot box that served as a padded cell. I was aware that the door was opening, and I looked up as Mary Blake entered. Her resemblance to Danny was so uncanny that I wondered why I hadn’t noticed it before.

“Are they taking good care of you, young man?” she asked.

I looked pointedly around the cell and shrugged. “My name’s Mike. How’s Danny?”

“Still sleeping. He’s not physically hurt. They’ve got him on amnesiacs. When he wakes up, he won’t remember much.”

“Are you going to tell him who you are?” I asked.

“Not right away.” she said, sitting beside me on the soft floor. She was quiet for a while. We sat side by side without saying anything for two or three minutes. Then she opened up.

“It’s funny - strange, I mean. They expected me to get all emotional about it. I thought I’d buried my kid and finished grieving for him a long time ago. I didn’t expect him to get up out of the grave and walk in on me ten years later. I’ve got over two thousand other kids to look after, including you, Buster.”

“My name’s Mike.”

“So you keep telling me. I guess you think this business somehow makes us related. I don’t show any favoritism - not to anyone. After you’ve buried enough kids, it doesn’t bother you any more. I don’t cry at funerals.”

“So - if you don’t give a shit - why are you here?”

She laughed. “I’m asking myself the same question.”

“Danny looks just like you. You are his mother.”

It was my turn to reminisce: “I always thought of him as my brother. He’s all the family I have left. Now he’s gone too. I don’t have anyone.”

“You have me. Like it or not, Mike. I run all the kids in this place. I am ‘Mother’ to every one of you. I don’t have time to listen to sad stories. You’ve got to pick yourself up by the bootstraps and learn to live in this hell-hole. You can go to school and study. You can be put to gainful work if you don’t. If you play up, you’re old enough to be put in the Convict Labor Battalion.

“We run everything here on military lines. That includes the orphanage. It’s efficient and it saves manpower. It isn’t welfare.

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It isn't adoption. It isn't fostering. It works because you find your own feet and learn to look after yourself. If you don't ..."

"You're not going to look after Danny?"

She paused before replying. "I can't. If he knew I was his mother, he'd have to cope with another identity crisis. He's just lost his other mother. He has to sort that out first. You're going to have to stay his brother for a while longer, Mike. For the good of both of you, I'm putting you together with a good company. I raised young Andrew Gillet from a snotty nosed brat. You'll get no other special treatment. You are not to tell Danny that I am his real mother. Got that?"

"Yeah. It'll be hard."

"It's hard on me too, Mike, but that's the way it has to be," she said, getting up. "Now come with me and we'll issue you with kit and take you to the dormitories."

She escorted me to the "Q" Store where I drew my uniform, mess kit, boots, kepi, and sunglasses. I was taken to the barracks to meet Gillet, my Cadet Commander. Half an hour later, I was just another anonymous orphan in the same monotonous navy-blue overalls, kepi, boots and sunglasses – another blue dot in a long blue line of orphans.

Captain Andrew Gillett was a wiry fifteen year old with flaming red hair and freckles. His idea of a sense of humor was to assign me to cleaning his boots and those belonging to his cronies. There was a snigger from the boys in the long dormitory, and they sat around watching me work. I pretended to resent it slightly - just enough to make it convincing. He wasn't to know that I had always looked after the soldiers' boots at the Hospital - in return for bits of ration cake and other favours. His sidekick, Sergeant Morgan, stood watching me for at least ten minutes before deciding that I knew what I was doing and wandered off with the

other boys. I knew boots. As soon as he left, I retrieved Gillett's and worked a small stone under the heel pad. I knew he wouldn't spot it until too late. Small stones are like that - they make their presence known when they have created a sore heel.

True to form, Morgan returned and poured a handful of dust over all the work I had done. His pals enjoyed the joke, but I knew my reputation would hinge on what I did next.

"You'd be a gutless coward hiding behind your mates and your stripes," I said quietly. "I reckon a real hero wouldn't be scared to take me on outside. No rank, no friends, and no comeback."

"I can't," he said. "It's strictly against regulations to fight."

"The dump," one of his corporals suggested, biting his lip at the withering look that Morgan directed at him.

"Sounds interesting," I said.

"The dump. The dump. The dump!" boys started chanting.

I reasoned fairly quickly that Morgan wasn't very popular with some of the other boys. Perhaps they'd been on the receiving end of some of his petty bullying.

He looked at my small frame and made his decision: "The dump," he affirmed.

It must have been a kilometer away from the base, amongst shallow depressions in the low set hills that ringed the complex. We streamed out of the barracks and moved across the scraggly desert like an army of navy blue ants. From every nook and cranny, boys and girls joined The procession until a thousand or more were gathered around a roughly crafted dirt oval. They formed a silent ring and watched as Morgan and I were pushed towards each other by the small band of N.C.O.s.

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Gillet strode forward and took over.

“This is a challenge?” he asked.

Morgan nodded with a broad smirk on his face.

“If Morgan wins, you’ll be his dog for as long as he wants you,” Gillet said. “You know what that means?”

“Nothing nice, I guess. What happens if I win?”

“You get his stripes. He could hardly remain as N.C.O. if someone in his squad trashed him. I don’t know why he didn’t just ignore your challenge and put you on punishment fatigues for being uppity. I’m supposed to look after you, but I can’t interfere with this. You challenged him. He accepts. Perhaps he needs a dog.”

I began to get a pretty good idea of what a ‘dog’ was and didn’t think much of the idea.

We stripped off to our briefs and two groups of boys emerged as our seconds. I handed my cap and sun glasses to a small youngster who gave me a quick grin. I don’t know what made some of them choose my side, but one or two gave me anxious looks as they led me to a makeshift corner that made me realise I was probably fighting for a lot more than my own status.

“Careful when he kicks dust in your eyes. He follows up with a roundhouse kick,” one of the boys said.

I looked at him appraisingly. There was something desperate behind his eyes. “Why do you want me to win?” I asked.

“Cause I’m a dog. His dog,” the youngster confided.

“Morgan's a real cruel bastard, and Jason's his dog,” Another added.

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We met in the centre. He threw a fist at me, and I blocked it, but the weight of his charge forced me backwards. He was determined to use his bigger size against me, and his longer reach started to tell. I changed tactics, and as he swung a particularly vicious hook at my head, I struck out at his fist with a hard knuckle strike to his thumb. He danced backward in pain and I took the opportunity to kick his kneecap. For a moment, he went down, but quickly got to his feet and turned on me once more. I held him off, but he was learning fast. I had to trap him into doing something stupid.

I was running out of my repertoire of fighting skills. He wove carefully up towards me, favoring his sore leg. This time, as his fist slashed forward, I struck at it again, but instead of following through, he flicked his hand towards my face.

Dust! He'd picked up a handful when he went down. I closed my eyes against it in a reflex, but Jason's warning came sharply focused into my mind. I jumped forward as he spun around in the roundhouse kick and caught his swinging leg, jabbing my fingers hard onto the inside muscles of the thigh. He screamed as I dug into the nerve points, lifted, and tossed him onto his face. With no thought for mercy, I slammed my heel into his jaw.

I had hurt him badly. He lay unconscious in the dust like a rag doll with blood running from his nose onto the sand. I knelt beside him and rolled him gently into the prone position. Someone handed me a small flask of water, and I washed his face with it. The crowd that had started to chant "Anvell. Anvell. Anvell." went silent as I carefully lifted his head. His eyes fluttered open, and I poured some water over his forehead. He looked up at me with an expression of complete hatred and loathing.

"Won fair and square," Gillet said, squatting down on his haunches beside Morgan. "You all right?" he asked.

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“Yes,” Morgan said through a thick lip. A couple of his friends helped him to his feet and he limped away with them.

Someone pushed my overalls towards me. “Better get these on before you cook,” he said. I dressed once more and looked around. The crowd was dissipating rapidly. Gillet and my seconds waited until I pulled my boots on. He held out his hand and I went to shake it, thinking I’d made a friend. He was handing me the set of sergeant’s stripes. I looked at them in a quandary.

“What now? I don’t know how to run a platoon.” I admitted.

“You’d better learn fast,” Gillet said, “And for starters, I wouldn’t go accepting any stupid challenges. You’ll be in our room. It’s got more space - only four beds. One each for the Captain and the three sergeants.

“Rule one is you share anything you get. Two is you keep your mouth shut, and three is you ignore anyone beating the meat or stroking their dogs. Everyone’s got their bad habits. Snore and fart outside. Got it?”

“Cool.” I said.

“That’s one thing it ain’t - ever. You get used to the smell after a while. Once a month you get a shower and wash your clothes. We live in these coveralls most of the time. We work in them, school in them, play in them and sleep in them.”

“All the time?” I asked, incredulous.

He laughed. “Except on your official birthday. That’s when they give you a new pair. What did you think you were coming to, Anvell? Paradise?”

He started to tell me about my duties and how things worked at Omega Base. Officially, the kids were run by Ma’am Blake. Unofficially, the kids ran their own affairs and their leaders were

appointed as N.C.O.s in various ways. Corporals and Sergeants had to be tough to command the respect of anyone under them. From these N.C.O.s, the regular officers chose the most suitable kids as Cadet officers.

Regular military officers were supposed to exercise oversight and prevent things within the Juvenile Refugee Facility from degenerating into a military version of “Lord of the Flies”, but there was no way they could ever know everything that was going on in that huge dormitory village.

I managed to wash myself in some second water that Jason found for me. He was anxious to please, and I wanted a friend from within the ranks.

“Do I have to be your dog?” he asked.

“No. Course not. You helped me, remember? I’d rather be your friend. Mates?”

“Yeah. I reckon,” he said.

I was to find out to my cost that Jason’s friendship did not come without a set of unique problems. Jason was a manipulator of the first order. He would barter the teeth from a crocodile. Anything not tied down was grist to his mill, and property disputes often erupted like the wake from a ship as he cruised his daily rounds, hustling from one deal to another.

Danny and Scamper came into the dormitory that afternoon. Danny looked a bit vague and groggy, but was otherwise O.K. Amnesiacs do that. The effect is to wipe out recent short term memories, so that Danny would remember all about Adelaide, Mum, Dad, and myself, but the events of our journey would be blocked from his conscious mind.

“Hello, Mike,” he said. “Where are we?”

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“Omega Base. We were coming here, remember?”

He shook his head and looked vague. “No. Where’s Mum?”

“She’s not here. We’re on our own. We have to look after ourselves. I’ll look after you and Scamper.”

“Scamper?”

“You’re carrying him.”

“He’s my dog.”

“Yes, Danny,” I assured him, glad he remembered something.

“And you’re not eating him.”

“No. Of course not,” I reassured him.

Jason stood in the corner of the dormitory watching as I took control of Danny and showed him his bed. I tethered Scamper to one leg of the bed. As I looked up, I noticed Jason was staring intently at the dog. He moistened his lips and then caught my stare. He looked away as if caught out in some guilty secret. Perhaps I was slow on the uptake, or distracted by my concern for Danny. It never occurred to me that Scamper could be in terrible danger.

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Captain Gillet spent an hour instructing me on my duties as sergeant. We sat side by side on his hand-made bed of flat stones, and bags stuffed with grass that had long powdered into soft dust. In the scorching heat, we stripped our coveralls down to the waist and pored over the tattered cadet manual that served as a guide to the running of a military orphanage. I was no longer perspiring freely, because I had started to dehydrate. I had trouble turning the pages, because my fingers were so dry.

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Because I had grown up with soldiers, I found that I knew a lot about platoons already. There were thirty boys under my command, ten in each of three sections led by a corporal. Three platoons formed a company, making a total number of ninety-four children altogether.

There were twenty-seven orphan companies at Omega Base. Five of those companies cared for babies and infants. They were staffed mainly by the army nursing corps, with rostered duty from the older cadets. It wasn't regarded as macho, but secretly, a lot of the older boys enjoyed what was termed "Baby shit duty", or - more politely - "Peanut Butter Parade".

"If you get a "Bunker Drill" while you're on PB Duty, each kid grabs his baby and heads down the hatch," Gillet said conversationally. "Actually, each ward has a door into the bunkers, so it's no big deal really. The Outsiders never attack, so it's all a big wank. The main trouble is from the two to six year olds. Sometimes they don't want to play. I got bitten by a six year old last time."

"Any kid who bites me will be sorry," I said.

Gillet shook his head. "Not worth it. If Ma.- Mary hears that you've thumped one of the brats, she'll use your guts to hang out the nappies. You've yet to meet her. She's really something."

"Actually, she was the one who brought us in," I said proudly. I nearly said that she was Danny's natural mother.

"Really," he said, taking a sudden interest.

"She rescued us after the Outsiders attacked the convoy. Colonel Spicer didn't want us."

"Spicer's an asshole. Don't cross him. He's on Mess-Hall duty tonight. You ever seen two thousand kids all eating at once?"

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You can't hear yourself think, but with him in charge, you can hear a pin drop."

"What's he do - if someone screws up on him?"

"Did you ever hear of the U.N. Charter of the rights of the child? You can demand a copy if you want. Let's just say he gives it a very creative interpretation."

The expression on his face as he said that, made my blood run cold. Danny and I were already on Spicer's bad books. He was already in trouble for trying to keep us out of Omega Base. If he wanted to get back at us, we could easily become targets for his anger.

"There's one more thing," I asked. "What can we do about feeding Scamper?"

"You'll have to let him find his own food. There are plenty of rats about. The boys catch a few and trade them. They taste O.K. If you decide to eat any yourself, make sure they're well cooked."

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Danny was reluctant to leave Scamper, but there was no way he could be allowed into the mess hall. With a piece of wire, I fashioned a running lead that attached to his chain so that he could have the run of the dormitory hallway. When the bugle sounded for tea, we mustered without kepis or sunglasses. It was the custom to roll up the sleeves of our overalls - a symbolic gesture that it was safe to move about with skin exposed to the elements. Jason helped us to fold them up neatly - squarely, so they looked uniform. At the time, I questioned this finicky behaviour - spit and polish at the end of the world, but now I understand the reason for it. There was always the need to give us hope - something to aspire to, even in the depths of our misery. Gillet carried out an inspection, then ordered us to march off.

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I called the platoon to attention, and we followed the other platoons to the Mess. The hall, a converted Aircraft hangar, was huge. We lined up in front of the main door in companies with our mess kits in our hands.

It was early evening. That orange ball of hellfire, our merciless Sun, slid slowly down the cruel sky to take its rest behind the low black hills in the West.

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Chapter Five

A Season in paradise

From the Museum Archives

HEY! I MEANT IT AS A JOKE!

So! - O.K. - It wasn't my best deed of the day, if you know what I mean...

Morgan, who thought he owned me, put the screws on me that very afternoon: "Don't think you're off the hook, Jason. You're going to be my dog until I decide otherwise. And you needn't think that new boy can protect you all the time."

I guess I'd better explain. You see, not everything that went on at Omega was official. I mean - they got control of the system, but we kids had our own world, too. Like - "The Bunyip Club". Kids only, and strictly no adults allowed.

That doesn't mean they didn't know all about the existence of the club. A lot of them used to be members - before they grew up and joined the system. Sure they knew about the Bunyip Club. They sort of tolerated it as a way for us to let off steam - provided we didn't go too far. Some called it 'Bedwetters Incorporated', or 'The Junior Mafia'.

The club itself was an old explosives magazine shed, surrounded by huge levees of earth. It had been painted (Some said by adults) in gangland graffiti colors. The luxury of squandering such sparse resources as paint, was never repeated, and in the heat, the colors faded and peeled off, leaving it really dilapidated. To us, it was super cooleroo.

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Mike and Danny were too new to be members. They went back to the dormitory after the fight, but a lot of the kids retreated to the clubhouse. That's where I went, and that's where Morgan's supporters carried him after Mike trashed him. It was just bad timing on my part that we crossed paths at the same watering hole.

Watering hole? You could actually buy water at the Bunyip Club. Someone in Engineering had made a solar still. It was supposed to supply distilled water for batteries, but somehow, the kids saw a better use for the device and it was defalcated (pinched) from the official base inventory. Second water-sewerage water - any sort of water, including ... but I won't go into that - was distilled and the end product was aerated, filtered through a sandstone block, and bottled. It was the finest water on the base.

So I was negotiating for a half litre when Morgan's minions tapped me on the shoulder and "invited" me to join them.

"There's no way I'm going to stay as your dog. That's over now you've lost your stripes," I said.

Morgan was lying on a long table, propped up with sack pillows while his friends ministered to the cuts and abrasions around his face. "I could sell my interest in you to Spider," Morgan said offhandedly. "He has a way of enforcing debts."

Small boys whispered that Spider once celebrated Easter with a real live crucifixion. (Surprising for one whose appetites were hardly Christian?) At any rate, His reputation was sinister and the gangling, effeminate youth was decidedly odd, so Morgan's threat worried me. I wasn't terrified exactly, but I'll admit to being worried.

"Or you could buy out your own contract," he suggested.

"How?"

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“That little brother of his has a nice little dog. A real one. I reckon we could have a good barbecue with it. What do you lot think?”

There was a chorus of assent. I looked around the room. There was no way that Scamper would have enough meat on him. Morgan only wanted the dog for revenge.

So I'd have to pinch the kid's dog? So what? It's no big deal. I reckoned they were probably saving it up for a meal. I could see that Morgan was desperate to strike back at Mike through Danny. My loyalty wavered.

“Throw in two boxes of ration biscuits,” I said.

He smiled through his bloodied mouth. “One,” he said painfully.

“You're on,” I said. We flicked hands on the bargain. It was not that I wanted to be a traitor to my new found friends, It was always the same with me. Business was business, and I rode high on the excitement - the adrenalin thrill of the deal. How was I to know that the dog was Danny's special friend.

My immediate problem was to secure the dog - without Danny or Mike knowing I'd taken it. I guessed it wasn't going to be easy. The best way would be to sneak out during Evening Mess. My luck wasn't in. Spicer was on duty.

Evening Mess wasn't just a “Two, four, six, eight, bog in, Don't wait,” type of meal. I mean - we got given two ration biscuits. Now you have to understand that they managed to give us two meals a day. Omega base was nominally a U.N. Installation, so they had all these rules and the Children's Charter. They did their best. We weren't exactly walking skeletons, but nobody was fat. The bones showed through, but not too obviously. There was a saying that you could get anyone to do

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anything for a ration biscuit. It was a saying - not a joke. The meal was more than a ritual, So they stretched the two biscuits into a two-hour long session of community singing and organised jollyng - up of all of us “poor” orphans.

With Spicer in charge, nobody got out of it. You stayed for jollyng, whether you liked it or not.

The bugler sounded mess call, and everyone left the barracks to muster in companies before “The Hangar”. It was huge. Some said that it was once used to house launch vehicles. We marched in and sat at our tables while the Sergeants queued up for ration boxes. Numbers were never perfect, so there were always a few spare biscuits - that’s how the trading operated. The sergeants got the extras, shared them with the cadet officers, and the black market ran from there.

Nobody wasted any time with the biscuits - they got scoffed down A.S.A.P. That way, you couldn’t lose them during the singing of the Anthem.

Beneath the Flag of All Mankind,

Side by side we’ll stand.

Working for the good of all

To heal the wounded land.

For by our toil and labor

By every deed and chore -

The Cool Blue Seas shall surely flow,

And Earth shall live once more.

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Omega! Omega!

Where all mankind will stand.

Working for the good of all

To heal the wounded land.

We sang it with gusto - before “Birthdays”. There were always five or six, and the lucky kids got a present - a few dried raisins were deposited into their top pocket and safely zipped away - to be eaten later, or shared with friends. One could always be sure of friends on ones birthday.

I've often tried to remember my early birthdays. I must have been five or six years old when I got my first birthday present - a cream biscuit. Two slices of sweet pastry with cream in the middle. Like many of the cadets, I have no idea where I came from. Officially, I was evacuated from refugee camp 16B. Nobody knows where it was, but someone said it was once called 'Yalata'. Sometimes the boys make quiet jokes about my dark skin's resistance to sunlight, but there are many races here - Asians, Africans. I know for certain that I'm a real Australian, and that there are very few of us left.

The gong from the high table sounded. It was an old ritual, to remind us of the importance of the event. The water boys were sent around each table. We had to drink a litre. Nobody wasted it. The water made the ration biscuits swell, so after a few minutes, it was possible to believe that you had just eaten a huge meal.

“Announcements for today:” Spicer intoned as the containers did their rounds in silence. This was the time for news and announcements. No news had been heard from North America. Asia was silent, but someone had heard a faint radio message from Europe. The Outsiders were active on the road from Adelaide. Factions were still fighting for the Adelaide Hills area. The condition of Barrack toilets was a disgrace. Two boys got extra duties for not wearing their sunglasses outside. Some girls were breaking curfew by visiting the Senior Boys’ dormitories. Cadet Tranby had died from complications (Cancer from his melanoma), and his funeral would be held on Monday morning - and so on, and so on.

Nobody had changed the script since before I was born, and it went into the “Sergeant of Arms” routine, when various members of the cohort had to stand on the table for alleged sins. Morgan was jeered for “Failing to get a bronze medal in the boxing.” He didn't stand. Spicer grimly noted his absence. Mike and Danny were introduced as “Two Tourists from the former City of Adelaide.” Then Mike had to do ten pushups for “Social Climbing”. It was all good fun. I was watching Spicer as Mike performed - graciously enough for a new boy. The Colonel's face was rigid - a mask of iron that glared from the high table in a look that could kill very easily.

We were well into the jolly bits, when the hangar lights went off suddenly, to be replaced by emergency reds. There was the sudden wailing of the siren, and the electronic warning sounded: “THIS IS NO DRILL. THIS IS NO DRILL. INCOMING MISSILES WILL IMPACT IN THIRTY SECONDS. BUNKER STATIONS. BUNKER STATIONS.”

I thought it typical of Spicer to pull a bunker drill at a time like this. He hated Mess Duty. This would keep all of us busy for

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hours, while he and his crony officers went off somewhere for a real meal. Sod him!

Then I saw his face. He was standing with all the officers at the high table looking distinctly alarmed.

Outside, the automatic artillery opened up.

This was no drill.

I had my one chance to complete the abduction of Danny's dog. It was too good to miss, and while the squad was doubling for the bunker, I used the confusion to slip away into the darkness and head for the barracks. Next stop, Scamper.

The incoming missiles were no fantasy. They began exploding all over the compound, and I was blown off my feet in the first salvo. I lay in the dust, hugging the ground while explosions burst all around me. I was terrified, but my heart was racing to the thrill of danger. As soon as the first missiles finished impacting, I was on my feet, racing towards the dormitory block.

I crawled through the entrance, which had been blocked by a roof beam. The interior had taken a near miss and was a shambles. Scamper had survived, and was cowering in a corner, shivering with fright. He whined when he saw me, then greeted me as a long lost friend, jumping up and barking with joy, then licking me all over. I stuffed him into the top of my overalls, and hurried out into the melee outside. The artillery opened up again, and I leapt into a shell crater, hiding as low as I could while a barrage of missiles shook the base once more. As soon as the shooting stopped, I raced for the shelter of the Bunyip club.

As I had guessed, many of the boys had skipped bunker drill, and were enjoying themselves in the safety of the old explosives shed. It had been built with huge earth retaining walls surrounding it, and was therefore relatively safe from any bombardment, save a

direct hit. Morgan and his cronies were there. In fact, they hadn't even bothered going to mess, so did not turn up at bunker drill. They would be marked as missing, and there would be trouble, but Morgan was used to that sort of thing.

“Got it,” I said, handing the dog over.

Scamper lay nervously in Morgan's arms for a few moments, then licked his hand and looked into the boy's face. Morgan gave the dog half a ration biscuit, which it ate hungrily. I was watching Morgan as he started to play with the little dog. Something changed in his expression, and I realised that, somehow, Scamper was not going to be the star of a hot - dog barbecue.

“Well?” I asked.

Morgan reached under his table and passed a neatly wrapped ration box over to me. “It's still sealed,” he said. Then he turned all his attention to the dog. His very own dog.

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The extent of the damage became clear after the barrage lifted early in the morning. The Outsiders called their attack off so they could withdraw before daylight. Dawn was breaking as the 'All Clear' sounded, and it was mid morning before the confusion died down sufficiently to enable the facts to be sorted from the rumors. There was one outstanding bit of news. Osark had been wounded during the battle. He was a popular leader, but what made the news even more terrible, was that it left Spicer in charge. Nobody believed that was good news.

We found out soon enough. The cadets were mustered to general assembly bugle call. They needed us for work details. The food store and the algae plant had been hit. They would take time to repair, and meanwhile, we would be on short rations. Most of the attack had been targeted against the launch facility. The

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Outsiders hated the idea that we would succeed in creating rings around the Earth. They wanted to stop the Omega Project at any cost.

By the early afternoon, we had been assigned to work details. It was heavy, back-breaking work. We had no water, little food, and the prospect of weeks or months of the same, until the base had been cleaned up.

Although major damage had been done to the Launch pad water tower and shuttle runway, that was no longer a priority. The shuttle, buried deep under ground, was safe. The most important task was to get the base running efficiently again. Convicts had been drafted into town duty to help restore services, relieve soldiers of their duties so they could create a defensive perimeter around the base, and to bury the dead. The dying had to wait their turn.

That evening as we paraded for mess, we learnt another piece of bad news. Because the ration store had been hit, our evening meal was to be a half biscuit each. We would also have to drink filtered second water. I wrinkled my nose at the thought, but was consoled by the added information that it wasn't too badly polluted and radioactivity was within tolerable limits.

You might think, that under the circumstances, I'd give up my ration box, and the Bunyip Club would donate its water purifier so that we could all get a clean drink. Life isn't like that. My ration box wouldn't augment the needs of one company of cadets for a day, and the purifier worked so slowly that it would add a negligible amount of water to our needs. No way. The rations and the purifier became highly sought after objects, and prices for biscuits and Bunyip Water went over the moon. I got to drink real water that night by trading a biscuit for a glass.

For many of the cadets, the strain of the following days was unbearable. After a few days, work details and School were cancelled. They told us to rest up - conserve energy by sleeping all day in the dormitories. I managed to eat from my biscuit store in secret. Many of the younger and thinner boys started to drop in their tracks. They were carried off to the temporary infirmary by whoever had the strength to move them. I helped move some, which was how I managed to run into Mike and Danny once again.

Mike was trying to coax Danny into eating a little of the ration biscuit he had managed to save. Danny sat on a sand bag and stared vacantly into space. Mike looked up at me with a gesture of hopelessness.

"He's lost Scamper. He won't eat."

"The dog must have been scared by the bombardment," I said, somewhat guiltily. I had a tight feeling around my chest.

Mike stood up and took me by the elbow, leading me away from Danny. "No," he said, "Morgan's got Scamper. He wants two boxes of rations to give him back. I'm going to see 'Mother' to find out what she can do."

My blood ran cold. "You can't do that!" I nearly screamed. "That's snitching. One thing you can never do is tell on the other cadets. Look - they'll kill both of you if you tell tales. They'll do for Danny. They won't care. You can't go running to the Caps just because things get a bit rough."

"But Danny will die."

"Maybe. But start informing, and it's a certainty. We all hate informers. They have nasty accidents. There must be something else you can do."

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"Sure. Get Morgan two ration packs," he said, giving me a hard look.

My blood ran cold as I could sense what he was thinking.

"You're not thinking of trying to raid the ration stores, are you?"

"Sort of. Will you help me?" he asked.

I looked around the makeshift ward, at kids lying exhausted on scraps of sack and rag that served for beds. One biscuit a day - half a biscuit each meal. Slow starvation. I'd seen it all before. Steal two ration packs - to buy a dog back. Buy a dog back to stop a mad kid from starving himself to death. Buy a dog back before it got eaten. Stop a new kid from destroying himself by breaking the code of silence. It was crazy, but it was our world. You had to live in it to understand.

"Count me in," I said. I was as crazy as anyone else. "How are we going to knock off the Ration Store. It's knee deep in guards."

"I'm not. Danny and I brought some ration packs in with us. They were in our personal possessions. They stored them somewhere..."

"They'd be locked in the baggage depot. That's well guarded, too. They do that to make us all equal - no personal possessions allowed."

He wasn't to be put off so easily. "Maybe it isn't well guarded at the moment. They're too busy cleaning things up. Maybe they cut down on the guards, or something."

"You know it's a state of emergency. No looting. No hoarding."

"We're not looting. It's our stuff. I can't help it if they put it in storage when we got here," he said defensively.

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"You're still supposed to hand over any food," I said self-righteously. My own ration packet was safely stored away in a secret bolt hole under the floor of the dormitory.

"So what should I do?" he asked.

"Check it out. Have a good look-see," I advised.

We reconnoitered.

He was right. In fact, there were no guards on the baggage store - the doors were locked, and someone must have thought that was security enough.

"Blue Caps!" Mike hissed, as a routine patrol marched past. We ducked out of sight. We had nothing to be afraid of really. They were just doing their job, and the most they would have done to us if they found us there, would have been to ask awkward questions. Had they found us nosing about, they might have put a guard back on the store.

"What do you think? Tonight?" Mike asked.

"After midnight," I said. "It's quiet then."

We managed to get back to the bomb damaged dormitory without being detected. At Mess Parade, we assembled with the rest to collect our half ration biscuit and water ration. The water had a slightly soapy taste. Colonel Spicer came onto the floor with the other officers and took the first cup - to show that he was sharing whatever hazards we were facing.

During the News session, Spicer told us that some things had improved. Osark had regained consciousness, but was suffering from an acute infection. The shuttle runway was badly holed and had to be repaired - older cadets could volunteer to help. The Algae tanks could be fixed, and rations should be back to normal in six weeks or so. Cadet Sergeant Anvell was to report to the

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Administration section after mess. The restrictions on eating endangered species were temporarily lifted, but remember that snakes and some lizards could be toxic or radio-active.

"What's he want me for?" Mike asked anxiously.

"No idea," I assured him. "Be careful. Spicer's the only poisonous snake around here."

"Thanks. That's really - very reassuring," he said.

Later, we agreed to meet at the Baggage Store an hour after midnight, then shook hands. I watched him walk tentatively into the Administration Centre. He looked pretty scared, and I felt sorry for him. That surprised me, because generally, the only person I ever feel sorry for, is myself.

The feeling didn't last for long. I was going to be busy negotiating for some house-breaking tools.

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Chapter Six

Crime Doesn't Pay

Anvell M. Personal Papers

He thought I didn't know. The little worm thought he'd got away with it - selling our dog to my worst enemy for a ration pack. He'd suffer, but I was determined to make him pay for his treachery as slowly as possible. I walked into the lobby of the administration building without looking back once. He could do all the sweating. I had my own problems.

The secretary looked up with bored disinterest as I approached the desk.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Cadet Sergeant Michael Anvell reporting as ordered," I said.

She smiled with cynicism. "Got you well trained, I see. They're not ready for you yet, Anvell. Sit yourself down over there and wait," she said, indicating a hard wooden form on the other side of the room.

The form was hard, and my buns didn't have much fat left for cushioning, but I sat where I was told and looked around. The secretary wore crumpled fatigues which made her look positively ancient. She had an old typewriter and a pile of re-constituted, hand made, paper sheets. There were cobwebs in the corner, and the photograph of the Secretary General, Akhmed Khamool, was well faded. Nobody had heard from him, or anyone else at the U.N. for months. If this was all that was left of the United Nations, I felt sorry for the world. Somewhere in the back of my mind was the thought, Not with a bang, but a whimper. I tried remembering the origin of the quotation, without success. My memory had

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become hazy over the last week or so. They said it was due to starvation.

"Would you like a coffee?" she asked.

"Yes please," I said. I'd have said the same for a toasted mouse. This was the red carpet treatment, no doubt about it.

"How do you take it?"

"White please, with four sugars."

She grinned. "One sugar cube, and just a spot of whitener, Honey. It comes out of my own ration."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't..."

She brought the cup over and gave it to me, then went back to her desk. It was warm coffee, but I didn't mind. She chuckled. "Don't be. I'd have tried the same thing myself once. Where do you come from?"

"Adelaide. I came with my brother on the last convoy. Where are you from, Ma'am?"

"Oh, I was born in Alice Springs. My family moved down here before the centre was abandoned. You could say I'm a local. You can forget the Ma'am bit. Most people call me Jennifer."

There was a sharp burst of noise from a plastic funnel beside her desk. I recognised it as the end of a speaker tube. Even in Adelaide, we had an electric intercom.

"He's here," she said. There was another burst of noise that I couldn't understand. She looked up and said, "They'll be another five minutes. Finish your coffee. They want you clear headed in there."

"What's it about?" I asked.

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"Nothing to worry about. Just that, in all the fuss after you got here, they didn't really de-brief you. They'll explain."

I finished the coffee. De-briefing. That wouldn't be too bad, just a lot of questions. I put the cup onto the form and watched the daddy long-legs on the ceiling capture a small beetle in its web. I wondered why nobody had eaten the spider.

Mother Mary pushed the inner door open and stood looking at me for a moment.

"Thanks for looking after him, Jennifer. He's all ours now. Come along, young man. We want to talk to you."

She placed her hand over my shoulder and led me down the corridor to a room marked "Conference Room". If I had expected anything grand, I'd have been more than disappointed. It was clean, with a long painted wooden table and wooden chairs. At one end, crossed flags - The U.N. and the Omega flags - marked the Chairman's position. Lt. Jivers was acting Secretary. Lt. Colson and Captain Dawson were sitting easily over folders. Colonel Spicer was in command. The two chairs on his Left were empty. Mary sat me next to him, and took her place beside me without ceremony.

For a moment, he ignored me. Sun cream - or rather, the lack of it, was the agenda item.

"We cannot manufacture the key ingredients?"

"Not with our technology. We'll be back to using clay - like the Outsiders," Dawson said.

"There are twelve new cases of melanoma, thirty BCCs and Twenty SCCs amongst the cadets. That doesn't include four cases of UV Aids," Mary chipped in.

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"Well, the kids know the rules." Spicer said abruptly. "Survival of the Obedient - that's the new biology. If they go outside without sun protection, we can't help them. They'll die of the consequences. If it was up to me, I'd parade the whole orphanage and make them watch the surgeons cut the cancers out. Without anesthetics."

There was a sudden silence around the table. Spicer could always turn a phrase.

"I hope you're not going to lecture me about the United Nations and the Rights of the Child, Mary. The welfare of children is foremost to our thoughts. Tonight we are blessed with the company of one of the species. How are you, Michael Anvell?"

"Very well, Sir." I said respectfully, ignoring the total sarcasm hidden behind his soft, deadly voice.

"And your brother?"

"In hospital."

There was another awkward silence. I looked pointedly at Mary, but she sat staring at the table.

"We're not here for a domestic," Spicer cut in. "How much ordinance was carried on the convoy? Do you know?"

"There were rockets, Light G2G rounds, SAMs - about twenty of each. They had boxes of Batteries, some - about five - small 240 volt generators, two solar generators, a container of mixed ammunition, four boxes of anti-tank missiles, and other stuff. I didn't see everything. One of the trucks was destroyed in the ambush. I don't know what it was carrying.

"You're a very observant young man," Captain Dawson noted with admiration. He looked from me to Spicer. "It's as I guessed,

Sir," he said, "They've expended about half of what they've taken, so we should expect another attack soon."

Spicer agreed: "They'll wait until we recover, then try to hit us again - guessing we'll be out for the count next time. We haven't the resources for continued long-range patrols, and they know it. What do you all think?"

"I think we should get in first," Jivers said. "A surprise strike with the helicopter..."

"Suicide!" Colson interjected. "Are you forgetting they've got the SAMs?"

"And we've no U.N. authorization for such a strike," Dawson said.

"What bloody U.N. WE - are all that is left of the civilized world, as far as we know." Spicer said angrily. He snatched the little blue and white flag off his desk and snapped the stick before throwing it into his waste-paper basket. I looked at it, and my mouth dropped open in surprise. It hung bravely for a moment on the lip and slid into the receptacle marked "RECYCLE ONLY".

The Omega Flag - white symbol against black background stood defiantly alone.

"We have to face the reality we are in," Spicer said heavily. "The United Nations no longer exists. Admiral Osark who held their charter as an Individual, is gravely ill. Our last connections with that August assembly will die with him. I shall continue on as leader of this last outpost of civilization, as he has requested. It is my duty to obey, and to serve. I look to your loyalty and cooperation with all my decisions."

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"Will you assume the rank of Admiral?" Jivers asked. I couldn't help noticing a sudden sly expression hung fleetingly over his eyes as he asked that question."

"Please," Colonel Spicer said piously, "I am - We all - are hoping for a miracle."

There was a long silence. I had the feeling I was watching history in the making - the end of the United Nations and the re-birth of a new ruler. Somehow, the Omega flag took on all the aura of a skull and cross bones. It was only inches from my face.

"Mary? What have you to say?" Spicer asked.

She was still staring at the table. She looked up at him with something of desperation in her eyes. "Danny. He's my son. My responsibility..."

"Of course, Mary. I'm sure we'd all be happy to approve some duty leave for you to attend to your family. I'm not sure that Motherhood and Affairs of State are a good mixture, even at our - very small government - level."

It was done with a subtlety that nobody noticed. Mary was out of the Council - for family reasons. Lt. Colson was too junior to have much influence. Colonel Spicer and Lt. Jivers would dominate the Council to squeeze Captain Dawson whichever way they wanted him. A bloodless coup had occurred, and nobody knew it had happened.

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After the interview, I returned to the dormitory. Mary returned to the Officers' quarters, after telling me that she intended to look after Danny.

"I lost him once, and I don't intend that to happen again, Mike."

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"You could have thought about that before," I said. It wasn't that I wanted to hurt her, but I had sensed her vulnerability. She hadn't thought about my feelings. I would be left in the orphanage while she established a mother-son relationship. She didn't know about Scamper. I would have one chance of getting the dog back to Danny before she took him away from me. Maybe he would think he owed me something. I still thought of him as my brother.

Jason came an hour after midnight, as he said he would. In the dark, we crouched over his Hessian sack of burglar tools and decided on our plan. There were very few guards about. Most were on lookout duty, or patrolling the surrounding desert, looking for Outsiders. There wasn't much manpower left for patrolling the base itself.

We felt our way towards the Baggage shed. The night was so black, you could eat the darkness, and it was Jason's familiarity with the ground, that brought us hard up against the door. He felt for the lock.

"Unreal," he said. It's only a padlock.

I felt it, surprised that it felt so small and insignificant in the dark. Jason pushed a steel bar into the hasp and bore down hard. It snapped the lock open.

"Easy as farting," he said. A push with the hand and the huge door slid to one side, leaving a slit for us to enter. Once in, he pushed it shut again, then struck a match. He put the bag onto the floor and handed me a candle. I lit mine, and looked around.

A candle gives off a very small light, but in that darkness, our eyes were able to peer along rows and rows of shelves stretching into the night.

"Where do we start?" I asked.

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Jason peered up at one of the rows of shelves. "This one is number R14. They must keep track of what's in here. The records will be In the office," he said. I picked up the bag of tools and followed him up a flight of wooden stairs to the upper storey. There was an office. It was glass partitioned, and from the interior had an overview of the whole complex. A floor plan hung on the wall. It was covered with dust and cobwebs. To make things difficult, the office was locked.

"Blast. It's a palm-lock," Jason said.

"There must be another way. Maybe things are packed in alphabetical order," I suggested.

There was the shattering of glass, and I realised Jason had taken things into his own hands by the simple expediency of breaking the window.

"The noise!" I said, aghast. Already, things were getting out of hand, and I had the feeling we were getting into deeper water than I had ever intended. He reached his hand inside and opened the lock. We parked our candles on a shelf, and I looked at the mess we had made.

"Now for the records," Jason said. A filing cabinet stood against the wall. Jason tried it, but once again it was locked. With all the skill of a sledge hammer engineer, he attacked the drawers with a crow-bar. It took a while, but finally we had it open. The cabinet was a mess. He swept the desk clear of assorted office bric-a-brac. Calendars, staplers, ink wells, quills, all went flying into a heap as he dumped the folders across the desk.

"Here you are, Anvell!" he shouted triumphantly as he waved our file about. "File alphabetically stored, as I predicted."

"Shelf U24," I said. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

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"What if I have anything here?" he asked.

"Are you going to open all the drawers?" I asked.

He looked at me for a moment, then shrugged. "Could take all night, I don't know my second name. Someone found me when I was a baby. Come on, let's get your kit."

I replaced the files into the drawers, which we shut as well as we could. It took a few moments to put the gear back onto the desk, but there was no way we could hide the broken glass or the damage to the drawers of the filing cabinet.

"The rats did it," Jason said as we climbed back down the stairs. U24 was the right address.

It was just as I remembered it - small, brown and battered. I opened the bag and rummaged around the contents - our solarsuits, shoes, and the two boxes of rations we'd taken from Bel Ridge. Jason grabbed them eagerly.

"Put that back, and we'll get out of here," he said anxiously.

The candles were burning down to their last centimeters of which when we reached the door. We blew them out and listened carefully for a few moments before sliding it open and squeezing into the night.

"Got everything?" I asked.

"Check. One set of burglar's tools, two boxes of rations. All we've left behind, is a mess for someone to clean up. They won't find anything's wrong for days.

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The crescent moon had risen, bathing Omega Base in a dull glow. We sneaked carefully across the black and silver terrain of waste land between the base and the Bunyip Club, two phantoms

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of the night wrapped too lightly against the chill of pre-dawn. I missed my Solar-Suit and its inbuilt insulation. I would have taken it, but a search of personal baggage could have revealed the fact, and that would give clues as to who had raided the shed. I felt more than guilty.

I had other feelings, too. The sheer excitement of the adventure thrilled me to my core. We had got away with it. No blue caps, nothing. In and out again like will of the wisps. Great.

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Jason knocked carefully on the door - a tap, pause, two taps, another longer pause, then a quick drumbeat pattern. The door opened after a few more attempts.

"What's up with you lot?" Jason demanded. "Nobody guarding the door tonight?"

"What's up with you then? Coming here this time of night." the kid demanded back.

"We've come to see Morgan. Got something for him."

"Come back in the morning. He's asleep. He'll kill me if I wake him now."

Jason pushed hard. I helped him, and the kid gave way under our combined weight. The luckless boy protested as we forced entry.

"He's not a member," he said, pointing to me.

"No, but I am, and he's my muscle, so shut it."

"What's going on?" Morgan said, having been woken up by the argument. Scamper gave a bark and took a flying leap into my arms. He was overjoyed to see me,

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"You said you'd give me two ration packs," Morgan demanded. "Well the price is now three."

"You can't do that," I said, holding onto Scamper tightly. "Give him the two packs, Jason. If he wants three, he can claim his back off you."

"You knew all along, didn't you?" Jason said.

"Give him the packs," I said.

Jason handed the packs over, and as Morgan grabbed for them, a flare went off outside. I was blinded by the brilliance of it. Two heavy figures entered the room behind us, and manhandled us to the floor. Scamper went berserk, barking, yapping, then with a frantic yipping, made a speedy, but safe exit.

"This is the Omega Base Police! Hold your positions, and do not move. You are all under detention."

I could still see the bright flash before my eyes and in the confusion, felt myself being picked up and shoved against the wall. There was the click of handcuffs around my wrists, and I knew that this was no dream. Somehow, we had all been sprung. I mean, badly sprung.

My eyes cleared, and I realised I was standing up against the wall of the Bunyip Club under the brilliant glare of an electric spotlight. Caps were everywhere. Jason, Morgan, and the Kid stood next to me. An officer walked over to where I stood and looked at me carefully.

"Morgan, Watson, DeVillier, and Anvell. You are all out of bounds after curfew without reasonable excuse, and have been found in possession of ration packs, presumed to have been stolen. Anvell and DeVillier - You have both been seen to enter a prohibited area, namely, the Baggage shed. There appears to

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have been some damage to that facility, and you are both to be held as suspects to offences committed on those premises."

They pushed us towards the administration complex. It was a long, stumbling walk across broken ground. They must have been shadowing us all the way as we sneaked across to the Bunyip club. The base was on alert. I should have known we would be seen - two bright blips on the infra-red scanners of the watch towers. How could we have been so stupid as to think it was all unguarded.

My only relief was that Scamper was being carried gently by one of the guards. The dog was material evidence. They wouldn't kill and eat him - yet.

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Our trial was held the next day. How could I ever express the loneliness of that terrible time. The shame, the guilt, all remain an integral part of me. We were detained in the Base Police complex overnight, and during this time, were thoroughly questioned. To this day, I shall never forget the look Mother Mary gave me, as I was led once more into that council room the following morning.

They had released the kid. He had nothing to do with what had happened, and was under age, so couldn't be prosecuted. We did not fare lightly in the ensuing investigation. The base police were merciless. With the logic of robots, they produced their evidence and painted the worst possible picture of what had happened. I pointed out that the ration blocks were in my possession when I arrived at Omega Base, but even this was not accepted.

"The ration blocks are stamped in edible ink. These blocks bear serial numbers that are old, admittedly, but they came from our store."

"They came from Bel Ridge. I can prove it," I said.

Spicer intervened at that point.

"All this is not necessary. I'm satisfied as to the facts of the case. You have all admitted what happened, and that stands you in some good stead." He looked scathingly at Morgan. "You disappoint me, boy. Blackmail, trading in rations, petty thuggery. I don't know that we want your sort in the New World Order."

"You went with them, were caught with them, and now hang with them," Captain Dawson said. "An old German proverb, I believe."

"Nobody's hanging anyone, Captain Dawson." Mary said sternly. "However, I must withdraw from this case because it touches on matters concerning myself and my son." She looked at me for a moment. "He's started eating and is doing quite nicely, now that he has his dog back," she said with a light smile. "But I can't help you, young man. The matters are far too serious."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You should have come to me with your little problem. It wouldn't have been snitching. I'd have whispered sweet nothings quietly into Morgan's ear, and he'd have handed Scamper over without a ripple. As it is, I must allow you to be fed to the sharks." She stood up and took her leave of the Council: "Good day, Gentlemen."

When she left the room, we were alone with Spicer and Dawson. I looked carefully at the ration blocks on the evidence table. The number "27" was clearly visible on the back, but the bar numbers were coded on the edge. If you knew where to look they were quite obvious, really. Why were they important? Spicer had effectively closed off any investigation into them.

"Be upstanding for determination of Sentence," Dawson said, then muttered: "You three boys are lucky that you're not a bit

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older. You'd have been sentenced to death. As it is, we've got a nice little job for you."

Spicer read from his notes, not looking up at us for a moment. His voice was as cold as ice. "You are all sentenced to three years penal servitude and will undertake whatever duties are assigned to you by the Commander of the Penal Battalion under such conditions as he shall determine from time to time.

"As juveniles, your duties will be appropriate for persons of your age." He muttered as if to himself, but it was perhaps due more to a thinly suppressed rage. "If I had my way, you'd be sentenced for life." He didn't mince words. "The men working out on that launching pad are very important - even if they are prisoners. We couldn't finish the project without them. They need three strong youngsters like you as water boys. That's your assignment from now on. It will be heavy work.

"You are all expelled from the Omega Base Cadet Corps and reduced to juvenile prisoner status. Furthermore, Cadet Captain Gillet has been assigned to escort you until you leave for the Penal Battalion.

"When you are dismissed, report to the baggage shed for clean-up duty. After that, you'll pack your kit. Be ready to march out to the launch pad with the next safari. They're leaving tonight at sunset."

He dismissed us, and we saluted for the last time. We were civilians once again. Cadet Captain Gillet was waiting for us when we came out. For the rest of the day, he discharged his role as our guard, with single minded efficiency.

"It's no good trying to run off or anything," he told us. "The other cadets know what happened, and right now, you three boys haven't got a friend in the world. We'd have you all in a few minutes flat. Believe me," he said, drawing his finger across his

throat, "Cadet Justice is much rougher than anything Spicer can hand out."

Under his direction, we cleaned up the mess in the baggage shed, then packed together the few items we owned. I had next to nothing - a comb, toothbrush, four marbles I'd won off one of the cadets during a match, and a rusty screwdriver that I'd found behind the dump. Gillet confiscated it as a 'potential weapon'.

As the sun went down, we assembled at the transport depot with the other people - engineers, scientists, and maintenance crew, making the fifteen kilometer journey to the Launch pad. Everyone walked, and all the equipment being taken was portered. That's why such treks were called "Safaris".

Gillet handed us over to a stern and efficient young soldier, who indicated that we could put our kit onto a four-wheeled trailer onto which had been welded two large water drums. It was a simple contraption - large iron wheels welded to axles, so that steering was by brute-force. A simple lever brake was set to one side to act on one of the front wheels. The rear of the trailer had a push bar, and on the front two chains had been attached. These ended in simple loops which fitted over the shoulders of whoever pulled it.

"This belongs to you," he said with a mocking smile. "The Colonel says you may as well get used to it. Two to pull from the front, and one to push. Pusher first. Who is it to be?"

Morgan was not on speaking terms with either of us, so he indicated the back. The soldier told him to put his hands onto the rear bar, and with a deft movement, locked his hands to it with a pair of handcuffs. We were taken to the front and the two pulling chains were passed under our armpits, over our shoulders across the neck, and round under the armpits again. There was no cushioning from the chains' rough surface. He cuffed our hands in front of us, then ordered us to pull. The cart was enormously

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heavy, but we had no idea of what further misery was in store for us. We stopped under a large stand-pipe with a canvas hose attached. They filled the drums with water.

"Now pull that, you thieving little bastards," he said, prodding us non too gently with his swagger stick. We strained our utmost, and the cart barely moved. The other travelers stood around, watching our efforts as our feet slipped on the ground and we fell over trying to move the dead weight. Jason began to cry.

"Oh, I forgot to take the brake off," the guard said. "Silly of me."

Our rag tag little convoy moved out along the track towards the launch pad which stood silhouetted against the skyline. The guard's little joke, perhaps a bit overplayed, set the tone for the journey - one of the most miserable I have ever made. I realised that, no matter how much we hated each other at the moment, the lives and fortunes of the three of us would be interlocked with that terrible water trailer for the foreseeable future.

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Chapter Seven

The price of Water

Mr. Morgan's Story

I was on my own once more. I could hear them talking about me from the front of the water-cart. My feelings of contempt and hatred for the Anvell boy intensified with every step I took, but I held my tongue. I concentrated on pushing, saving my breath for the times when the trailer bogged itself down in the wheel ruts, or the drifts of deep sand. Every sudden bump and jolt sent a sharp pain through my wrists. Sometimes, when Mike and Jason had a good pull on, and the trailer was moving under its own momentum, I slackened off, and allowed myself to be pulled along. We weren't allowed to stop. Even when Jason cried out and begged for them to stop, they wouldn't.

Our guard was always there, goading us forward with curses and occasional blows with his swagger stick. On easier parts of the road, he mounted the trailer, and sat in the centre of the front rail, treating Mike and Jason for all the world like draught horses.

Other members of the safari were pushing wheelbarrows full of equipment, tools, supplies, etc. Everyone had a load of some sort. We had to push on and on, until Jason collapsed and Mike stopped. The guard went crazy, hitting him with his swagger stick, but Mike stood there and took it, until some of the other travelers pulled the guard off. They complained to him, not so much about our treatment, but that he wasn't walking with everyone else. He was angry about it, and came around to the rear of the trailer to vent his rage on my back.

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I had never been beaten before, and the pain from his strokes was agonizing. He stopped at last and stood looking defeated. Finally, he decided that Jason could not pull any further, so he picked him up and placed him onto the top of the water trailer. Then he had to unlock me from the push bar so I could pull the cart from the front with Mike. He slipped the chain over my upraised hands and around the back of my neck. I put my hands down, holding the loop of chain in position.

We started pulling the trailer once more. It was now terribly heavy work and a couple of the men from our walking convoy got on the back to push. I recognised them as members of the technical staff. One was an engineer. Not everyone at Omega was an arsehole.

"Are you badly hurt?" I asked Mike quietly. I didn't want anyone to hear us.

"I've been better," Mike said. "This damned chain is cutting hell out of my neck. Why did he get stuck into you?"

"He wanted someone to hit, I guess," I whispered. "God it hurts."

I reached across with my hands and lifted the tow chain loop over his head so it dropped around his waist, and then did the same thing with my own chain.

The wheels of the trailer bogged down again, and we strained fit to bust. At last, it moved forward again.

"With luck like this, I ought to win something sometime," He laughed, in spite of his pain. I began to realise what a tough little bastard he was. No. I knew that. He'd trashed me. I mean, I began to realise in an intimate way just how tough he was. He was a mess of bruises from the beating he'd had, but he still kept

on, pulling without complaining. Later, when we were alone, he told me it was anger that drove him on.

The guard finally called the safari to a halt in the middle of a flat plain. We moved our loads into a defensive circle and rested. Mike and I slipped our tow chains, and sank wearily to the ground. Our water trailer came into its own, as the workers came over for a drink. Jason climbed down from the cart, organised a queue for the two cups, and after serving us, operated the taps for the rest of the civilians and guards. Nobody questioned his right to do it, and it was typical of him to seize the opportunity to get an advantage. The guard came over and inspected our handcuffs.

"Guess you're not going anywhere," he said.

"Can you take them off, please, Sir?" Mike asked politely.

"Orders from Colonel Spicer," he said, "They stay on."

"It isn't legal. We're under age," I protested.

"Make a complaint," he muttered. "If it wasn't for the big audience we've got, I'd thrash you to a pulp right now. But don't worry. I've been detailed to look after you three. I've got plenty of time."

I backed down - fast. "I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't mean to be rude."

"Fast learner, eh? They don't want you with the adult prisoners. They don't really know what to do with you, so I'm the one who has to look after you," he said. "Show me how sorry you are. Lick my boots."

I couldn't help but look at Mike Anvell's face. If this was justice, it had come full circle. My own act of petty bullying had at last come home. I leaned forward and put my tongue onto the guard's boot, ready to lick it clean. He kicked my head back viciously.

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"I don't want you spitting all over my leather," he said. He walked away, and I sat back on my haunches, stemming my bleeding mouth with my closed fist.

"He was a bit big to try on my trick," Mike said.

"Shut your crappy mouth," I said with irritation.

We rested for a couple of hours. I pulled my kit from the trailer and used it as a pillow. Mike and Jason lay on the stony ground. Jason fell asleep immediately, but he was one of us. Mike lay silently for a while, and it was only when he thought I was asleep that he began to cry quietly. I lay listening to him for a while, then reached over with my hands and shook him gently.

"Use me for a pillow," I said, "Save your head for tomorrow."

He didn't object, but wriggled over and let me hold him. It wasn't a generous move on my part. I really hated him with the same deep intensity that I had for him after our first fight, but he was warm, and in that cold night air any warmth was appreciated. Overhead, the moon rose to spread a deep blue haze across the silence of the night, and the roughly round form of Omega, rose in the East. It was illuminated by the unseen sun, golden, heralding the approaching dawn. Sometime before the sun rose, I slept.

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I have found, many times in my life, that in the midst of degradation, there are many fine people, who will do whatever they can to help their fellows. Others are generally self seeking and mean spirited, helping only to advantage themselves, but there are a few, fortunately a very few, who live off misery and take special delight in adding to suffering. Our guard was a member of this select set of people.

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Colonel Spicer gave orders, secretly, that we were to have a tough time. The words, "Ration Thief" were stenciled across the backs of our overalls. During the day, we were shackled like mules to the water trailer, then set to work at dawn, pulling it from work gang to work gang. We were allowed to rest when we refilled, but continued work until sunset. Often, our evening rations were short, and as there was no accommodation for us, we slept under the trailer each night. It was parked away from the adult convicts' camp, because, as juveniles, we were to be separated from the men. For security reasons, we were tethered each night with our handcuffs secured to the two front pulling chains so we could not abscond. We combated the cold by huddling together for warmth beneath the two Hessian sacks that were given to us to serve as blankets.

In this intolerable situation, it did not take much effort on the part of our guard to make our miserable lives totally unbearable. Beatings with his hated swagger stick, shortened breaks for rest - five minutes instead of ten, refusal of water, and denial of toilet breaks, all worked to sap our spirits, but the worst torment of the lot was to handcuff our wrists behind our backs to the pulling chains as we worked. In this position, we could not brush the sweat or flies from our eyes, or balance ourselves while pulling. He would hit us across the shoulders to make us pull harder, or jump from the cart to beat us and kick at our legs, all the time cursing and screaming abuse. On one day, he struck me across the face with his stagger stick, splitting my lip and severely bruising my cheek. I screamed in agony, and rolled about on the ground, oblivious of his attempts to get me up and harnessed to the cart again. Blood ran from my head and pooled onto the ground. I was a gory mess. I was to receive other beatings from that guard, but none could ever compare with his savagery on that occasion.

Mike and I worked side by side in silence. We had run out of things to say, and spare energy was better spent on staying alive.

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There was one part of the delivery run which was especially hazardous. The roadway into the rock quarry was particularly steep, and we had to restrain the trailer by spreading ourselves apart and walking beside it, bearing back on the chains as hard as we could to stop the whole contraption from getting out of control. Half way down the slope was a sharp bend to the left.

The men in the quarry were worked to their limit. We never left there with a drop of water in the tanks. Some said, that these convicts were the worst possible types - murderers, rapists, and dangerous psychotics. They looked forward to our coming, and never gave us a bad time, hard word, or even an unkind look. They could say nothing to us, but after they had drunk, each one would reach out a hand and touch us gently on the elbow or shoulder as he passed, assuring us that if nobody else cared about us, they were brothers in spirit and shared our special misery.

On the day we killed our guard, he was in a cheerful mood and left our hands cuffed in front. We had our full share of rations, adequate rest, and the luxury of toilet breaks. His good humour was due to the fact that he was to be relieved and would walk out on the next safari.

"Don't think you'll have a softer time from the next fellow," he said cheerfully. "I'm sure the good Colonel has given him the same orders he gave me."

We stood silently with our eyes downcast waiting for the last of the water tanks to fill. He was satisfied, and sat in the centre of the cart.

"Gee up," he called cheerfully, and we pulled as hard as we could to get the beast moving. Once the initial inertia had been overcome, it was relatively easy to keep going. The route to the various work sites was long and circuitous, passing by riggers fabricating steel frames, men spreading dirt and gravel along the

access track towards the great underground bunker doors behind which lay the huge space shuttle, and gangs filling in bomb and shell craters by hand.

At last, we reached the sloping ramp into the quarry. Mike and I stepped to our sides of the cart and held it back as it pulled forward, dragged by its own weight. The danger was, that it would run directly into the sharp bend, and then we would have a hard time pulling it back and steering it around the corner.

From his vantage point in the centre of the cart, our tyrant gave his orders, believing, I think, that it was his voice alone that controlled the thing, and that we poor slaves had no part in its management.

We were only twenty metres from the corner, when Mike acted. Leaving his position suddenly, he jumped up on the side of the cart and grabbed the guard's swagger stick, then threw it ahead of the cart towards the corner.

"What in the hell do you think you are doing," the guard shouted as we pulled the cart to a stop. He jumped down and ran ahead for his stick.

"Just you wait!" he shouted as he reached down to pick it up. "I'll see you are sorry you were ever born!"

I shall never forget the look on his face as he turned to see the cart bearing down upon him with the three of us pushing it as hard as we could straight for him. He could have ducked down and rolled under it, but he tried to climb the vertical rock face that walled the curve. The steel cart took him across the chest, crushing his torso against the wall with the most wonderful display of strawberry jam I have ever seen.

As we had planned, Mike and I stepped over our handcuffs, and our hands were now secured behind us. When you are very thin,

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this is easy to do, and in the ensuing investigation, this simple deception on our part was our salvation. Our story was simple. He was walking in front, and the cart got away from us. Tied as we were, what could we possibly do about it?

Confusion reigned, as guards and prisoners came onto the scene from all angles. We stood by helplessly as a large crowd milled around. We made things as difficult as possible, getting in the way every time one of the guards tried to pull the trailer back. At last, in desperation, one of them grabbed the handcuff keys from the dead man's belt loop and released us.

"Get back out of the way," he said, throwing the handcuffs onto the side of the road in irritation.

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Captain Harper, the commander of the Penal Battalion, sat on a leather chair that was covered with a sheepskin, to keep himself cool and free from perspiration. He was the neatest man I've ever seen. A young prisoner stood behind him with a large fan, waving it slowly back and forth, but insulated from the proceedings with a dead-pan look. He wore an ear ring, which must have had some significance, because jewelery was not allowed on prisoners. It was our first meeting with the commander - during the enquiry into the death of corporal Joharri Datun Sayed. It was a strange way to learn our tormentor's name - at his inquest.

"I was told that Sayed was an expert on Juvenile Prisoners, and that he would look after them," Harper said to his panel of jurors. I wasn't to worry about them. Now all this surfaces. Gross breaches of regulations, deliberate flaunting of United Nations conventions..."

"I'd like to draw the Commander's attention to the fact that the U.N. doesn't exist. Admiral Spicer abolished all reference to it after the death of Admiral Osark." The Captain of Guards said.

So the old guy had died after all. I felt nothing. I hadn't had any feelings for a long time.

"So?"

"So protocols on the treatment of minors now have no effect."

"I can't believe this. Read their sentence, clerk."

"They are sentenced to three years penal servitude and will undertake whatever duties are assigned by the Commander of the Penal Battalion under such conditions as he shall determine from time to time..."

"Sir, Corporal Vardun will continue to oversee the prisoners..."

"Corporal Vardun can replace his little black beret and return to Omega Base. We are quite capable of looking after our own prisoners, Captain."

The new comers all had black berets - they had removed the U.N. insignia and dyed them. The silver Omega badge gleamed wickedly from the centre of each one. I'd heard they had even replaced our anthem. That was really sad.

A verdict of "accidental Death" was announced. When we were finally released, we walked back to the trailer unescorted. We couldn't run off anywhere, and the trailer was, after all, our home. I began to hum the anthem. Mike and Jason joined in, and the three of us sang it defiantly so all could hear. We changed "Omega" to "U.N." in the last verse. I'd come to hate the sound of that final letter:

Beneath the Flag of All Mankind,

Side by side we'll stand.

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Working for the good of all
To heal the wounded land.

For by our toil and labor
By every deed and chore -
The Cool Blue Seas shall surely flow,
And Earth shall live once more.

Our pale blue standard -
Before it proudly stand.
Working for the good of all
To heal the wounded land.

Sometimes, in my fantasies, I liked to think they might have heard us and the Commander and all his loyal staff would have stood at attention and sung with us while the Omegans wrung their hands, shook their fists and made vicious faces. Pretty juvenile thoughts, eh? Hunger does that to you.

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The commander came to some more decisions that concerned us directly. He summoned us to appear before him and told us that we were now on our own. Water was our trade, and we knew what to do with it. We could get up on time, fill the cart by ourselves, trek it round to all the watering stations, and generally manage without supervision. If we couldn't, he would be happy to re-assign a guard and provide him with the three sets of heavy leg-

irons (just our size) that Vardun had brought with him from Omega Base.

"We can manage, Sir," I told him.

"Repairs can be done by maintenance staff. You will need to see Mr. Riley in shed 3B if anything happens to the cart. You will take your mess at regular times at the staff canteen. Do not wander around the complex. Stay with the cart. Under no circumstances are you to enter the adult prisoners' compound. Some of those men would gladly eat you or worse. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir!" we said - virtually in chorus, and gave him a snappy salute.

"One thing, before you go. I never apologize for what life throws up. You have to live with your consciences, and I with mine. Nobody's perfect. Forget what has happened. Put it behind you."

We took the hint, and things at the launch pad took on a definitely better complexion. As an added bonus, we were issued with new overalls that were not branded with our criminal offence. A bit late, we thought, as everyone on Launch Pad had seen us in our old uniforms.

Jason took to scrounging. He managed to get two large wooden packing cases delivered to our parking spot, and we soon had our own quarters rigged up with all the comforts of home - three hand made beds, a heating stove, some Hessian bags for blankets, and a crudely lettered sign that read, 'Launch Pad "A" Water Authority'. I managed to find a somewhat tattered U.N. Flag to decorate the cart, and Jason came up with three pale blue berets which we wore with pride.

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We worked hard. The men depended on us, and whenever we arrived at a watering station, there was cheerfulness and banter, instead of the surly atmosphere that had always greeted us in the past. While we didn't perform with a spring in our steps, we did manage to get to the stops on schedule with full loads of water. We got to know many of the men first hand.

"We got your hammer fixed, Spike," Mike called, handing the repaired tool over. We had become a part time courier service, delivering small items of needed equipment from station to station.

"Good lad. Any news from Omega?"

"Nothing good, I'm afraid. They seem to have had some sort of re-organisation. I heard one of the Black Caps say they were playing musical chairs with the ranks.

"It's what I thought. Spicer will be giving the top jobs to his cronies. We're lucky we're all out here. This is one project nobody's going to interfere with."

The prime function of Omega Base was to get the shuttle launched, so we could destroy that terrible nemesis that orbited Earth so threateningly. We had the technology. It had been scraped together with everything we could spare and more. During our few weeks of freedom I saw stuff at Launch Pad that I never knew existed. Fusion reactors, Nano Tech Computers, Com Link Networks. They had everything science could devise, but they were racing against time.

Then it all came to a grinding halt. One afternoon, we returned to refill the water cart and found the compound and administration area teeming with Black Caps. The Omegans had arrived with a vengeance. Our little shanty had been destroyed. It looked as if it had been driven over by the A.P.C. and then torched.

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Standing by the wreckage with a group of armed guards was our next tormentor.

Lieutenant Vardun.

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His special agenda: to deal with us.

Harper's joke about the leg irons came all too horribly true. Mike and I were handcuffed behind again and shackled together by the ankles. We had enough free movement for walking and pulling, but nothing more. If the cart ever got away from us again, we would be crushed beneath its wheels. There would be no more 'accidents'.

How can I write about that terrible time? It was a savage repeat of Sayed's regime, but worse. What was left of that first day under Vardun's control was spent in total misery. Once more we were thrashed to force us to work harder. The leg irons rubbed our ankles raw. Food and water were minimal. That night, we were left bound to the water cart. We were not unchained - even to sleep. At least Mike and I could lie together on the hard ground, but Jason, handcuffed to the push bar, had to stand or kneel all night. In that painful position, he couldn't sleep or rest. Soon he began to moan, shout and cry. I wondered if he would survive the next day.

"Hang on, Jason," Mike shouted in encouragement.

"He can't stand it," I said. "He won't last tomorrow. I think they want to kill us - for what we did to Sayed. We won't be able to control the cart tomorrow. Not down that damned hill." I could imagine it pushing us faster and faster, then the loss of control, falling, being dragged under the wheels...

"I can't keep living like this," Mike said. "I'd rather kill myself."

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"The chains," I suggested. "Perhaps we could use them. Mike, listen to me. Could you strangle me?"

"I can hardly move," he admitted.

It was true enough. With heavy leg irons, and our hands cuffed behind us, the most we could do was to lie where we were.

"Mike. I've always hated you. Ever since we met, I hated you. Even yesterday, I wanted you dead."

"I know."

"You knew?"

"I've always known," he admitted.

"So kill me."

"No. I forgive you," he said.

There comes a time when hatred is a burden that cannot be sustained. Mine had run its course. It had no further use, and I found that in shedding it, I gained some understanding of that universal peace which comes from the acceptance of forgiveness.

"Thanks, Mike. I need that."

"Rest your head on me. It's my turn to be the pillow," he said.

"You'll get wet."

"What are friends for?" he asked.

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Chapter Eight

Safari

Lt. John Colson's Recollections

The kid was shy at first, but away from the orphanage, Mary was a different person from the severe matriarch the kids called "Mother M". She was warm and full of fun, so she thawed him out as gently as she could. At first, he spent most of the time with his dog. Then she suggested they make a bed and a kennel. This meant they would have to scrounge for some basic rubbish. Planks were not the easiest things to come by at Omega. Teddy Bears, we had a-plenty. Kids clothes, a surplus. After all, most of the Omega kids were orphans and wore overalls. Civilians' did much better than that. He had chosen a bright red and yellow solar-suit with fluorescent panels that reacted so well with the ultra-violet that they nearly outshone the sun.

He refused to take her hand, but they wandered off towards the town dump, and I returned to the administration centre. In my shirt pocket was a ration biscuit that I'd removed from the evidence table after the trial. I was puzzled by the serial number. It was an old biscuit that should have been eaten years ago. Number 27 series. The bar code would tell me its precise distribution route. What if Mike was right? If he had found the packets of biscuits at Bel Ridge, he wouldn't be guilty of ration theft.

Colonel Spicer had always been a bit obsessive, and he made little secret of his dislike for the Anvell boys. I had the feeling he was covering up for something; something that the boys could

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reveal; something that threatened Spicer so severely that he would risk killing them if necessary, to conceal it.

I couldn't ask Danny where they'd found the biscuits. The drugs he had been given when he arrived had wiped most of his memory of the journey from Adelaide. Any amateur detective work on my part would have to be done alone. I had the feeling that Spicer's relationship with the Base Police was just a shade too close for comfort. He was advocating that our total security would be taken over by the Black Caps as soon as Osark, who was close to death, had passed on.

Despite my deep attachment to the Corps, I wasn't very interested in the U.N. question at the political level. Somehow, it didn't seem relevant any more. If there were any survivors in Europe, Asia, or America, they would probably be living in caves by now, I thought. Our base communications were very good. We had listened for months for any radio activity. The radio spectrum was almost silent, although we heard burst of traffic occasionally - usually from obscure war-lords fighting over the few habitable parts of Earth that remained. We were the only birds still singing regularly on the ether, but for Omega Base to style itself the inheritor of world government was patently absurd. We had become just another group of war-lords, fighting for our patch of a doomed planet.

George Macintyre, "Old Mac", would have some of the answers. At least, he could tell me some good oral history, and it was a fair way to spend some of my Stand Down time. He had been at Omega long before the U.N. took the place over.

The civilians had once voted Mac as their mayor, and for a time, we had civil government, but the Administration had whittled down the role to a rubber stamp and finally replaced it with the Omega Council - one made up of army officers only. As a member, I was not complaining. I had rationalised it through long

ago, and shed any guilt I had about power in the hands of an elite. I reasoned that, as the only qualified astronaut, they had to have me, or the shuttle wouldn't fly.

So why was I rocking the boat?

I couldn't answer that directly. I'd been a street kid as far back as I could remember. When the War-lords swept the streets of Adelaide clean of juvenile Riffraff and trucked us to the North, I was still as angry a little rebel as anyone in the refugee camp. I'd been an expert at picking locks, night raids, thieving forays, and mugging. Not long after we'd been assigned to platoons and commenced training as Orphan Cadets, I made the mistake of trying to rob a total stranger who was making his way home from the administration block. It was Commander Osark himself.

He wasn't amused. After he had knocked the knife from my hand, flattened me with his right hook, and pinned me onto the ground, he rolled me over to take a good look at his captive.

"Bloody kids!" he had said. I could still remember his exact words.

I had a bad case of concussion, so he threw me over his shoulder and took me to the medical centre.

Perhaps he felt a bit guilty about hitting a kid. I don't know why. I would cheerfully have knifed him. If he'd stuck by his own rules, I'd have been sent to the penal battalion. Instead, he put me on "Work Experience" and I spent the next few months, at first unwillingly, in his company. At night, I was kept in the base detention centre. Gradually, our working relationship thawed as we worked on the shuttle. Finally, he trusted me enough to allow me to sleep with my assigned cadet company. Any semblance of military life ended there. I was young then. Thought about things differently. "Mother" Mary was, to me, a hated tyrant who enjoyed giving us a hard time. I hated any form of soldiering. As

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soon as we had eaten, I took my leave of the cadet corps and reported to the transit depot for the bus to the launch pad. In those days, there was plenty of fuel. We didn't have to walk everywhere.

My skills in lock-picking were based on the complex mathematics of machine language. Unknowingly, my childhood apprenticeship in crime was an education in basic computing that few youngsters of my age had a chance to master. I wasn't particularly literate, but we sat for hours poring over the technical manuals, and my reading went from strength to strength under his tutelage.

It was never a 'Father - Son' relationship. I'd never had a father, so wouldn't have known what to do with one. He understood that. Once, he explained to me that our relationship was more 'Mentor - Disciple'. His theory was that Humans had transmitted information from older generations to younger, from time immemorial, and that the instinct to teach was biologically ingrained within us.

When my sentence expired, I continued to turn up at Shuttle Dock, so I was given a regular job that included servicing the simulator. That entailed knowing all the flight operations. Soon, I knew it better than anyone with the exception of Osark. Within a year, I was piloting it like a veteran.

"There's one area of skill you've yet to manage," he said to me, "and that's learning how to pilot yourself."

"Sir?" I asked. His comments were often cryptic.

"You've got to learn to steer a course through life, John. So far, I've kept you away from most cadet duties. If you're going to fly this bird with me, you're going to have to learn how to handle a crew. That means how to take and give commands. Do you read me?"

"You want me back in the cadet corps."

"Right on. Think of it as your final set of flight lessons. Lining up, saluting, spit and polish. Do you think you can handle it?"

"I'll try, Sir."

"That's not good enough."

"I'll do it, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

At eighteen, I graduated as a 2nd Lieutenant in the United Nations Omega Operational Group. That pale baby-blue beret was the hardest badge of honour I'd ever earned.

Within days, I would swap it for a new regulation black cap with an Omega crest. A whole tradition was being swept away.

Perhaps that was why I wanted to know more about that ration biscuit.

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"The thing I like about tobacco," Mac mused, "is that it's got plenty of silicon in it. The geneticists made sure of that."

"It didn't help grass," I ventured.

"Nope. It sure didn't. I still think that the demise of grass was engineered, too," he mused. "Too many people had a vested interest in famine. It was greed - untrammelled greed - that killed the world."

"Why didn't they stop it?" I asked.

"The trouble with greed, is that it's such a basic human drive. People will always be greedy. The greedy were too powerful. They controlled the system, and didn't see why they should make sacrifices. The working class and the dispossessed could suffer. The greedy thought they could live in domes, charge people for air, and control the havoc they wrought.

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"At the end of the last millennium, just before 2000, there was a glut of goods on the markets. Food was so cheap, it was being given away. Metals went for a song. Mines were being closed, because prices were too low. Yet in those conditions, people all over the world were starving."

"That was before 'Chaos', I said."

"That was the start of chaos," Mac said. "Wealth itself became a commodity. You can always tell when economies are in trouble. People start buying money."

"That's stupid."

"What's money around Omega at the moment?" he asked.

It was the cue I'd been waiting for. "This," I said, producing the ration biscuit. "I want to find out when it was made, when it was issued, to whom, and how it could turn up now in the hands of the Anvell kid. He says he got it at Bel Ridge."

"Come and I'll let you into a little secret," Mac said, leading the way into a back room. It was his personal office. Framed certificates hung on the wall, and in pride of place was his mayoral chain of office. He slid open the roll top of an antique desk. It concealed a terminal.

"I'm impressed," I said. "I presume it works."

"One of the advantages of being Mayor. When the office was abolished, I never bothered to return it."

"They'd detect you as soon as you tried to use it," I said.

Mac shook his head. "Not this one. It's one of three terminals cleared for total and secret access. Commander Osark knows I've got it. He doesn't mind. He has one, and the Computer Control

Auditor has one. Now let me see what this little morsel can tell us..."

While he worked at the computer, I looked about the room. There were other photographs, mementos of other times: People laughing in groups at a beach, cities alive with people, a reserve with wild animals: elephants, lions, tigers... I felt a deep physical pain, a sense of loss for the Earth I had never known.

While Mac worked at the computer, I looked about his office. He had a book case containing stacks of book disks. I picked one up and looked at the title: "The War with Hannibal" by Livy. There were many titles by names that meant nothing to me: Homer, Proust, Darwin. On one shelf were three real books, stored in plastic bags. I did not disturb them, for I knew we were short of Nitrogen, a common enough gas, but difficult to separate with old machinery. Yet I could read the titles, and was surprised, for they were "Das Kapital" by Karl Marks - a book that I had been taught was totally evil, for it launched the Evil Empire. Next was "The Holy Bible", a strange companion to the former. Full, I was told, of ancient tales, of magic and superstition. Primitive societies had used those writings as an excuse to destroy each other. The third was Dr. Diamond's "The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee".

Enough said.

One prominent branch of Christianity had used its power to attempt world domination by enforcing their women to initiate a population explosion. Millions of poor starving wretches do not make a secure power base. The countries governed by those ideas were the first to suffer population collapse when the exovirus struck. I had seen photographs of starving wretches reduced to eating the bloated corpses of the unburied dead. During those years, the rat seemed the most likely successor to humans. In an ironic twist of fate, rats had become one of our chief sources of

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food. Another was the common ration biscuit - grown in large tanks as algae, then converted to its compressed form.

"I've got it," Mac announced, interrupting my gloomy thoughts.

"The politics of food. What have you found?"

"It was issued to a cadet company for survival training purposes. They were to march across the desert and attempt to live off the land. The ration biscuits were for emergency use only. It was a complete disaster."

"Sir?" I had moved over to stand behind his chair as he worked on the machine. He had an inventory of rations issued to the patrol: Chocolate, Condensed milk, Coca Cola Powder, tins of baked beans, spaghetti, and so it went. They lived in luxury in those early years. There it was, at the cursor: 'Ration Biscuits, Emergency, series 27.'

"I remember that incident," Mac said, "It was before your time. I believe the Cadet Corps was up and running when you arrived. You wouldn't have known just how rough it was in the beginning. It had a bad start. A lot of the youngsters couldn't really adjust. Lieutenant Spicer had the idea of getting the toughest and most troublesome kids, and giving them something very difficult to do. They had to trek overland and survive as best they could, using their wits. The exercise was meant to build character, initiative, and leadership."

"Did it?"

"Nobody will ever know. They disappeared. Spicer and two of the local civilians who were to act as guides drove them some hundred kilometers to the South of here. He said all seemed well when he dropped them off. He drove the truck back. It was a valuable military vehicle, so an officer had to take responsibility for it. There was an enquiry, but it cleared him of any blame. It is

possible that our local civilian guides were not as competent as we believed them to be, or that something happened - a fight with the boys, perhaps..."

"An attack by Outsiders?"

"At that stage, there was not much of a rift between the Outsiders and the U.N. forces. We were seen as a stabilising influence in the area. We could make our own food. They couldn't. More and more starving people from the South arrived, some with weapons. Eventually they broke up into the warring tribes we have today. The patrol could have run into a starving band and been made to surrender their food packs. Who knows?"

I shook my head. So long ago. The only ones with any clues were Danny and Mike. They hadn't really told us much. We should have been more thorough about debriefing those kids - before shooting Danny up with Amnesiol.

"What's the significance of the barcode?" I asked.

"It tells us who actually got the biscuit. In this case, it was issued to a boy called 'Duke Wilson'."

"A member of the patrol?"

Mac ran the file onto the screen. "Yes. Want a printout?"

"Please," I asked. It was no small request. It meant using a sheet of paper.

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Mary's house was still illuminated by a faint glow as I walked back to my quarters. It was late, but I knew Mary kept late hours. I trudged up the gravel path and knocked at the front door.

"Who is it?" she called.

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"John," I replied. "Colson," I added, remembering that she probably knew a couple of hundred other 'John's.

"Come in, John," she called. I was surprised. Few people on Omega Base left their doors unlocked. "I do know the sound of your voice," she said.

In the dull light of the oil lamp, I could see that she'd spent a lot of time making her quarters a special place. When I was a kid, I'd lived in a wooden packing case. From what I knew of Mary, her childhood wasn't much better. I looked around her small lounge room with admiration. She'd made the simple barracks accommodation into a home away from home. Old, but clean carpets covered the floor. Wildflowers and desert plants adorned various objects that served as flower pots. The walls glistened with brown varnished woodwork, and the ceiling was spotlessly white. She'd managed to get pictures from old magazines, and framed them with real borders and glass. In one corner was her exercise machine. It was a compact unit that she'd found in one of the storehouses. It contained weights, a rower, cycle, and bars for calisthenics, enclosed in a tightly compact machine.

"Like it?" she asked from the darkness beyond the doorway.

"Sure," I said, then swallowed as she came into the light. She'd changed from her battle fatigues and I realised that her dress was modeled on the period costume from one of the framed pictures.

"I can't wear army duds all the time, John. I am a woman, if you hadn't noticed."

"Sure," I said once more, swallowing again, as the soft fragrance of perfume wafted across the room. "I've just seen Mac. We had a long talk..." I said awkwardly, "Then I saw your lamp on, and wondered..."

"If we could talk," she said, indicating a comfortable lounge chair. I sat down, and she sat beside me. "What shall we talk about?" she asked.

I was about to stammer out a reply, when a bundle of furry fury erupted into the room, barking and yapping.

"Down, Scamper! Down!" Mary commanded.

Whatever atmosphere had existed in the room a moment before, was completely destroyed, and I burst out laughing. Mary looked at me for a moment, then joined in. When we finished, I fished sheepishly in my pocket and handed over the biscuit.

"Don't eat it," I cautioned. "It's evidence."

"You came here to talk about biscuits?" she asked. "Hold on. This is about Mike, right? Look, John. He did the wrong thing and is being punished for it. I've been busting my gut trying to organise food so the kids won't starve, and he's up to his ears in black market deals."

"Wait. We don't know that. Look at the biscuit. See those marks? They're identification codes. They used to put them on because these were regular issue. That '27' means 'Ration Pack Series 27' and the barcode enabled me to track down the very cadet this was issued to. Duke Wilson, a member of the Lost Patrol."

"We're flat out making algae cake at all, now. Nobody marks them. Where did he say he got it?"

"Bel Ridge. He didn't say any more than that. Just that they were in his pack and he didn't steal them. Claimed they belonged to him."

She looked carefully at the biscuit in the dull yellow light of the oil lamp. "Should have cleaned the glass on this yesterday," she

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admitted. "But the markings are there - no doubt about it. Maybe I should have sat in on that court-martial after all." For a moment, she sat looking at it, then looked at me with a smile of surprise. "And today, we retrieved Danny and Mike's case. It hasn't been opened yet, so there may be a trace of biscuit inside."

She handed the biscuit back to me, and I put it carefully into my pocket, wrapping it carefully in the printout of the issue order. It had become weighty evidence of something, and I didn't want it disintegrating in my perspiration.

Mary stood up and moved towards Danny's room. "What are you chasing, John?" she asked. "An acquittal for Mike?"

At that moment, all the turbulent thoughts that had been going around and around all morning crystallised into one brilliant star of discovery."

"No." I said. "He was guilty of break and enter offences, as well as vandalism. What I think I'm on to, is - a solution to the mystery of the lost patrol."

She rummaged around in Danny's room for a moment, then returned with the case. She placed it on the table and unlocked it. "Why? It happened years ago," she said.

We carefully removed the boys' solar suits and looked at the debris at the bottom of the case. "Can't make out much in this light," I commented. "Might have to wait until morning.

She had felt around Danny's solar suit. "I don't think so, John, she said, unzipping one of the pockets. "Look."

She held out five more ration biscuits for my inspection. Each one was marked with a barcode and the number '27'.

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I was a street kid, who had become a simulator bound astronaut, now I was playing the great detective. To me, it was a game, a conspiracy of plots and intrigues. As a little boy playing with a toy and seeking to discover its working, I dismantled the puzzle piece by piece, not knowing that with every step I took, I was also destroying vital evidence that might lead to the reversal of Mike's sentence, and any hope of prosecuting the miscreants who had created the tragedy of the lost patrol.

I had to sleep on it. That night, my dreams were filled with strange shapes, running water, strange landscapes, and long frustrating journeys over countryside that was at once familiar, yet strange. I never seemed to get where I wanted to go, but was always frustrated by deep rivers, imposing precipices, and blank walls.

I woke in a bath of perspiration. The pillow was soaked with sweat, and I had a severe cramp in my leg. During the night, a hot humid wind from the west had turned the normally brilliant, unrelenting furnace of the sky into a firmament of boiling thunderheads, wind gusts, and false storms that poured gigantic torrents of rain into air so hot that it evaporated and rose again into the clouds long before it hit the earth. Lightning had no such restraints. It crackled and flashed around the base, and most people took cover from the devastating blasts. I suspected that the Ultra Violet readings for the day would be down to 'Very High to Extreme'. Usually it was about a fifth of a watt per square metre.

To prevent damage to the equipment that we had left, the base closed down operations for the day.

Trusting that the Gods would not notice a humble U.N. Lieutenant running between the metal framed outbuildings, I wove my way to the Physicians' quarters. Morrison and Saunders were playing chess on the verandah. I noticed they had provided themselves with a goodly supply of the hospital's version of

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Techbrew - Ethyl alcohol and flavourings. It wasn't strictly legal, and perhaps at the minor guilt of being caught out by a Member of the Council, they offered me a glass. I sat watching the game and sipping cautiously on the amber liquor.

"You're too fit to want my professional services," Morrison muttered finally, "So what are you after?"

"Information, and possibly some help," I said. "Can you reverse the effects of Amnesiol? I need to question young Danny Anvell - some details about the journey and information that is very important."

"You'll be telling me the security of Omega is at stake next."

"Could be. Could very well be. Tell me, Doctor. Will you be swapping your pale blue cap for a black one?"

"I notice you haven't swapped yours, yet."

"I'm not in a hurry," I said, and winked at him. They grinned at that, and I knew I had two more allies.

An hour later, Danny lay on the surgeon's comfortable couch, breathing pure oxygen. He had been given a healthy tot of fortified port wine, and was decidedly tipsy.

"Before we began to manufacture our own chloroform, I had to operate without anesthetics," Saunders said. "We used hypnosis, but this trick with alcohol and oxygen is a lot better."

"I used to get the little brats as pissed as parrots and make them run around the dormitory huts before burning their cancers off. How do you feel, Danny"

"Wong way away. Wong - wong way away."

"Go deeply to sleep, Danny. Deeper down, Deeper down. Very deeply asleep! So deeply asleep that you will not waken, except on

my command. You are fast asleep and completely under my control. Deeply asleep under hypnosis, and completely in my hypnotic control. You will obey every command I give you, and every command I give you will only send you deeper and deeper asleep. Breathe deeply, and go deeper and deeper asleep."

While Dr. Saunders questioned Danny, I was able to record his story on the computer :

"Mothers can be impossible, sometimes.

"I tried to tell her it wasn't Mike's fault that we got locked in the freezer, but you know how they can be once they get an idea in their heads..."

It was an ugly tale of greed and deception. Somewhere amidst the wreckage of Bel Ridge was the evidence that I needed - of treachery, murder, and cannibalism. It wasn't really new stuff. Ever since our environment had collapsed, people had survived by eating other people. After all, for a while, we were the most numerous species on the planet, and just the right size.

Mankind had destroyed almost every disease and natural predator that threatened our species. By doing so, we had created our own doom. The final enemy of Man, is Man.

"Will he remember what he's told us when he wakes up?" I asked.

"Yes. Hypnosis reverses the effects of Amnesiol. I hope he can handle his memories now. He should be able to cope with his grief."

Mary and I took Danny home on a stretcher. The storm had abated, and the air was cool and crisp, yet the thunderheads that had gathered in the early morning seemed to be re-grouping for a second onslaught. This time, I knew we would be in for some real

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rain. After putting Danny to bed to sleep off his hangover, Mary and I set to work to ensure our Water tanks were ready for the downpour. Even though the rainwater would be undrinkable through its pollution and radio-activity, yet it would be useful as 'second water' for a multitude of tasks.

The Doctors had returned to their grimmer trade of trying to save the young lives within the hospital. Sometimes I wonder why they gave up some of that precious free time for something that must have seemed so trivial, yet its very triviality was probably the reason - the chance to do some pure medical research and apply it to something outside of the realms of death and dying children. When I returned the stretcher, it was taken immediately by a young nurse and two small emaciated bodies were placed on it, ready for burial.

I had a lot of details, but I needed collaboration. There was only one place I could get it - from Mike. I would have to find some excuse to visit the Launch-pad and the Penal Battalion.

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Chapter Nine

Omega

Daniel Blake's Memoirs

John got promoted to Captain, and was made a Major a few days later. He had supported Colonel Spicer and taken a black cap. (I guess its wise to go with it.) Mary was furious, but didn't tell him that. She put her blue cap away in the cupboard, but I caught her taking it out now and again, to look at it and brush it.

I got on pretty well with John. He got me a black Omega cap and promised that he would show me the shuttle. I could tell Mary was really annoyed about that, so I wore it all the time. (Mothers are fine, but you have to keep them in their place). I tagged around with John when he went on official duties, and pretty soon the Colonel and I had to cross paths.

"Who have we got here, Major?" he asked. I was wearing my new black and silver Omega Cadets uniform. I put Scamper down and gave him a salute, which he returned. Scamper ran up to him and fussed around. For a moment, my heart was in my mouth. I expected the Colonel to kick him, but he stooped down and patted instead. "Hello, Scamper. We'll have to make you the official Omega Base mascot, I think."

In a typical grown up way, they began to talk business, ignoring both of us. I was teaching Scamper to retrieve stones and sticks, and he was pretty good at it, so we moved away to play. All the while, my radar ears were locked onto their conversation. Whatever they say about little pitchers, is all true. We do have big ears, and the desert is very quiet.

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"Morale is my main concern, John. All this United Nations business is a distraction to our task. When the troops were moved in originally, it was to try to keep the peace between the Warlords. Then they were assigned to us to protect the base. A large number of them returned home during the Chaos. We replaced them with locals. Most of our military personnel, and that includes me, were recruited locally. I was an Outsider from Belle Ridge - Many were kids who grew up on Omega - civilians, former refugees, and orphans. We have very few of the original United Nations troops left on active duty. Most of them are working on the launch facility."

John nodded in agreement. "Omega is more like a medieval fortress town. We can't pretend that we have any orders from the world government. We don't even know what happened to it. My theory is that ..."

He hesitated. Whatever he thought was too terrible to believe.

"Go on," Spicer insisted.

"We're pretty isolated here. There hasn't been any air travel for a couple of years. If any country survived, it had to be America. They were so well organised, shelters, survival, everything, but they succumbed just like everyone else. It had to be a plague. Maybe someone engineered something."

"The Admiral and I were privy to information that hasn't been released, John."

"Am I right?"

"They call it 'Nemesis'. I don't want you talking about it. We have to keep the base isolated. Avoid outside contact. That way, we might survive." he looked across at me, but I ignored him and continued throwing a stick for scamper.

"That's why you didn't want ..."

"The boys? Yes. I couldn't say anything, of course. Ozark disagreed with me, but accepted my reasons for trying to stop them. One of our more public brawls, I'm afraid."

He sighed, "I'm going to miss him. I won't call myself 'Admiral'. I believe that 'General' would be more appropriate. Don't you?"

"Sounds fine, Sir. I mean, General."

"Oh no, not yet. No. It has to be done properly - by resolution of the Omega Council. Someone has to propose it."

"Would it be presumptuous of me to..."

"Oh no. I wouldn't want to influence you, of course."

"I'd be honored, Sir. I'm going to miss the Admiral. He was like a father to me."

"I know that, John. I'm going to need a second in command that I can trust. I don't want to be surrounded by old fogies that mutter into their moustaches. Everyone respects you. You're the 'heir apparent' you know that?"

John shook his head, and Spicer reached forward to grasp his elbow in reassurance.

Admiral Ozark died one afternoon. There was no school the next day. Everyone went to his funeral. I looked at the orphan cadets in their navy blue overalls, and felt sorry for them. I noticed for the first time, how ragged and dirty they looked. For a brief time, I had shared their misery, yet I felt no common bond with those urchins. I was now a civilian, a member of the social elite.

Jordan Myers lowered the U.N. flag to half mast. It stayed there all day. Next day someone hoisted a new Omega flag in its place.

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That conversation between John and Colonel Spicer was my first lesson in power politics. John had earned his promotion to Major, and stood alongside General Spicer when the Council passed the Ordinance of Succession that allowed Spicer to take over from Admiral Ozark as Supreme Commander Omega Base and Launch Facility. Everyone moved up a branch. Mary became Captain Blake, and was soon busy with her orphanage duties once again.

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DIARY EXTRACT: Daniel Blake

"The Omega Flag:

"It's jet black with a silver Omega letter on it. (It is Greek and looks like a horse shoe with feet.)

Mum says I can go to the Launch-pad with John. She isn't coming, so we'll be on our own. My other Mum would never have let me do that. Mary is my real Mum. Usually, when kids get two mums, its the other way around. They start off with their real mum and end up with another one. In my case, I started up with Mum Anvell, and after she died, my real mother found me. I miss Mum Anvell, sometimes I get a real stomach ache thinking about her, but I'm glad I've found my real mum. I used to be called Danny Anvell. Now I use my real name, Daniel Blake.

Mary (that's Mum Blake) got me this book to write in. It's got a hard cover and real paper pages. She said, "Don't waste any, because it's real paper."

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From this moment in time, as I look back over these scattered papers, I feel my childhood emotions are as shadows on a distant wall. The strength of them flows within me even now. I had suffered a great loss, and was coming to terms with myself, finding out who I was, in a strange land, with strange guardians. The records of the following times are not recorded on paper or computer memory, and I must indulge in narrative if the events which followed are to be set down for the historical record. I managed to keep that diary for three days, then lost it in the turbulence of the events which followed our trip to the Launch Pad.

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We traveled in style. Major John Colson was a member of the Council, and used a vehicle. It was a well worn pick up truck, but it flew the Omega flag on the front as a hood ornament, and two armed guards, George and Sam manned the back, which was packed with supplies for the journey. I know it was packed, because I helped to pack it. John said that in his outfit, everyone had to pull his own weight, and somehow, I didn't mind doing the chores with the other men.

It was funny being back in overalls again, lugging boxes, but if it was good enough for John, it was good enough for me. I thought he'd change into his dress uniform for the trip, but he explained that at the other end of the journey, we'd be unloading all of the boxes again, and it was hardly worth getting dressed up over a work detail. I guess I really wanted to strut around the launch pad in my Omega duds and show them off to Mike. I'm glad I didn't wear them. He'd have thought I was a real arsehole.

I didn't take Scamper because John said it wouldn't be wise. Mum looked after him for the day. I felt good about that. It was a short trip to the launch pad. Later, I was surprised to learn that most safari groups took all night to get there, but they traveled in

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the cool of dark, and were heavily laden with equipment. I remember looking at the low scrubby hills and watching the whirlwinds march past in a procession of heated vortices. As we drove across the flat plain we trailed a huge dust cloud behind us. We came to the main gate, manned by a missile crew and ATROS. It gave me the shivers, and I had a flash of remembrance - I'd chased after scamper at night, defying one of those dumb sentinels.

"Bastard," I swore, remembering the night I spent handcuffed to the truck.

"What's that?" John asked.

"That ATROS. It reminded me of something."

"Memories coming back?" he asked.

"Yes," I said bitterly.

"The stuff's wearing off. We pulled your memories under hypnosis, remember?"

"Yes. They hurt."

"Cheer up, Danny. We'll be able to see Mike, soon. I hear that he got into a bit of bother."

I had to laugh. "That'd be Mike," I said. "They will let us see him, won't they?"

"Are you kidding? Who's number two around here?"

"You are," I affirmed, "Major John Colson, Second in Command of Omega."

"Sometimes I don't believe it myself," he said under his breath.

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John reported to the main office while I sat in the cab and looked about, hoping that Mike was around. We didn't see Mike straight away. He was on water detail with the other J.D.s (Juvenile Detainees), so we drove to the Shuttle Bunker to unload our supplies.

"All done by human hands," John said, as I gaped with astonishment at the huge ramp that had been cut from the solid rock of the surrounding hills. It sloped down into a huge trench that ended against a pair of gigantic doors that could well have been the gates of hell itself.

"It's bigger than the Pyramids," I said.

"It would have been a mammoth task if we did it using machines. That would have meant using fuel, pollution, bad politics."

"We're using fuel."

"We're on council business. Besides, these stores are very important," John said. He said it seriously, but behind the words there was a note of cynicism that disturbed me.

"The water cart!" I said. "Look, John Over there."

John turned the vehicle around and drove towards the cart. As we came closer, I saw with mounting horror that Mike was chained to it together with his companions, and they were totally absorbed in their miserable task of dragging it along the roadway. Any romantic illusions I had held of my brother, the convict, were swept away in that stark moment of reality. Mike and his friends were suffering as no kids had any right to suffer.

John slowed down and drove alongside the cart for a few moments, waving the guard in charge to stop. He cursed and

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shouted at the boys who stopped pulling and immediately sank down onto the ground to rest.

I leaned over John and began to call out to Mike, but John stopped me.

"Danny, leave all this to me. Number two, remember?"

He got down from the cab and walked over to the cart.

"What do you want?" the guard asked. Suddenly, he recognised John. "Oh. Sorry, Major. I didn't recognise you," he said. He jumped to the ground and gave a crisp salute.

"That's all right. I'm curious about why you're in charge of this detail. Doesn't seem appropriate for an officer, Lieutenant Vardun."

"Oh, I'd like to explain, Sir. You see, the last guard had a nasty accident and I'm investigating what happened. It seemed that if I came out myself, I'd get some idea."

John nodded. He looked at the boys, studying their condition in detail before commenting further. "It seems to me they're under some considerable handicap"

"The leg irons. Oh, I can explain that, Sir. These boys are potentially dangerous. They might look a mess, but they really are a handful. No sense being careless, is there?"

"I'd really appreciate it if you took them off. As I remember it, the boys were cleared of any suspicion during the inquest."

"I'm not satisfied, Sir."

"You're questioning an inquest finding?"

Vardun dropped his voice, but I could still hear him clearly. "Orders come from General Spicer himself, Sir."

This clearly came as a surprise to John. He was stopped cold in his tracks.

"Spicer. Told you to do this?"

Vardun smiled. "Yes, Sir."

"I'll take it up with the General when I return to Omega. Meanwhile, I need these boys to help me unload some stores at the shuttle bunker. You can get a couple of convicts from the quarry to help with the water."

"Sir, as you request something that could be contrary to the General's orders, I'd like your order in writing - to cover my arse, if you know what I mean," Vardun said smugly.

"I don't have any paper," John admitted.

"I do," I said, waving my diary.

John gave me a wink, took the diary, wrote his orders onto a page, tore the sheet out, and handed it to Vardun with a flourish. Vardun accepted the order, stepped back and saluted, then unlocked the boys.

They stood together, exhausted and confused. I ran over to Mike and hugged him. For a moment, he looked at me with vacant eyes, then tears sprang from them and he held me tight.

"Danny. It's you. It's really you."

As we held each other, I realised what he had gone through to save me. A hug from a big brother is worth so much more than a lick from a dog, even if he is your very best pet, but I wasn't telling Mike that.

"Thanks for saving Scamper."

"Yeah. How is the little shit."

"He's home. Mum's looking after him."

The words came out before I could stop them. If I had a knife to twist in Mike's guts, that was it. The pain he felt flooded over his face and he stepped back away from me, as if I was a traitor to the whole family.

"I meant, Ma Blake," I said lamely.

"Yeah. I know who you meant," he said.

Jason and Morgan were helped onto the back of the pick up, and sat under the watchful eyes of our guards. Lieutenant Vardun began the long walk to the quarry to get some convicts. Mike climbed into the front with us, and we drove towards the gigantic bunker. The water cart was left unattended on the road.

"There was no way we could control that thing down the slope into the quarry," Mike said. "They wanted to kill us."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'll see what I can do about it." John promised. "I'm trying to get evidence so you can appeal against the conviction for ration theft. You are guilty of breaking and entering."

"And vandalizing the office," Mike admitted. "But that's not the same, is it?"

"The sentence will be reduced, but ... Hell, at your age, I was no angel myself."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I'll tell you, one day," John promised.

"You mugged the Admiral," Mike said. "Everyone knows that."

John smirked. It broke the tension, and we all started to laugh.

"I don't believe it," I said, wiping the tears of laughter from my face.

"That's how I became an astronaut," John said.

We had arrived at the great doors of the bunker. A large roller door was inset into the side wall. Two heavily armed marines stopped the truck and demanded papers. I noticed they still wore the blue U.N. caps, and red and white striped arm badges. United States Marines. The men were very old.

"Hi, John. Come to look at your bird?" one asked.

"G'day, Merv. Got the stores we need. The lads on the back are our work detail."

"I'll have to ask your men for their weapons."

"That's O.K. We know the drill. George! Sam! Check your hardware with Merv."

The soldiers handed their blasters and grenades to the guards. John gave a friendly wave, the roller door was raised, and we drove inside.

At first, the great bunker seemed dark after the glare of light outside. We took our sunglasses off and slipped them into the pockets of our overalls. The soft blue light of the interior was diffused by a smoky haze. The steel scaffolding scintillated in the lights from arc welders and machines that ground showers of sparks. Overhead lights shone like brilliant suns. Eclipsing all this was the gigantic silhouette of the shuttle "Endeavour".

The huge rust red fuel tank and boosters supported the glistening space-craft like the towers of a great cathedral to technology.

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John switched off the engine, and we climbed out to stare at the colossus. Jason, Morgan, and the two soldiers clambered off the back of the utility. Two technicians and a man in a white coat and safety hat walked over to meet us. They handed us white safety hats from a rack. I rolled up my kepi, stuffed it into the back pocket of my overalls, and adjusted the hard hat to my head.

"Doctor Humboldt, I've brought your supplies," John said. "These boys are Danny and Mike, and two others who'll help unload all the stuff."

He wandered off with the scientist to report to Commander Hayes, who was in overall command of 'Launchpad', leaving the rest of us to do all the work. It was a surprisingly long job, because each item had to be taken from the truck carefully and stowed neatly onto palettes. The operant instruction was that on no account could we drop anything. After that, we had to stow two large, but empty equipment boxes for transport back to Omega.

We finished at last, and were cleaning up at a wash basin, when a small siren sounded. I looked up in alarm, but one of the technicians said, "Lunch break." and I checked my watch. It was noon. John walked over to where we stood.

"Mike and Danny can come with me. George, and Sam, will you look after these two boys. See they get a meal at the canteen and don't wander off?"

At the thought of food, Jason and Morgan didn't hesitate to follow the soldiers while John led us off towards the gantry lift.

"I guess you two would swap a hot meal for a ride to the top and a conducted tour. Don't worry, Mike. We'll eat in style - up there," he said, pointing to the distant cabin.

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A few minutes later, we had ridden on the gantry lift to the main door. John placed his hand on the palm lock, and it swung open.

"Endeavour was kept in The Museum to the Twentieth Century. That was built underground a couple of hundred miles North of here before the ages of Chaos."

"Is The Museum still there?" I asked.

John laughed. "Hell, no. It's the stuff of local legends, now. A humungous waste of money and energy to build it. A Time Vault to the future. Like a lot of things, the museum was abandoned after Chaos. The U.N couldn't afford to build another shuttle, so they managed to rescue 'Endeavour' for the Omega Missions. Come on in."

I was at once in awe, and also disappointed by the cramped space inside. For a start, everything was lying backwards because the ship was upright. I had imagined a great space liner, but this shuttle was a collection of old technology. Some of the screws were missing from the instrument panels, and much of it looked as if it had been made in someone's back yard garage. The windows were small and we had to move about carefully to avoid getting in each others' way.

Mike made at once for the command couch and started plying John with questions. He was older than me, and knew much more about orbits, attitude control, re-entry modes. Once again, I was the Kid Brother, looking on while Mike stole the limelight.

This time, I did not begrudge his moments of fantasy. I watched John as he allowed Mike to dominate the command chair and controls and for once did not complain. In a few hours time, I'd be back in the comfort of home, while he and his companions returned to forced labor in the Penal Battalion. How thin and pinched his face looked. He was becoming old before his time. I let him live his dreams, because I believed he would never fly the

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shuttle, never in a million years. If I studied hard at school, there was a chance that I could become an astronaut.

My mind began turning over and over the problem of what to do about getting Mike free. There had to be a way.

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When we finally left the shuttle, John took Mike to one side and they had a long talk about his conviction for ration theft. I was not party to that discussion. We left the bunker an hour later. The water truck had been moved, so John decided to drop Mike, Jason, and Morgan off at the administration centre. I had hoped that, as second in command, John could say something magical, like: "Here's a full pardon, Mike," but no such pardon was forthcoming. From someone who had spent his youth as a leader of the Omega Base junior mafia, John had turned into a very straight officer. His advice to Mike was strictly by the book, "I want you three boys to serve your time quietly, and on your best behaviour, Mike, while I look into your case. I'm going to leave strict instructions about the fairness of your treatment. You should have no more trouble from Lieutenant Vardun."

When we arrived at the administration centre, Jason and Morgan were told to get a meal and clean themselves up. Mike would join them after saying 'goodbye' to me. While John reported to the Officer of the watch, George and Sam went for a comfort stop. Mike and I were alone. We stood at the back of the truck while Mike tried to bite back his tears for a moment, then he reached out and hugged me tightly. We clung together for a long emotional moment and I felt his tears running down my face. All the time my eyes were staring vacantly in front of me, but came to focus on the box in the back of the pick up. I had my answer.

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"Vardun is a first class prick," John said, a few clicks down the road towards Omega. "He got Spicer on the phone and gave him a garbled story about what happened. The general isn't amused."

"With Vardun?"

"Not amused with me. Seems I'm in for a kick in the tail."

"It isn't your fault. Vardun was being cruel to Mike."

"He's not really your brother. You know that now."

"Mike'll always be my brother. It doesn't change anything just because we're not blood related. We grew up together. We've fought each other nearly every day of our lives. That's what brothers do, right?"

"I guess so. I don't have a brother - least, none that I know of. I guess he hogged all my time in the shuttle, too. Sorry about that, Danny. It was really your treat."

"I didn't mind. Not much, anyway. I feel sorry for him. He's been punished enough. They should let him go free. It was all my fault, anyway. He wanted to save Scamper for me."

"You mustn't feel guilty, Danny. People make choices. He made some bad ones."

The grim outlines of Omega Base were soon ahead of us, and we passed through the main gate after a quick inspection. My heart pounded. I half expected the gate sentries to search the back of the truck, but our two guards seemed enough deterrence, and we drove to the refueling shed. John dismissed Sam and George, who saluted, then doubled off towards the mess hall.

"We've got one last job to do before we head home to our dearests and loved ones," John said.

"I thought you lived alone," I replied.

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"Just me and my shadow," John replied. "We've got to refuel, in case the truck is needed during the night."

"You're looking after it, right?"

"No. It can stay in the refueling shed. We'll walk home."

I swallowed. "The refueling shed is well guarded, isn't it?"

"Very well guarded. The truck will be totally secure. Don't worry about it, Danny."

It wasn't the truck I was worrying about.

Another sentry and another stop while John was identified. "Any matches, lighters, or flammable apparatus to be checked?" the young soldier asked.

"There's a box of matches in the glove box, Danny. Hand them over, will you?"

I reached into the glove box. There was not one box of matches, but two. I handed one to John, and as he handed them over to the soldier, I pocketed the other. You have to understand that matches are "attainables" in Omega's youth culture. I could swap a box for a couple of ration biscuits any time.

"You're cleared for entry, Major," the guard said and we drove inside.

It was my turn to be surprised. Mum Blake and Scamper were waiting for us. "Hi, Soldier," she said, handing Scamper over. He was delighted to see me. I picked him up and received a great lick all over my face. "How was the trip? Mike O.K.?" she asked.

I must have looked very miserable. "No," I said.

"Bad as that, eh?" Mary commiserated.

John was at the back of the truck refueling, when I glanced over Mary's shoulder. General Spicer and a squad of his Omegans had entered the shed. He was angry.

"Trouble," I said, pointing with my finger.

"Take over for me, Danny," John said, handing the fuel hose to me before walking over to meet the general. I held the hose and watched carefully as the fuel poured from the glass bowl of the antique pump into the truck. Mary's attention was riveted on the clash between John and the General.

"I trusted you to be my right hand man!" Spicer shouted. "How could you betray me?"

"I haven't betrayed you," John denied, puzzled. "What's happened?"

"I've been made to look a complete idiot in front of the whole base, that's what," the general said. "The Anvell boy has escaped. I knew he was dangerous. Why do you think I ordered them to be kept in irons?"

"He's only a boy," John protested. "We mightn't be the United Nations any more, but we still have standards of decent behaviour."

"Don't talk of standards to me, young man. I'll show you how you've betrayed me. You men, search the truck."

I'd placed Scamper in the cabin, and was about to get him, when one of the Omegan guards pushed me away from the fuel inlet. I stepped back, and thought furiously. While two of the men clambered onto the back, I quietly let the rest of the fuel flow onto the ground around the drums.

There was a shout from one of the guards, and Mike was hauled up from the box. He stood looking terrified as they pushed him

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off the back. The men jumped down and held him so all could see.

"See what I mean, Mister," Spicer said to John. "You call this loyalty?"

John looked at me, and I shrugged in despair. He didn't know what I'd done. If anyone had been betrayed, it was Major John Colson.

I felt for the box, and slid a match from it, placing my thumb on its head, pinning it to the striking side. Mike was only inches from me. I looked upwards in silent prayer for a fraction of a second, and flicked my thumb forward. The match sputtered against the striker and flew in a tiny red arc towards the puddle of fuel on the floor.

It was not an explosion, exactly, but a sudden puff of light and heat, that took everyone by surprise. The guards jumped out of the way, and Mike would have followed them, except that I grabbed his sleeve and shoved him towards the cabin.

"Drive!" I said, pointing to the keys in the ignition. I jumped in, pushing Scamper to the floor. Mike was beside me in a flash, slamming and locking the door. Mary moved as quickly to the window on my side.

"Get out of the cab, Danny. This is no way to handle things," she said.

I had unclipped the extinguisher from the floor and handed it to her. "Quick, Mary. Put the fire out," I said, pushing the door lock down and winding up the window as two of Spicer's guards raced to the front of the truck with blasters drawn.

A blast of foam from Mary's extinguisher struck them across the face, and they were bowled over by the force of the stream.

Confusion reigned as Mike drove the truck out of the shed. Fuel was the one commodity on Omega Base which was irreplaceable. Spicer and his men now ignored us, grabbed extinguishers, and commenced fighting the flames. The one person who could have stopped us escaping, the young guard on sentry duty, stood looking in awe at the huge fire I had started. As I looked back, I could see that he was running into the shed to join the others.

As the fire sirens blared, Mike approached our last obstacle - the main gate. He wound his window down and looked out at the guards.

"General Spicer wants all men on active duty fighting the fire." he lied.

"We're on sentry duty," the soldier protested.

"Accidental fire in the fuel dump," I shouted. "General said to stand the artillery down and go fight it. He said he'll take the risk. We're rounding up all the men."

It took a few seconds for the guards to get organised, and Mike drove towards the barracks before turning the truck around to the gate. We watched the sentries doubling towards the fire, which was now illuminating the darkening sky.

As we drove into the vast desert, with no plan, except to put as many kilometers between us and the base as we could, I knew that I had made a choice between Mike and Mary. I had chosen my family. We were fugitives, with no food, and little water. Our chances of survival were low, but our spirits were surprisingly high."

"Where can we go?" I asked.

"The only people I know who might take us in are the Outsiders," Mike said.

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"You're joking!" I said. "But you're right. There is nowhere else. Outsiders, here we come!"

"I guess that ends our 'Omega' period, little brother," Mike said. He began to laugh, and I joined in.

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Chapter Ten

The Lioness and Her Cub

Memoirs of Princess Tania

They came from the West, as the Sun rose above the horizon. A great cloud of dust rose behind their vehicle. We could see it coming for hours before it arrived. I was standing watch with Toran, my father. We stood on the high cliffs above our homeland, the Valley of the Spirit.

"Look, Father, " I cried. "From the West. A vehicle is approaching."

"I can see it," he said. "It may be several vehicles. It could be an attack from those Technos at Omega. Go at once, daughter. Tell the commander to get ready."

I ran as fast as I could down the broken track that led from the Lookout to our main camp. The men greeted the news with excitement. Messages were relayed to our neighbours. Artillery was readied. Missiles were brought up from the deep caves and placed on standby. Armed platoons began assembling, ready to march towards the pass that guarded our homeland.

I asked Garradan, our commander, if I could march out with the men. "Please, Sir. Let me come with you. I was the one who saw them first. I was the one who ran all the way to warn you."

I thought he might refuse me, but Lord Garradan, our high chief, is a man of honour. He knew I was of age.

"You are strong, Tania, as strong as any boy, and you can shoot. Few can match you with the bow. Your father has taught you

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well. I should hesitate, but for this occasion, I shall not. We cannot afford to waste bullets or energy. Arrows may be useful. Despite your youth, I shall take you."

I was overjoyed, but kept my peace, making no great deal of the matter, though inside, I felt my heart would burst with pride. We marched out to meet the strangers. I carried a Remington Megawatt Nitro-Iodine Beamer with impulse control. It could cut through a boulder. On the other shoulder, I had my laminated bow, and a sheath of fine fletched arrows with razor sharp heads - the ones I use for hunting. It's a waste of energy to take out a Wallaroo with a laser, and nothing is left of a rat. An arrow is clean, but sometimes I miss.

I drank my fill from the water butts and waited for a while, then drank more. I knew it would be a long march, and the sun would beat down mercilessly, so I drank yet more water and then licked some salt. Mother applied kaolin lotion to my skin, to ward off the cursed Youvee. I wore my goatskin shift, felt hat and sunslits. How grand it felt, to march out with the men and youths at the head of a great army, to meet the foe.

We waited, until the vehicle could be identified by a lookout with a telescope. "A light truck - an old pick up - no obvious threat to our village," was his report.

We waited.

Some men put branches across the road as a signal for the old car to stop. At last, it appeared. It drove tentatively towards the branches, then stopped. The driver and his companion waited for a while, then got out of the vehicle. We could see they were mere boys. They held their hands high, to show they were not armed, but they were wearing the enemy's colors, sky blue U.N. caps and navy blue overalls. They could have been hiding weapons, so we stayed cautious.

"Omegan Orphans," Garradan said, "Runaways, perhaps. We don't want them. You can take them out, Tania."

"Perhaps we should wait, and hear what they want," I said.

He looked at me with annoyance. I felt sorry that I'd crossed him. He had been kind to me, but I do not kill without cause. I put my beamer down, and strung my bow. Taking two arrows from my quiver, I stood up and took sight. They saw me and stood on the road, facing me with arms raised. I could not kill them in such cold blood. I ignored Garradan, and walked forward, bow ready.

"You are surrounded," I said.

"Yes. We guessed that, when we saw the branches," the older boy said. "Can you take us to your leader?"

He smiled as he spoke, and I recognised the joke. It is hard to jest in the face of death. I lowered my bow, signaled with my left hand to the soldiers to lower their weapons and told the boys to walk in front of me.

"Keep your hands up until you have been searched. Some of the men may think you are armed," I advised.

"Can I call my dog," the young one asked. "He's in the car."

"Yes."

"Scamper!" the younger one called, and a small dog jumped from the car and trotted to his heel as he walked, hands raised, towards the waiting soldiers who now stood to reveal themselves. I directed them towards Garradan, waiting with his body-guards in a small clearing amongst the rocks.

They were stripped and searched. I watched with interest. Neither of the boys was near to manhood, but my attention was

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drawn to lines of cruel scars on the older boy. Four fresh lines of blood blisters lay across his back, which bore signs of previous beatings. Garradan gently turned the boy's head from side to side, and I could see the tell tale marks of beatings - fresh scar tissue around his eyes, nose, and mouth.

"This is not the work of the United Nations," Garradan said in a whisper. "Who worked you over, boy?"

"There is no United Nations. Admiral Osark is dead. The base is now under the control of General Spicer and the men who call themselves the Omegas," the boy said. "Spicer's men did this. My brother helped me to escape from the penal battalion."

"Were you a criminal?"

"I did something wrong. I deserved to be punished, but..."

"We have no place for runaways, especially delinquents. Your only use to us, is to tell us what has happened at Omega. We are not aware of these developments that you speak of. We want to know the results of our attack on the base. Then we will decide what to do with you."

"Tell them nothing, Danny. It isn't our war." The older boy said.

I could not stand the senseless bickering for a moment longer. "What is your name, boy?" I asked.

He turned to look at me. If he felt shame at his nakedness, he did not show it. Our eyes met, and he read my face.

"My name is Michael Anvell, and this is my brother, Daniel," he said. "Our dog is called Scamper."

"Bel Ridge," someone muttered.

"We came from Adelaide. Our convoy was attacked. Our parents were killed during the ambush."

"Doctor Richard Anvell?" Garradan asked.

"Yes. Our mother was Susan."

"We found his papers amongst his medical equipment after the attack."

"You led the attack that killed my parents."

It was a statement, not a question.

"I killed your parents."

There was a long silence. He looked at Garradan for a long moment, then averted his eyes.

"Cover yourselves," Garradan said. "You will come with us." He reached into his pocket and brought out a length of cord, which he cut into two pieces. I met his eyes and shook my head. He meant to tie their hands, but I knew that once he took this step, he would eventually kill them.

"Do not bind them," I said. "They can not possibly harm us."

"My niece is called Tania. She seems to like you, boy."

Michael Anvell looked at me and nodded his head in acknowledgement. "Thank you, Tania," he said.

I felt strange whenever I looked at him. He was thin, terribly thin, but his muscles stood out like whipcords and despite the rough scars that showed how harshly life had dealt with him, or perhaps because of them, and the fact that I had seen him entirely, I found myself wishing to be near him.

It was decided, that as the vehicle might be a deception, rigged with a homing device, it would be driven into hiding in a remote

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valley It would not be used for our purposes until it had been thoroughly searched by a technician.

We sat out most of the Noonday heat. Michael and Daniel slept on the sand in the shade of a tree. I could see they were exhausted by their ordeal. A guard woke them with water and food, which they consumed eagerly. The journey back to our camp was long and tiring. Daniel and Scamper fared well, but Michael was ill and unsteady on his feet.

Nobody offered to help him. That is our way. I walked beside him and offered some of my water ration. He took it gratefully and limped onwards. When we reached the cleft between the hills that marked the entrance to our home, he collapsed to his hands and knees and tried to crawl forwards. His brother tried to help him. One of the men handed his beamer to a companion. With a quick movement, he hoisted the boy over his shoulder and carried him the rest of the way.

I retrieved his U.N. cap which fell to the ground. As we walked back to the camp, I traced my finger across the white embroidered badge. The world, surrounded by olive branches - the symbol of peace. How ironic that we were at war with the very organisation that was supposed to prevent war.

There was great excitement as we entered the camp. The boys were prodded to the centre of a large crowd, and Garradan took charge of the occasion.

"These boys are Anvells. Sons of Doctor Richard and Susan Anvell. I killed Richard and Susan when we attacked the great convoy. These boys were taken to Omega and were treated badly. They have come to us. They brought a fine truck, but not much fuel for it. I have decided they may rest here for a few days, and meanwhile, we will decide what is to become of them.

"They have a blood claim on you, Garradan," one of the old men said.

"They are tainted by Omega," someone shouted.

"Hold. Hold!" Garradan shouted. "I hate the Youwen as much as any of you. There is no love in my heart for these boys. They are our enemy. Perhaps we shall kill them, or drive them out. I say we will decide that in time, but not now!" He peeled the overalls from Michael's back, revealing it to the crowd. "This is the devil's handwork. In Omega, they are not people, but beasts. They have - and I should not have to remind you - nuclear power."

"Ban the bomb.

Ban the bomb.

No. No. Nuclear Power!" the crowd chanted in unison.

Daniel stood watching the proceedings, while scamper lay quietly in his arms. I moved closer to the centre of the action, but felt a hand tug at my elbow. It was Toran. I stepped back to allow him through.

"I shall be the guardian of the Anvells," he said. It is the duty of our family - to fulfill the blood claim."

Michael slumped forward, and Garradan held him up. "The boy is exhausted, Toran. I thank you, brother, for taking on this responsibility. It would gall me to give shelter to Youwen spawn. Friends, let us break up this meeting. The boys need rest and care."

And so it was, that Michael and Daniel came to stay with my family at our home in the Valley of the Spirit.

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“Before the times of Chaos, when the Earth was green,” Toran recited, “Were two mighty Empires. The one in the West was ruled by great barons of industry and commerce.”

“What does that mean?” I had once asked, but was never given a satisfactory reply.

“The Empire of the East was ruled by men who said that all should be equal. Their equality flowed from great force, so that all in that empire were equal, but very poor. The rulers of the East were cruel. The rulers of the West were mean and greedy.

“After many years of conflict, and wars which were very cold, the riches of the Earth were spent, and Man became a plague upon the face of the planet. Gaia, the Earth Mother, seeing this great plague of people, sent forth famine, war, pestilence, and death. But there were those who said they could tame Gaia, and abolish her dreadful servants. They unleashed Hitech, Genome, and Nuclear Power to destroy Gaia. But Gaia said, ‘Let the Earth grow hot, and let there be an end to grass and all cattle. Let all life perish, that I may start again, as has happened in the past. Man shall become as the Dinosaurs, bones in the clay.

“To this end, she let Omega descend, to be the great destruction of the earth. This shall be the end of Man.”

He sat on his wooden throne and gazed with firm eyes at the children sitting cross legged in front of him. From the dimmer recesses of the great assembly cave, came the sounds of plainsong chanting.

“Gaia, hear our prayer.

May your mighty works be done.

We strive to heal the wounded land

With the might of the fiery sun.

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“For when the blast is o’er,
And Earth is purified,
The wheel of life comes round again.
It shall not be denied.

“We will destroy the You-Wen.
Omega then will die.
That Terra shall be purified
Beneath - The Cruel Sky.”

Danny and Mike sat with the children, and I was able to watch their faces during the song. They listened with dismay, but Mike kicked Danny firmly on the ankle, and they said nothing. I knew they disagreed with what had been said, and this was dangerous, for Garradan and Toran had little patience with unbelievers.

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“You think I didn’t notice, Tania?” Toran said, his eyes twinkling merrily. “That is a fault of the young. To them, all oldsters are blind. I know they will take a while to learn our ways. They have been poisoned by Omega for so long, that it will not be easy to convince them of our path.”

“We must go into that eternal night?”

“Dear Tania, It is written. Man created The New World Order, and named her ‘Galadriel’, Both Wonderful and terrible. There

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was once a religion that made Man sacred with the Gods. The life of a man was valued so highly, that the church of that time decreed man should procreate in abundance. With religion, Man could live for ever, and never die. With science, Man could live for ever, and never die. With all their wisdom, the men in those times forgot that every life form must have its own checks and balances. When Man had no more natural enemies, no disease, no cancer, nothing that could destroy Homo Sapiens, there was yet one final enemy that Man could not defeat.”

“What was that, Toran?” I asked.

“Man. The final enemy of Man, is Man.”

“We are our own Nemesis?”

“That is so, Daughter. You have learned well. I shall leave you to teach the Anvell boys. I do this, because I trust you implicitly. Your faith is so strong. It must be firm in the face of all the arguments they shall make in defence of their survivalist philosophy.”

“I shall be strong, Father.”

“While they are with us, they must wear their caps as a sign that they are unbelievers. That will ensure they cannot spread any false doctrine among us.”

As I left his presence, I bowed carefully, for Toran was speaking not only as my father, but as keeper of the law, and in that awesome responsibility, he discharged his duties meticulously. He had charged me with teaching the Anvells a new truth - a new way of seeing life and its meaning.

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I began by showing them how we obtained our food. For over a hundred years, we had carved terraces into the rock walls, where

the growing plants could be protected. Yams, Bush tomatoes, Kankerberries, and other foods grew in abundance, tended daily by the older and more responsible children. The gardens were protected by fences of fine wire so that rats could not destroy the food. We gathered “grain” - really, the seeds of trees and bushes, for storage in deep caves we called our granaries.

The adults took the responsibility for crafts. Esara, the furrier, made fine rat-skin cloaks and hats. Mesal created fine sunglasses from thin sheets of Mica, or fashioned pinhole lenses from thin plates of black shell. It was a rule of our tribe, that our economy would be based on needs, not wealth.

I told the boys they would have to wear their caps at all times, so the people would know they were strangers among us. The boys said they would like to wear the same clothes that we had, but I had to tell them that, as they were amply provided with good clothing already, such a diversion of community resources would be a waste. In The Valley of the Spirit, there was no want, no waste, and no theft.

“What would happen if somebody did steal something?” Daniel asked.

“Come and I’ll show you,” I said.

We walked to the ‘Arena of Sorrows’. It was a natural amphitheatre carved by the force of wind and water into the rocks. At one end, a boulder had worn a great hole into the rock. It formed a natural well three metres across and about four metres deep. The walls of the pit were highly polished, so anyone cast inside could not possibly get out. A well worn path led to the great circular platform which was surrounded by tier after tier of stone seating. On the highest row, tall poles had been erected. On many of these, the skeletons of the criminal dead hung wretchedly impaled - eternal witness of the justice of the people.

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“You hang their bodies here after you’ve killed them?” Mike asked.

“No. We hang them here, and they die - eventually,” I said. “Don’t worry. It hardly ever happens. Nobody has been executed in my time. Usually this place is reserved for disputes - arguments between people. They fight here, and the winner wins the argument - whatever it is.”

“The strongest wins?” Michael asked.

“Sure. Don’t they always?”

“Do you settle all your arguments this way?”

“It is written: ‘To none may justice be denied’. This is the one place where any person may take on the law or even the whole tribe by demanding trial by combat. It’s a pretty brave thing to do, because the best fighter in the tribe is chosen to accept the challenge, and usually wins.”

“What happens to the loser?”

“His family buries him. The winner used to be able to claim his body, but we don’t do - that - any more.”

“Trial by combat - it sounds so barbaric.”

“Toran says it is the best way. In the old days, people were tried by the law, but it got so complicated that it hardly ever worked. People got wealthy by using the law. This way, if you don’t like someone, or what they have done to you, you can keep your peace, or challenge them. They can settle, or accept the challenge. Then you get the chance to kill or maim them, and they get the chance to do the same to you. It is fair.”

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Michael Anvell had no reply to that. He stood for a while looking at one skeleton, a small one, hanging by the wrists from a long, thin pole.

“What did he do?” he asked.

“That was a boy called Tomas. He stole food. They say he took a long time to die.”

Mike looked at the skeleton. In the same fashion as all of the other skeletons, It had been re-assembled - tied together at the joints with wire - because in fact, the corpses of criminals usually decomposed into a pile of scattered bones. These were set up - as examples - to show us what would happen if we broke the laws.

“Why did he take so long to die?” he asked.

“His parents were stupid. They used to sneak up here at night and feed him. His father was killed by a sentry, and his mother went mad. Mad Marralin. You will sometimes see her in the village,” I said.

We left the Arena and returned to the village. The sun was now in its dangerous quarter, so the people had retreated to the caves and man-made holes dug into the sides of the hills. We used them as living quarters and sleeping chambers. Most of us would stay under cover until late afternoon. School was being held by the older men and women, and I left the two of them with the class for older boys.

At the time, I felt that they disapproved of much I was telling them. Daniel looked very nervous and uncomfortable. It was hard to tell what Michael was thinking. He was stronger, getting better every day, but he was morose. There was a depth of sorrow about him, that shrouded his spirits like a dense fog. He would sit for long periods of time gazing vacantly at the steep valley walls, as if waiting for the very hills to talk. Sometimes he would smile, or

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laugh at a joke, but his smiles and laughter were sardonic and remote.

I mentioned some of these things to Toran, who looked at me speculatively. “You must care for him very much,” he said. “I did not realise...”

“I don’t love him,” I protested.

Toran smiled. “We aren’t always aware of our own feelings, Tania. Be careful lest his sorrow rub off onto you. He carries his past heavily on his shoulders. Such people find great difficulty with life. He can’t offer you any future.”

“He’s only fourteen,” I replied. “Why talk of futures? Why do older people always jump to such conclusions. I only said I feel sorry for him.”

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That night, in the light of the flickering camp-fire, I listened to him talking with his brother. Their dog, Scamper, sat nearby, chewing noisily on a rat he had caught near the granary. If it was my dog, I would have removed the rat for my own use and given it but a morsel, so it would be encouraged to move outside to hunt once more. It is hard work gathering seeds from the sparse bushes and trees growing in the desert. As a ratter, the dog was useful.

Some say it is rude to listen to the chatter of others. however, our sleeping chambers were so close together, that it was impossible not to hear what was said.

“I don’t understand them. They’ve been awfully kind to us, but they can be so cruel. How can people be so different?” Daniel asked.

Michael Anvell answered: “They must have had a very hard time trying to survive. I guess they’re fine now, but you must have

noticed - blindness, tumors, running sores. They smell terrible. No hygiene at all, and no doctors. Tania says doctors are evil.”

“They stop Gaia from choosing survival of the fittest. If you get sick, you die and that’s O.K.”

“More than O.K. It’s how nature is supposed to work. You have to admit, Danny. They’re tough bastards.”

“But we are healthier, and bigger...”

“That’s all right, Danny. I’m not embarrassed now. Mum Blake is a bit of an Amazon, isn’t she. All that weight-lifting. It’s no wonder you’re a big kid.”

“I miss her. It’s not as if I knew her all that well, but she was my mother - my real mother. Sometimes I could almost read her mind, you know that? We thought the same things at the same time, and we liked the same stuff.”

“So how come when push came to shove you chose me?”

“Because you’re really my brother - even if we aren’t related. We grew up together, and I always wanted to be like you. In Adelaide, you used to go off with the soldiers in their speedboats and I always wanted to go with you, but wasn’t allowed. Mum always said I could go when I grew up, but that never seemed to happen. I love you, Mike. I always will. Promise me we’ll always be family?”

“I love you too, Danny. We’ll always stay together.”

They fell asleep soon after. Scamper finished his rat, and went outside to find another. I sat watching until he returned and stole his catch. He growled at me, but there was nothing he could do about it. Toran says the rats will be the masters of Earth one day. Rats, or roaches. Which species will survive?

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A loud noise alarmed me from sleep. I had overslept. Outside, it was daylight. There was a bustle of activity. People were scurrying about in all directions, and they seemed somewhat alarmed.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

Karenna stopped for a brief moment to inform me that a great sandstorm was coming from the South. I went outside and looked up into the sky. The brilliant blue was split by the advancing arc of sand. It looked frightening, yet magnificent. I was not alarmed, because our valley was reasonably protected from the winds, but it was a rare event, and as children, we always looked forward to the great winds and cool weather which always followed behind the front.

“What’s happening?” Danny asked as he and Mike emerged from their sleeping chamber.

“A big sand storm is coming. Come. We’ll go to the lookout. It will be fun.”

“Dangerous, you mean,” Michael said.

“Nega! Danger nothing! When it gets close, we’ll come down.”

We were joined by a group of older children who enjoyed the tough climb to the summit we called ‘Lookout’. The path was rough, and not without its dangers. I was confident and sure footed. Finally, we gained the top, and I stared into the face of that mighty oncoming storm. That it would be no ordinary sandstorm, I could see at once. Behind it rolled huge thunderheads, from which flashed lightning. Beneath these cells, great tornado funnels swept to and fro. We watched it for scarcely a

minute, then turned about and fled down the path to warn the village.

Soon, everyone was hard at work preparing for the onslaught of the storm. Most of the preparations were to protect the gardens, for our precious food supplies would be most vulnerable to the elements. Plants that were mature, or nearly so, were immediately harvested. Root crops, such as potatoes, were left in the ground. Large stones were placed around young cabbage plants to protect them. Soon, the storm was upon us, and all that could be done had been done, so we retreated to our caves for shelter.

For the next four hours we watched as the outside world became a battlefield of the elements. Winds of ferocious strength whirled through the canyons, and driven sand piled up in nooks and crannies, slithered into our shelters, and generally penetrated almost everything we owned. Then rain began to fall - not a mild shower, but a mighty torrent. The small dry creek that ran through our valley began running and grew into a feisty torrent of turgid foaming brown water. All the while, lightning and thunder flashed around, bouncing from the valley walls.

We huddled together and watched the fury from the safety of our sleeping caves.

“Tania, have you ever heard of The Museum?” Michael asked.

“Of course. It used to be somewhere to the North of here, beyond the Great Salt Lake. None of our people ever went there. It was forbidden by the Youwen.”

“Forbidden? Why?”

“In those times, the Youwen was very powerful. It governed The New World Order, which was very proud of what it had achieved.

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“The leaders of those days decreed a memorial to their glories. Every article that could be gathered in memory of the Twentieth Century would be stored in a huge time vault - buried beneath the desert and guarded by secret means so that people five thousand years from now would know of their glory.”

“That’s stupid. Nobody could ever make a museum that big,” I said.

“They got ‘Endeavour’ from the museum,” Mike said.

“Do not talk about The Museum to anyone,” I insisted. “It is not a good thing to discuss. It is buried beneath the desert sands. All who knew of that place died.”

“Anyway. It’s above the Heat Line,” Danny said. “You could cook if you didn’t have protective clothing.”

At last, the storm spent its fury and passed to the South. There was a short period when the rain slackened to driving sheets of water, and finally a slow drizzle. The sun came out, and we emerged to survey our valley. Water cascaded down the creek and off the valley walls. It was wonderful to see that not much harm had been done, indeed, such a storm brought much needed water, and the promise of new life to the desert. Food supplies for the ensuing weeks would be good, if not bountiful. The rats would breed in their small tunnels and our supply of protein would be assured. We should have been pleased to see our freshly washed valley, but we were not amused by what we found when we emerged.

Michael and Daniel pushed out behind me and looked down at the white painted jeep that stood on the valley floor by the bank of the running creek. Boldly painted on the sides of the vehicle, in large letters, were the two letters, “U.N.” and standing beside it with a large white flag on a stick were two soldiers in battle fatigues and baby blue helmets. They stood slightly apart from

each other, with their hands apart, slightly raised to signify they were not armed.

“It’s Mum,” Daniel said. “Mum Blake. She’s come to get us.”

“And that’s John Colson, the Astronaut,” Michael said.

“He who will fly the shuttle to destroy Omega?” Toran demanded from behind us.

Michael bit his lip. He showed that he had said too much. Danny kicked his ankle.

The boys moved forward to greet their friends. The rest of us moved slowly down from the valley walls and surrounded them in a pressing throng. They were no threat to us. Daniel hesitated for a short moment, then ran forward and threw his arms around his mother who lifted him into the air and hugged him tightly. Michael shook hands formally with John and was embarrassed when Mary Blake reached out an arm and hugged him to her side.

“We’ve been worried as hell about you two,” she said.

“The people took us in. They’ve been very kind to us,” Michael said. Then, remembering his manners, he started to introduce them. “Toran, this is Daniel’s real mother, Mary Blake, and my friend John Colson...”

“Omega SCUM!” Garradan shouted. “You sneaked in here under cover of the storm, and hoped to worm your way into our confidence with this trick! You used these children to try to soften our hearts so that we might accept you.”

“They’re friends, Garradan,” Daniel said. “She’s my mother. Leave her alone.”

Angered by Daniel’s arrogance, he slapped the boy’s face. “Devil child!” he said.

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His mother didn't hesitate. Her fist snapped forward to Garradan's nose. Blood spurted across his face, and he staggered back.

"Wrong move, Mary," John said.

Someone threw a clod of earth which hit her on the ear. Within moments, a melee erupted. Many members of the tribe tried to reach in and grab, punch, or kick the strangers. The man, John, did his best to protect his woman, pushing her and the boys under the jeep, where they had some protection. My fear was for Michael. I could not see him. John went down with a heap of enraged people tearing at him.

"Toran, do something," I pleaded.

Toran reached for the brass horn at his side and gave three tremendous blasts which summoned his bodyguards to his side.

"Stop that!" he said, pointing to the brawling mob. "Pull those people away."

His men at once began pulling people off the stranger, who was by now unconscious on the ground.

"There was no need for that," Toran said to Garradan. "No need at all. What could they do to us? And with a flag of peace..."

"They are the evil ones. The Youwen," Garradan muttered in half apology. "Take care you do not side with them, old man. I say - throw them into the pit until we have decided what to do with them."

Toran thought for a moment. "Perhaps that is the best," he said. "At least - there they will be safe from the mob."

Escorted by an uneasy crowd, Mary and the two boys carried John, who was semi conscious from his beating. Willing hands

pushed the four of them roughly up the path towards the Arena of Sorrows. I would have gone with them, but Toran held me back.

“Leave it daughter. You have been with the boys, and the crowd may remember that.”

“But we promised them safety. Why did Garradan turn the crowd against them?”

“There is more to this than the Youwen, Tania,” he said sadly.

“It’s you, isn’t it? He’s challenging you. He wants to be paramount chief.”

He frowned at me, shaking his fist in anger. “There is more to being Chief than having muscles for brains. Come, daughter. You must help me. The next hour may be crucial. We must prepare for a different kind of battle.”

“A challenge?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Between you and Garradan?”

“That will not happen, Tania. You shall see.” He said. My father was a wise man, and I owe much to him. That decision, to remain out of the immediate conflict and prepare for the political battle was typical of his patience and care in all things. I helped him don his chiefly robes, and when suitably prepared, we lit torches and set off along the secret passage at the back of his cave, to an outlet hidden near the Arena.

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Chapter Eleven

Trial by Combat

Notes by Daniel Blake-Anvell

My mother was with us, so I wasn't afraid. I should have been very, very afraid. Despite my rejection of her; despite the damage I had done to her precious Omega Base; she had left her post, taken a vehicle, and risked contact with the Outsiders so that she could find me. Now, I knew she loved me. For the first time since I had met her, I knew my mother. She was strong. She was all guts. I had complete faith in her. Her very presence made me feel safe.

Garradan kept his distance from us as we were pushed and shoved towards the Arena of Sorrows. Mum held John's arm over her shoulder, and Mike helped to steady him. He was conscious, but still groggy. I walked slightly behind, ignoring the pushes directed against my back from some of the boys who, a couple of hours before, I would have called my friends.

At the edge of the hole, we hesitated. It was quite a drop to the floor, and the large round stone which had ground the pit under the influence of running water was a hazard that had to be avoided. I expected the bottom to be partly filled with water, but it was merely wet. The creek had cut a trench away from the flat rocks, so they were no longer being eroded by the force of water.

"I'll go first," Mum said. "Help John down and I'll take his feet from below."

The Outsiders stood back as we lowered him down, then Mike and I followed. I hung over the edge of the pit and held on to the

lip for a second, but a hard boot stamped on my hands, and I dropped beside the others. We looked up at the crowd of hostile faces rimming the hole. They burst into jeering laughter. Small pebbles and rocks rained down onto us, and someone started to urinate.

“Bastards!” John shouted. He was starting to recover some of his energy.

The hazing continued for a few minutes, then died down as their interest in us subsided.

Garradan stood at the edge of the hole. He looked at us with contempt. “We may decide to leave you in there,” he said. “Don’t attempt to climb out. It would be the last thing you would ever do. I have guards ready to shoot you, or anyone who attempts to come near you.”

We could hear the mob withdrawing. At last, there was complete silence. We stood looking at the top of the hole for a while, and John pointed to a brilliant spot of red light that lit the edge.

“Laser sight. They have at least one guard up there.”

Mum looked at him with concern. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“My hand’s broken and I think I’ve got a cracked rib,” he said. “I’ve had better days.”

Poor John. I felt sorry for him. Anyone could see he wasn’t a warrior, but he had tremendous courage. The way he defended us from the mob, his silent acceptance of pain. I watched him staring at the lip of the pit, calculating how easy it would be to get out.

“Mary, you could stand on my shoulders, and the boys could pyramid up and climb out,” he suggested.

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“Risky. and not in daylight,” she said.

There seemed no way out of our predicament. I wiped my skinned knuckles and Mum lifted my hand to her mouth to blow gently on the broken skin. For a while, she hugged me, as much to comfort herself as to give me solace. The sun peeked over the edge of the pit, and we were soon running with perspiration. I took my cap off and used the flap to wipe the perspiration from my face. A brown smudge spread across the sky blue fabric.

“It needs a good wash,” mum said.

Mike and John sat on the large boulder. It was a very hard rock, but the long period of time during which it had worn away at the base of the pit, had ground its surface smooth.

There was nothing we could do, but wait. No food or water was given to us, and the heat was awful. Nobody mentioned the one terrifying thought we all shared - that the Outsiders had left us to die of exposure.

“What happened after we left?” Mike asked.

“Things got a bit exciting, as you could imagine,” Mum said. “Thanks to the reinforcements you sent from the gate, we got the fire out. Apart from the loss of a few drums of fuel and some fire damage to the refueling shed’s pumps, the base wasn’t actually harmed. The refueling depot is designed to cope with fires. John and I spent the night in the brig.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“General Spicer decided to hold a public trial. He wasn’t popular, and his position wasn’t very secure. By getting rid of us, he’d have been able to put two of his Omegans onto the council and secure his power base. It had to seem fair, so he asked Mac to act as judge.

“From Spicer's point of view, the trial was a disaster. Jason and Morgan gave evidence about the way they were treated at the penal battalion. They confirmed that John wasn't told about Mike's escape plans. A verdict of 'Not guilty.' was recorded for all counts, and John and I were released. He couldn't even make me pay for the damage to the shed because I hadn't taken legal steps to claim Daniel as my son.”

“It didn't stop you coming for me,” I said and snuggled up close so she could hold me tight. I looked at Mike, but he ignored me and pretended to examine John's hand. Perhaps John sensed the situation, or needed some support for his arm. He slipped his arm over Mike's shoulder and Mike, who was always so grown up and independent, began to cry.

We were all low in spirits. I wanted Mum to carry on with her story. At least we had something to listen to.

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“I asked General Spicer if I could take a vehicle and try to find you. At first, he refused. I thought he was going to have a fit when I asked him. He must have slept on it, because the next day, he called us into his office and said I could, if John came along too. He said he was most anxious to recover the truck. In view of what had happened at the trial, and the revelations about the ill treatment that Mike and the others had, he promised not to proceed with any charges on your return.”

“I got a long lecture about children being our most precious resource, and how we had to look after them. You'd have thought he had just written the 'Declaration of the Rights of the Child'. He's got his hands full. Many on the base are in open revolt over his Omega move. Blue caps are back in vogue, and the Launch Pad is now off limits to the black caps.”

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“What’s happened to Jason and Morgan?” Mike asked. He had brightened up considerably now that Mary was telling stories.

“They stayed on at Launch Pad. I guess they feel safer there. Jason said he’d found some of his people amongst the convicts in the Penal Battalion.”

“They’re still carting water?” Mike asked incredulously.

Mary smiled ruefully. “No. They’ve been paroled. There isn’t much work going on there at the moment. It isn’t a very happy place, Mike.”

“I don’t see anything much going for life out here, either,” John said. “A miserable lot you boys got mixed up with. I’ve never seen such a pile of loonies. Who’s the guy with all that attitude?”

“Garradan. He’s their warlord. Toran’s their chief, but he’s too old. He couldn’t take Garradan on. He’s a good fighter and I don’t think anyone could challenge him.”

“Their law is based on fights. The winner wins the case,” I said.

Mum became interested. “Tell me all about these challenges.”

“Well. They don’t have arguments because if they want to disagree about anything, they’ve got to fight to the death,” I told her.

“It’s trial by combat,” Mike added. “Anyone can seek justice - even against the tribe. They just have to challenge the champion.”

“And I’ve already bloodied the bastard’s nose,” Mum said.

“You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking,” John said. “Mary, you can’t challenge him.”

“Why not? I’m fitter, stronger, and a trained fighter. He might be all right swaggering around with this tribe of misfits, but has he

really had an all in brawl? Why do you think I was head of the kids, John? Because I was a pussy?”

“If anyone challenges him, it should be me. It’s my duty.”

“Thanks for breaking your hand on our behalf, kid.” she said. “Maybe you should have jumped under the jeep with the boys.”

I could see that John’s feelings were hurt, but before they could begin arguing again, there was a tremendous Yapping and barking.

“Scamper!” I shouted. “He’s found us.”

We looked to the top of the pit, expecting to see him any moment. I was worried that the guard would shoot him. There was no sign, but the racket continued, although it was somewhat muffled.

“The stone,” Mike said. “It’s coming from the stone.”

“That must be how the water got out,” I said. “There must be a hole under the stone.”

We put our shoulders to it, and it rolled to one side. The stone had worked its way down through the softer rock that formed the pit, until it had struck the base of the layer. The sand and clay underneath had been washed away to form a small tunnel. It wasn’t large enough for any of us to wriggle through, but to a small dog like Scamper, it was no obstacle. He must have tracked us by smell. True to his name, he jumped up into the pit and showed how much he loved us by spraying us with muddy water as he shook himself dry. Within moments, he was in my arms and licking my face furiously.

“Where’ve you been?” I asked. “Hunting?”

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John was busy inspecting the hole. “In a couple of thousand years, we could get out of here,” he said. It must flow into the creek.

“Is there much water in there?” Mum asked.

“Muddy. We’ll probably drink it when we get desperate.”

“And Scamper can bring us rats,” I volunteered.

“Great. Just what I want to live on,” Mike said, “Muddy water and raw rats.”

“We don’t know they’ve left us here,” I said. “They’re probably talking about us now. Tania’s on our side.”

“How do you know?” Mike asked.

“Because she’s sweet on you. That’s why.”

“Crappers.”

“She couldn’t take her eyes off you. One look at your whanger, and she was history.”

“What?” Mum asked.

“Oh - they made us strip when they caught us,” Mike said. He tried to be offhanded about it, but his face reddened. “At least I’ve got one. Not like Daniel’s. You’d have to search.”

“Shut it,” I said.

“Hey, you two, knock it off,” John said. “There isn’t room to brawl in here. We’ve got to try and figure out a way to get out of here.”

Mum took a notebook from her pocket. “We could send a challenge to Garradan. That might work,” Mum said. “How to get it to him - that’s the question.”

“Toss it over the edge of the pit. They’ll get curious and try to see what it is,” Mike suggested.

“Maybe,” Mum said, jotting the challenge onto a sheet of paper. “This might do it.” She rolled the message into a ball and tossed it up. It didn’t reach the top. “You climb up on my shoulders and toss it, Mike,” she said.

It took a couple of minutes to organise Mike to stand on her shoulders and toss the ball into the air. It vanished over the edge, but a sudden burst of laser fire zapped the rim of the pit, showering us with hot chips and dust.

“I think they just zapped the challenge,” Mike said.

“At least we know they’re still awake,” John said.

For a while, we sat despondently with no fresh ideas.

“Scamper could take it,” I said.

“Scamper’s not trained to do tricks, stupid,” Mike said.

“He’s a smart dog. He can catch rats,” I protested.

“You’re always thinking about your stomach,” Mike sneered.

“Hold it boys,” Mum said. “Danny’s got a point. If we tie a message onto Scamper, someone will notice it. The main point is, how to get him to leave Danny.”

“That’s one thing he can do,” I said. “He likes getting rats. Just sool him onto them.”

“There aren’t any rats around here,” Mike said.

“That’s the point. Can’t you see? He’ll have to go to the granary to get them. Someone will see him.” I explained.

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Mum tore another sheet from her notebook and wrote out the challenge. John took a lace from one of his boots. Mum fashioned a loop to hold the new message. It was tied firmly to Scamper's neck, where he couldn't get at it.

At last, everything was ready. I placed him back into the hole. "Rats! Scamper, RATS!" I urged. He became excited, turning around to look in all directions. Suddenly, he was gone.

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I remember - it seemed an eternity of time. We waited - and waited - and waited. How time stretches when you are young. The shadow at the base of the pit crept higher and higher, so that we were in the shade once more. The sky was turning the deeper blue of evening. We heard a sound - hooting, yelling, and a rattling that became louder and louder.

"Company's coming," John said.

There was the loud sound of shouting and talking, made more frightening because we couldn't see anyone. Dust and gravel fell into the pit, so we averted our eyes.

"So, Lady. You challenge me," Garradan asked. He looked menacing, standing over us with his hands on his hips. His bodyguards looked at us with cynical amusement. "What is your complaint?"

"We came here in peace. We were unarmed. You struck my son. You started a fight and my companion was injured. You have put us down here without any reason but your hatred. I'm challenging you to trial by combat."

"I do not fight with women. I'll fight the man. If he wins, you can all go free."

“He would fight you, but he is injured. His hand is broken. His ribs, too. Are you so afraid that you’d rather fight a sick man than a woman? “

“He will fight you, Mary Blake,” called someone from the back of the crowd. The bodyguard moved back from the edge of the pit, and Toran pushed his way forward to stand opposite Garradan. “She has issued the blood challenge, Garradan. You must accept it, on behalf of the people.”

“Very well. I understand you perfectly well, Toran. I’ll remember that - when I’ve settled the woman,” he said. “She fights for their lives. If she loses, the others will die with her.”

“You would still demand their deaths after her sacrifice?”

“Without that, there would be no point to it.”

“Take them from the pit,” Toran commanded. “Summon the people. Everyone must watch. It is almost the full moon. Let the fight start when it stands clear above the arena.”

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Night came.

We were given food and drink and then taken to the front row of stone seats where we sat, surrounded by Garradan’s bodyguard and other soldiers. Toran and Tania sat on a raised platform behind us. Scamper, now free of his message, managed to find me, and I held him securely on my lap.

There was some discussion in the arena, then Mum and Garradan stepped forward to face each other. Because he had been challenged, Garradan chose which weapons would be used. He picked matched sheath knives. Toran held a wooden box between Mum and Garradan. She chose first, so there was no doubt that the contest was fair. She held the knife up so all could

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see. It gleamed in the moonlight. Its blade was about twenty centimeters long. Mary stepped back. Toran juggled his weapon from hand to hand, making it appear in one fist, then the other, as if his performance of dexterity with the blade was the sole object of the show. He was trying to intimidate her.

Mum stood with her left hand held slightly out from her body while the right tucked the knife under her forearm where Garradan couldn't see it.

“Ah,” one of our guards muttered knowingly.

“Come on, Mum!” I yelled.

“Mary! Mary! Mary!” Mike called, and John joined in. The crowd looked at us with some amazement. It was a good chant. Hadn't they heard of barracking before?

Garradan circled cautiously. Her eyes never left him for a moment, but her left hand lifted in a clenched fist - a salute to her fan club.

Toran retreated to the edge of the arena. “Fight!” he called.

Garradan slashed forward towards Mary's right hand, but as if by magic, she slashed downwards with her left, the blade caught him across the forearm. He jumped back with a curse.

“How'd she do that?” Mike asked in a whisper.

Garradan was bleeding slightly. He was not badly hurt.

“She's very fast,” John said, “and the knife is one of her favourite weapons. You learn a lot round the canals and sewers of Adelaide.”

They circled about each other, arms weaving back and forth, sometimes touching, sometimes switching the blades behind the

back, or merely pretending to. Neither seemed keen to come within slashing distance of the other.

“Keep playing with him, Mary! Keep it up!” John said.

“Mary! Mary! Mary!” we yelled.

Garradan let fly with a heel kick, directed against Mum’s legs. It was unexpected - but, in a fight to the death, a fair move. His foot caught her behind the knee, and she staggered, losing concentration for a moment. Garradan moved in with a stabbing blow towards her stomach. Mary deflected it, but it caught her across the side.

“Shit!” she screamed, turning away from him and staggering back in some pain. Her knife dropped from her hand, and she held her hands to the wounded side.

Mike and I stood up, expecting the end to come at any moment. I could feel John’s hand on my shoulder as he held me tightly against his side.

The end came in slow motion. My heart was racing and time dragged as she stood, unarmed, facing her nemesis. Her hands spread outwards from her body as if, by holding them up to surrender, Garradan might have mercy on her.

There was no mercy in his heart as he moved forward for the kill. His blade swept forward towards her unprotected breast. She pivoted on one foot, sweeping forward with her open right hand, closing on his fist and taking it forward across her shoulder. Then she whipped her arm backwards, uncoiling like a spring, so that the back of her hand, held in the classic chopping position, struck Garradan across his exposed throat. I could hear the sharp snap as it struck home.

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Garradan's head flew backwards, and the knife fell from his nerveless hand. He arched backwards grasping for his throat as he fell onto the arena floor. He kicked with his feet and thrashed around in desperation, trying to breathe. Mum wasted no time retrieving his knife. She kicked him in the side of the head, and he lay stunned, twitching on the floor. Then she sat on him and lifted her knife hand towards Toran.

He nodded, and she slashed with her blade. Instead of killing him, she cut a huge chunk off his beard. Holding it aloft, she walked to Toran's position and handed it to him.

"I'm not a murderer," she said. "Do you accept this for his death?"

"You should take his life, Blue Cap," Toran said.

"We are not killers, Toran! That isn't our way. The United Nations wants Peace, not War."

"The Youwen is not our friend," he snarled in an undertone. Toran took the handful of hair and held it aloft. "The woman has won. She can take her companions and go."

Garradan's men were running into the arena to give him aid. He was in a bad way. We ran forward to where Mum was standing, now surrounded by an excited crowd. Everyone loves a winner, and the women were especially excited. There was a tremendous hubbub of excited noise. Above it all, however, was a strange sound I'd never heard before - a shuddering in the air.

"Chopper!" Mary shouted. She picked me up in her arms and pushed her way through the crowd. John grabbed Mike and followed as fast as he could. The pit yawned in front of us.

"What's happening," I shouted, as a tremendous flash of light illuminated the arena. Mike and I were dropped into the hole,

Mum and John followed as a tremendous noise assaulted us - a high pitched whining that I knew all too well. Gatlings.

Above us, screams, shouts, and curses, the flash of lasers, explosions, and gunfire. We huddled on the bottom of the pit. The noise went on and on...

Silence.

The battle was over. Above us, we could see the blades of the helicopter as they rotated overhead. It had landed in the Arena. There was another sound - troops under orders searching the area. It didn't take them long to find us.

Spicer stood on the lip of the pit, gloating: "Well, well, well. If it isn't Mother Mary and her brood," he said amiably. "Fancy finding you in a hole like this."

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Spicer's attack had been devastating. I looked for Toran and Tania, but they were not among the dead. Nor was Garradan. They must have escaped. The soldiers searched the corpses for weapons. We were shepherded back towards the helicopter.

We stood in a group surrounded by black caps who surveyed the carnage. Corpses - pieces of men, women, and children lay scattered amongst the blasted ruins. In the bright moonlight, they took on a bluish grey hue. In many ways, it was not real, but I have often dreamed of walking among the dead, searching, searching, but never finding whatever it is I am looking for.

At the time, I had no feeling for those poor people.

That is what I remember most clearly. For all of those dreadful corpses, I had no feeling. No sorrow. No remorse.

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“I have to thank you for leading us to them, Mary. We bugged the vehicle and I didn’t tell you - in case they caught you and used torture.”

“A surgical strike, General? An Omegan massacre?”

“Still wearing your blue cap, Mary? Your U.N. principles? Haven’t you given up on all of that claptrap? Surely you know. Now, it’s survival of the fittest.”

“What we’ve seen here is nothing short of bloody murder.”
Mum said.

“You’ll have plenty of time to air your opinions at your trial. I intend to set an example with both of you.”

“What? What are you trying to pull now, Spicer?” she demanded.

“You’ve both been charged with desertion in the face of the enemy and theft of a vehicle.”

“You gave us permission to look for the boys - and to take the vehicle.”

“I distinctly remember telling both of you that you were confined to the base. In fact, I made a diary entry of that fact afterwards. Your action triggered this raid. We determined to strike before the rebels had time to organize another attack on us.”

“That’s a lie! A pack of lies,” she said angrily.

“Secure them. They can go back to base in the jeep. I’ll take the boys for a ride in the helicopter. They’ll like that,” he said.

Mum screamed and struggled, trying to get at the general, but the troops dragged her away.

“Leave my son out of this, Spicer. I’ll deal with you, you bastard! Danny! Danny! Don’t hurt my son, damn you!”

I would have tried to follow her, but the black caps held me firmly by the arms. Scamper growled menacingly, but Mike picked him up and held him. Scamper, the hero, was growling and snapping at any soldier who tried to get near him. John stood quietly while the soldiers handcuffed him. He managed to get one question to Spicer before he was taken away. “Are you going to add their murder to your list of crimes, General?” he asked, nodding at us.

“They left Omega of their own free will. I’ll make sure they will not be returning. My troops are not war criminals. They would never permit me to murder children.”

Mike and I were pushed into the body of the helicopter. Troops clambered on board, and we were surrounded by grimy, smelly black caps who pushed us onto the floor and ignored us.

I managed to roll closer to Mike. “What are they going to do to us?” I asked, trying to loosen the tapes tying my wrists.

“Stay cool, Danny.”

“Stay cool, Scamper,” I said.

The helicopter lurched slightly, and I realised we were taking off. The troops were laughing and joking about how easy the raid had been. There was a brilliant flash from below and several of the soldiers began talking about blowing the Outsiders’ ammunition dumps. I felt angry and helpless, but I didn’t cry. We sat side by side in the dark while the helicopter putted on and on into the night.

At last, it tipped nose forward, and I realised that we were landing. The rotors slowed, then stopped. The side door opened,

The Cruel Sky

and General Spicer order the men to put us out. We were dragged to the door and pushed out onto the ground. Spicer dragged me to my feet and cut the tapes from around my wrists.

“You wanted to leave Omega. We’re putting you out here,” he said.

I looked around. In the bright moonlight I could see the flatness of the horizon and the sparkling whiteness of the ground. It was a salt lake. Two of the soldiers lowered a jerry can of water from the cabin.

“By rights, I could strip you of everything belonging to the base and leave you naked in the wilderness. Instead, I’m giving you enough water for a few days travel. You’ll have to carry it,” Spicer said, “And in case anyone accuses me of not provisioning you, I’ll also provide two boxes of ration biscuits.”

“Number twenty-fours?” Mike asked.

“You worked it out?” Spicer asked.

“I think so,” Mike said.

The general smiled and tipped Mike’s hat forward over his eyes with his hand by way of farewell. “Smart boy. I could have used someone like you. That’s karma. So long, Kids.”

We stepped away from the whirling dust and salt that the helicopter stirred up as it took off. We watched it out of sight, and listened carefully until its sound had completely disappeared.

“What was that about the ration packs?” I asked.

“Spicer was an outsider, but left them to join up with the U.N. forces. Remember what ‘Granny’ said? She had a son at Omega? - Spicer. She had a deal with the Outsiders. They’d leave her roadhouse alone in exchange for favors. See, the Outsiders were

too strong. They played havoc with the convoys to Omega. So Spicer made bargains with them - weapons, fresh water, fuel, stuff like that. They were short of protein. He swapped the cadet patrol as food. They were stored in the freezer at the roadhouse. The outsiders were cannibals when necessary. Because of his efficiency, he got promoted, but he still played both sides against each other. Why do you think we got ambushed on the way to Omega, Danny? He told them we were coming.”

“We’ve got to get back there.”

“How? We don’t even know where we are.”

“He’s left us to die, hasn’t he?” I asked.

“Yes. The food and water won’t last long.”

“If Jason was here, he’d tell us how to live off the land.”

“Danny,” Mike said gently, “I don’t think that anything lives here. Not even rats.”

There was nowhere to go. We decided that, rather than walk in circles all night, we would rest beside the water can and wait until daylight. We lay down to sleep on the salt flat, cushioning our heads on the hard steel can as best we could.

Morning would come in its own good time. We needed all the rest we could get if we were to have any chance of surviving in that salt lake inferno.

At temperatures over sixty degrees Celsius, the body begins to break down. A human begins to cook in his own body fluids. Long before that happens, the brain shuts down from heat stress. Our only hope was to find shelter from the searing heat.

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Chapter Twelve

Flight

From: “A Brief History of Planet Earth”

Personal Histories Princess Tania d’Toran

As we walked through the torch-lit darkness, stumbling whenever the flickering flames failed to reveal the traps beneath our feet, Toran gave a running commentary on the museum. “The Pyramids had lasted for thousands of years,” he said, “They were old when Romans took guided tours to visit the massive tombs and the mysterious sphinx. people came to gaze, and time passed. The very stones wore away. Mankind walked on the moon and planted the seeds of human destruction in the sciences of engineering and technology.

“During all that time, nobody knew or guessed that a great boat had been buried at the foot of the pyramid in an underground vault. Technology revealed it to mankind, a short era before the age of chaos. They also discovered more secret passages.”

“Is that why they built the museum?” I asked, “to hide the twentieth century away from human eyes?”

“Museum. All I hear is that word. Do you children have nothing else to think of?”

We stumbled on in silence.

“That’s where we’re going, isn’t it?” I asked.

He turned to look at me. In the red and yellow light of the fire, his face was a changing pattern of shadows. His cheeks glistened with the tears that he could not hold back.

“Yes. It is our only salvation. We have nothing else.”

“The Youwen.”

“Youwenesco. If they still exist.” He staggered on along the cave floor, while I followed as quickly as I could. “If they still exist, which is doubtful. They are a tribe of the Youwen, but more peaceful. That is, they were, when I knew them.”

His grief sustained him.

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When the attack helicopters from Omega Base swarmed into the arena from the darkness and launched their withering fire onto the spectators, he pushed me back into the recess that led to the hidden passages beneath the arena. In the slaughterhouse that followed, he fought bravely, holding the attacking troops off until as many as possible had gained the sanctuary of the caves. Then he triggered the explosive charge that blocked the tunnel against pursuit and joined us where we huddled in one of the larger caves below.

Garradan had been brought into the cave, and lay against a rock while his relatives tended him.

“They tricked you. That accursed woman tricked you,” He exclaimed hoarsely.

“We could have checked the vehicle, if you hadn’t distracted us,” Toran said. “We should have been on our guard instead of playing circus.”

“That’s right. Blame me. Oh, my throat.”

The Cruel Sky

“Remember well, Garradan, that she could have cut it. You’d better rest. We shall have to scatter. There is nothing left for us here. They might try to use gas,” Toran warned.

“Gas!” someone shouted.

“No. There’s no gas, but they might try it. Scatter, all of you. We will meet at the Great Pillar in three weeks time. Gather all the tribes, so we can plan our revenge.”

“Where shall you go, Toran?” an old woman demanded. She held her lantern high, and I could see the mocking face of Old Doreen, whom we called “High Witch”.

“It is better that nobody knows where anyone goes. That way, nobody can harm the others by prattling.”

All agreed that it was for the best, so we parted company from that time. From a supply cache, I filled my quiver with oily rag to light our way on the long journey ahead.

Now, several hours later, I was able to see a distant point of light that marked our exit from the cave system.

We emerged as the moon was dipping to the horizon. Parked under a thorn tree, so it could not be seen from the air, was the old pickup truck that Michael and Daniel had driven from Omega base.

“Has it got enough fuel?” I asked.

“We refueled it.”

“They could attack us. There is no cover on the roads.”

“They are as short of fuel as we are. By daylight, they will have returned to Omega base to celebrate their great victory. We will be safe on the road, Tania. As for now, we shall rest until daylight. I’d rather bake in the heat than try to drive that road at night.”

We bedded down in the rear of the utility, and I curled up beside him as I had done when I was a small girl. Neither of us slept, but we rested well.

Interlude II

From: “A Brief History of Planet Earth” - The Personal Reflections of Michael Anvell

We carried the heavy water can on our long march to the North. We took turns. Scamper followed us loyally, and he shared all we had. We decided that, if we were going to die, we would try to die together. Danny said that we would probably be three piles of bones on the salt flat, and in time, we could become fossils. Some eons into the future, we would be discovered side by side by some alien paleontologist, and become a great mystery.

The thought cheered us immensely. We laughed and joked about it.

The sun rose higher in the sky, the water can became heavier and heavier, hotter, and hotter. We drank whenever we felt thirsty. Sometimes we wet our caps, or splashed a little water onto our necks to cool.

At the height of the sun, we rested and ate. As it lowered to the horizon, we walked North again. That night, we slept, and began walking again after dawn. The water can, although lighter, became heavier, and we stopped to rest more often.

No carrion crows marked our trek,

Nor dingoes dogged our track.

Alone we faced the cruel sky

The Cruel Sky

Which cloaked the great outback
And turned the furnace desert red
Then hotter still to white,
Silently, we trudged on and on
into that hellish light.
Our eyes were red
Our mouths were dry
Our bodies burned
Beneath - The Cruel Sky.

Scamper refused to drink the hot water. We sponged him to keep him cool. I carried him as far as I could. His feet were so sore that they bled. I thought dogs were supposed to be tough. Scamper was so small, that there was little resilience left in him. He whimpered for a while, then lay silently in my arms. Danny carried him while I carried the water can. Scamper began fitting, then trembling, and finally, his small spirit ebbed away.

When he died, neither of us could cry. Danny carried him for a while longer, then we laid him out carefully onto the white salt. The water can was empty, so I left it alongside his body. We walked on without looking back.

Our eyes were too dry to cry.

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The distant horizon stays as distant as it has ever been.

We walk to the North.

The Cruel Sky

Gaps.

There are great gaps in my memory.

I can see the yellow sky and I am lying on my back. I should be walking.

“Danny!” I call.

There is no answer.

Our bones shall not lie side by side beneath the sun, bleaching white, as white as salt.

Vultures should circle overhead.

No vultures fly here. Vultures have more sense.

Nothing lives here, not even birds of prey, for there is nothing to prey on. Only fools die out here. My tongue is a fire in my mouth and I am going mad.

“Mummy!” I call. She is hugging Danny. Down among the rocks she hits him with her hypnospray.

“If you want to grow up to be a big, big man,”

“You have to get your hands dirty.”

Someone said it’s a nice way to die - to perish in the desert. Someone never felt the pain, the cramps in the stomach and legs. Cooking in your own juices is not a nice way to die. It hurts like all hell.

I am a fossil underneath the sun.

Covered with salt, I wait to be dug up by alien archaeologists.

No.

They don’t dig up fossils.

The Cruel Sky

Wrong guys.

I'm being dug up.

By aliens.

Huge black aliens with blond hair.

Black aliens with baby blue caps.

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“Did you have to record my ramblings?” I complained bitterly. Danny laughed and switched off the tape recorder, his latest toy. “You’ll waste the batteries.”

“There are millions of batteries. I’ve seen crates and crates and crates of them in the hospital store,” he said. “Doctor Jagamarra says we should record everything for posterity.”

“He would. Give me that. I want to record everything I can see,” I demanded.

He sat up on his bed and swung his legs over the edge. The drip stand teetered precariously.

“Watch it,” I said.

He steadied the stand, then lay back. “Sorry, Mike. I don’t seem to have found my legs yet.”

He breathed deeply, and coughed. There was a loud bang as Doctor Jagamarra wheeled a trolley through the swing door into the room. His blond hair, brown black skin, and strong aboriginal features behind the white hospital face mask emphasized what I had seen in my dreams.

“Righto, kids. The Martians are here,” he said. “Who’s for Galactic Soup?”

“Nothing solid?” Danny asked. “What happened to our ration biscuits?”

“You want to eat that rubbish when there’s real food? You’re having me on, Cuss. Now I know the sun got both of you. Fluid diets. As soon as your system stabilizes, we’ll wean you back onto hard tack.”

“Where are we?” I asked. “Is this Omega Base?”

“No. But this is a U.N. facility, so you’re among friends. When you’re both better, we’ve got a lot of questions we want to ask you boys.”

“I hate questions. I get very bad amnesia whenever I get questioned,” I said.

Danny picked up the cue. “Yes. Me too. I distinctly remember nothing about everything.”

We finished the soup.

“Thanks,” I said politely. “What sort of soup was it?”

“It came from a can. Beef soup.”

I didn’t connect for a moment. Beef. “What’s a beef?” I asked.

“Beef cattle - cows, bulls. You know...” he looked at my blank face for a moment, then his eyes widened. “You really have got amnesia. Oh, wait a minute. You’re from the surface. You’ve never seen cattle. They all died out. Right?”

“Bullickies,” Daniel said. “There are some left. They live on shrubs and trees.”

“I remember. I saw a picture of one. Fat and big. They used to eat grass. People used to get their milk. They’ve changed,

The Cruel Sky

Jagamarra. They're thin, skinny things, not much bigger than dogs. You couldn't milk one. You've got some of the old type here, haven't you?" I asked.

"Not as such. Frozen embryos, that's all. We've got all the life forms that ever existed on earth stored down here frozen in nitrogen."

"What about the radiation?" I asked. "You think liquid nitrogen will save them from radiation?"

"Safe enough at this depth," he said.

"How deep are we," Danny asked.

"I've told you two too much already," he said huffily. "Wait until you're both interviewed. They'll tell you everything then."

"Please, Doctor Jagamarra, tell us now," I pleaded. "Where are we?"

"In hospital at the Museum of the Twentieth Century. Right now, you are six hundred metres below the surface. You are both to rest up, until the nutrients do their job of making you better.

"What we all want to know is - what were you two crazy boys doing wandering around up there. Normally, we leave the surface be. What happens up there is none of our business."

"We came by helicopter. General Spicer banned us from Omega Base. Where else could we go?" Danny said.

"We detected the Omega helicopter when it invaded our airspace. Your presence was detected as you came within range of our ground monitors. We weren't sure whether to save you or not. It was the blue caps you were wearing - that's what made the difference. We thought you might be U.N. personnel.

“We are. We’re U.N. Cadets. Orphans, actually, but the U.N. looked after us.” I thought for a moment. “You would have let us die out there?” I asked.

“Yes. This facility must never be discovered. We seldom venture onto the surface.”

“But everyone knows about the museum,” Danny said. “It was a huge project. They spent billions of dollars on it.”

Jagamarra looked uncomfortable. “The gift to the future - so future generations in thousands of years time would know about life in the twentieth century.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I asked.

“At a time when the world needed the resources poured into this place, it was a total waste of money - unless...”

“Unless it was for something else. It was, wasn’t it?” I asked. I already knew the answer. “This was built as a shelter - a shelter for rich and powerful people. Are they here, Doctor? Have you got the world’s leaders on ice? Are they alive down here?”

He shook his head and sighed. “They never made it. Events must have overtaken them. Communications broke down. Cities that broadcast for help were systematically nuked. The whole planet became socially insane. Whatever held the thin skin of civilization together - that bond of trust between nations. It broke down. Suddenly, there was no more room on the Earth for people. There were mass migrations. wars, famines, Droughts. Our climate became unstable - especially the heat. The U.N. managed to get the Omega project started, but it went terribly wrong. The comet, Omega, threatens to hit Earth.”

“We called it ‘CHAOS’,” Danny said. “It was the time of the Chaos - when everything collapsed.”

The Cruel Sky

“We know all about Chaos. Perhaps we could have stopped it, but the U.N. had to deflect the Omega comet. We managed that to some extent. We managed to get it into orbit around Earth. It was done at a tremendous cost. We let the people rage where they would.”

“If it was so expensive to orbit Omega, why did they build this place,” Danny asked.

“Logically, the Museum project should have been shut down. They kept it going - just in case. You’re right, Mike. It was a funk - hole for the rich, powerful and famous.”

“So how come you guys missed out on Chaos?” I asked.

“Simple, really. We shut the doors,” Jagamarra said.

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They didn’t close the doors with a bang. The workers cleaned the surface of all signs of construction activity. That took weeks of work. Then they shifted all the heavy equipment into the museum complex, using huge lifts that served as major equipment access doors. Jagamara’s people had helped to build the museum. When it closed, they went underground with everyone else.

“You must understand that the decision to live underground and staff the Museum wasn’t easy for our parents,” Jagamarra said, “But really, it was all for the best. You know, there is some enormous irony in the fact that my people, once regarded as the most primitive on this planet, are now the holders and trustees of the knowledge - the last remnants of the great nanotech civilization that was once Planet Earth.”

“How long will we stay down here?” I asked.

“For as long as we have to,” Jagamarra answered.

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Interlude III

From: “A Brief History of Planet Earth” Mary Blake

The storm had turned the rough road to Omega Base into a quagmire of mud and slosh holes that no amount of good driving could penetrate with ease. John and I were amused to watch the wretched black caps reduced to beasts of burden as they pulled and shoved the jeep through the deep gluey mess of black soil. Eventually, they released us from the handcuffs and asked us - respectfully - if we would mind giving them a hand.

“Ma’am, you’re the lightest. Do you think you could drive?” Simon asked.

“As long as it’s you that’s asking, Simon, I’ll do anything to help,” I said. He was one of my junior cadets, and I remembered him from when he was about ten years old. I’d raised so many of these lads. Now we were implacable enemies, or were supposed to be.

We came onto firm ground once again, and John and I rode in the back once again. Simon omitted the cuffs, but we were prisoners just the same. We passed black capped troops of the armored corps from Omega, waiting for the ground to bake dry so they could proceed to the Outsiders camp and mop up the remains of any resistance. I surmised that any threat from the Outsiders was unlikely. Our main problem would be to get the Omega Project on track once again.

If I expected that we would return to the warm environment of friends, I was sadly mistaken. Spicer’s propaganda machine had been at work since his return. He’d reported that he found us with the Outsiders, engaged in sports and entertainment. We had not

The Cruel Sky

supported the Omegan attack, indeed had hidden amongst the rocks and tried to avoid detection. We were deserters and traitors.

He kept us isolated so as not to give us the opportunity of stating our case for the defence. Neither of us was given the chance to speak to a defending officer.

We were given medical treatment. My wound was judged to be minor - a knife gash to the side. A few stitches and some antiseptic dealt with it. John's cracked ribs were taped securely. Then we were placed under guard in separate cells. Lt. Gillett was my guard. He sat outside of the cell while I set to work subverting him from within.

"It isn't reasonable to be told not to talk to me, Andrew," I said. "Why were you told that, do you think?" I asked through the bars.

"Sorry, Ma'am. General Spicer's orders. No communication with the prisoners." He looked at me with some desperation. "You always taught us to obey orders, Ma'am."

"I never taught you to be a mindless robot, Andrew."

"We had a bust-up, Ma'am. All the cadets. Kids took sides. So the General held a parade and asked us to choose, Ma'am. Omega or U.N."

"And you chose Omega so they gave you a black cap with a pretty silver badge and some pips for your shoulder. Tell me, Andrew, what happened to the cadets who chose the U.N?"

"They were interned, Ma'am. They're in our penal battalion. The general has them working on the fortifications, in case of attack."

"But the Outsiders have been defeated. Who can attack us now?"

The Cruel Sky

“Launch Pad, Ma’am. The U.N. controls it. We reckon it’ll fall soon. They haven’t got our heavy artillery - only a few missiles, ATROS, and the Robo-cannons around the bunker.”

“He can’t shell the bunker! That’s madness. The shuttle’s maintained in there. It’s our last hope. If we don’t get the launch on schedule ...”

“No, Ma’am. The General’s told us. We can survive. He’s got somewhere we can all go to, where there’s plenty of food and supplies - enough for a thousand years. Ten thousand years, maybe. It was built for all the world leaders to hide in, but never used.”

“That’s rubbish,” I said. “Do you really believe that fairytale?”

“It’s no fairytale, Ma’am. He told us. It’s called ‘The Museum’.”

I knew about the museum, everyone did. At the end of the twentieth century, the U.N. decided to build a memorial to the twentieth century - a sort of time vault. Artifacts and records were to be sealed in it so that in the distant future, people would be able to know all about our era of history. It was a massive undertaking. They chose to put it underground in Central Australia, because the Earth’s crust is so deep and stable in that region.

Unfortunately, Chaos overtook the project, and it was closed down and sealed long before it could be completed. It would take a nuclear blast to open that vault. It didn’t take me long to figure out where Spicer was going to find his key.

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Our trial, if it could be called that, took less than an hour. It was held before a panel of officers chosen by General Spicer. The officer chosen to defend us was Major Vardun. At last, we had the

The Cruel Sky

chance to have our side of the events heard, but our story fell on deaf ears. They didn't even bother to record our statements. I mentioned that Danny and Mike had been taken from me in the helicopter. I demanded an explanation from General Spicer. I wanted to know - what he had done to my son.

“Your son and his half brother were expelled from the Omega Community. They were given sufficient water and food to survive, and released to the North of Omega Base.” Spicer said.

If he wanted a dramatic outpouring in the court, it didn't come from me. I wasn't going to issue death threats. I let my eyes do that. I made sure that the evidence I gave was correct, logical, and unemotional. Every word I said was weighed before I spoke. We were among enemies. prosecuted, defended, and judged by Spicer's cronies.

John and I were charged with desertion, convicted, and sentenced to Death. In the same breath, Spicer magnanimously reduced that to Life imprisonment with hard labor in Omega's own penal battalion. Late that afternoon, we were marched to Omega's new detention centre.

Our new home was “The Bunyip Club”. It made an ideal prison. The concrete explosives magazine was surrounded by earth banks, now topped with coils of barbed wire. The guards stayed outside the wire, and the prisoners had the run of the clubhouse and yard. At last, we were among friends. A few moments after we were pushed through the gates, word of our arrival spread throughout the small compound. We were mobbed by the cadets and adults who had remained loyal to the U.N. At the back of the group was a very familiar face.

“George Macintyre,” John said. “They've got you in this little picnic as well, have they?”

“Afraid so,” he said. “Spicer’s done a real number on us, John. How are you, Mary?” he asked. “Heard you got hurt in a stoush with the barbarians. Well, we’ve got a brilliant physician inside who’ll be only too glad to put that right.”

We moved into the building. It was darker and cooler inside. My eyes soon adjusted to the low light levels. Along one wall, a line of sick and injured cadets lay on makeshift rag bedding. Some of them, I guessed, were as young as eight or nine years old. It took a few moments to register, and then the shocking horror of their situation sank in.

“What in the hell is going on here?” I demanded.

Doctor Saunders looked up from where he was working on a boy’s leg. “They’re being made to work - to do tasks that are far too difficult and strenuous for them,” he said.

“But why are they here? Why are these kids in the penal battalion?” I asked.

“They chose to stay on our side, that’s why,” Mac said quietly.

One of the boys stood up and walked unsteadily from his pile of rags. He saluted, then reached out his hand towards me. I took it as he looked up at me. “We’re the good guys, Ma’am. The U.N.,” he said, pointing to the end wall where the brave, if somewhat tattered, blue flag took pride of place on the wall.

“Now you’re here, Ma’am, we’ll be able to fight Omega properly. Won’t we?” another said.

They came from everywhere, and I was surrounded by a large group of cadets. Most of them had managed to keep their pale blue caps. If these few boys and old men were the last remnants of the New World Order, then Earth was in a pitiable state.

The Cruel Sky

“Hey, kids,” I remonstrated, “remember that the first job of the U.N. is to keep the peace. No fighting.”

“How are we going to defeat Omega, then?” another asked.

I didn’t know, but I knew we would have to think of something. Someone had begun to sing the Anthem. I always felt emotional about that song. I’d grown up with it.

“Beneath the Flag of All Mankind, United we will stand.

The Undivided, Nations, the community of Man.

Our lovely sky blue planet, The jewel around our Sun.

We love it and adore it, For mankind now is one.

The snowy poles are sparkling, The deep blue waters flow

The mountains green with verdant trees are things we love and know.

From Mercury to Venus, from Jupiter and Mars,

Saturn, Pluto, and Uranus, and all the distant stars.

There is no world that’s like her. Our planet, Mother Earth.

The world of many nations, the planet of my birth.

We shall do our best to serve it, until the day we die.

We will live in peace and harmony, beneath Earth’s pale blue sky.”

Someone touched my arm. It was John, and he was smiling.

“Back with all your kids, Ma’am,” he said.

I didn’t see any humour in the situation. I bit my bottom lip and turned to Mac and Doc. “We’ve got to get these kids out of here,” I said.

“I’m all for that,” Doc said, “but how will we do that?”

“Surely Spicer isn’t all powerful? What about the civilian population?”

“All under military orders, Mary. Those bold enough to speak out are interned with us, or have been destroyed.”

“He used ‘Death Squads’, Mary.” Doc Saunders said. “Doctor Morrison was found with his head belted in. Omega troops used that incident to blame the U.N. cadets. The civilian population is far too cowed to give us any support, even if they could. Most of them have been drafted to the front lines. It’s a war out there, lass. A damned, senseless civil war.”

“Why didn’t you boys join Omega?” I asked. “If you had done that, you wouldn’t be in this mess.”

It had always astonished me how children developed such a strong sense of loyalty at such a young age. Often, they were loyal before they were moral. Loyal to their gang, loyal to their platoon, their company, their corps. How could they be loyal to such an abstract idea as the U.N?

“Please, Ma’am. If we did that, the whole world would be in a mess, wouldn’t it?”

“What’s your name, son, and how old are you?”

The Cruel Sky

“I am Cadet Sergeant Samuel Wu, Ma’am. I’m fourteen years old.”

“How are you guys organised? Have you got platoons, or what?”

“Nothing, Ma’am. We get up in the morning, go to work, and hope we get food and water when we get back. I guess we try our best to survive.”

“Mary, this is no time to play kid soldiers,” John urged. He had an instinct for what was coming.

“Like hell it isn’t,” I said. “What’s kept the kids alive all this time, John? Order, discipline, and hope. I want all N.C.O.s here for a meeting in one hour. Pass the word around. I’ll lay odds on that these boys still remember what it is to be cadets, and not prisoners.”

In another time and place, I would have been criticized for my demagoguery. I knew the dance. The rhythm and purpose of military ritual, It is as old as civilization itself. It bonds humans together as a strong coherent force, a force that can be used for good or evil. it is not human at the individual level, but it is a powerful organism, that group mind, The military machine.

If we could do nothing else for the kids, we could at least create an atmosphere of purpose and hope. They were my cadets, my responsibility. I was determined to get them back into shape, if it was the only thing I could accomplish. It kept me busy, and in my efforts, I was kept from black despair.

The thought that Mike and Danny were perishing alone and unaided in the fiery desert to our North, was more than I could bear.

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Chapter Thirteen

Museum Life

From “Recollections of the Post Chaos Era”

By Daniel Blake-Anvell

Most days, we went to school. Mike and I were enrolled in the secondary section. He studied food production and energy systems. I had Language, Society, Sciences, and Mathematics. All of us were taught basic skills in Museum management. I began to learn electronics and was assigned to do simple repairs on the small artifacts that were in constant daily use, such as small tape recorders. Mike took on the task of community communications, manning the small internal media station that piped music and commentary on several channels. Much of the material was from the old sound archives.

At times, life became very boring, but when some eighty children are cooped up underground with their parents, most of whom are archivists and technicians, one can hardly expect exciting incidents to occur every day.

(Which is not to say that we never tried.)

We didn't have to wear uniforms. I'd become heartily sick of U.N. Blue, in whatever guise it appeared. Our navy blue overalls were cleaned and put away in our personal lockers with our baby blue berets. We chose our everyday clothing from surplus stores - samples left over from the late 20th Century - stuff thought unsuitable for long term preservation. I preferred to wear knee

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length shorts and tee shirts, with rubber sandals known as “thongs”.

I’m jumping ahead of myself. There’s a reason. I don’t want this to read like an academic paper. My recollections are my recreation. I want them to be chatty and informal.

After we left the hospital, Mike and I were placed with a foster family, the Nicholsons. They were very ordinary, middle of the road people. Don Nicholson was a preservator. He made sure that the stuff being stored in the museum didn’t fall to bits. His wife, Arna, was a sprightly mouse of a woman, who worked as a data input officer. That could easily be done “at home”, so most of her day was spent with us. She worked on her computer during the gaps in domestic chores. Unlike the old machines at Omega base, The Museum computers were biological - genetically engineered to co-exist with their host and implanted on the surface of the brain. The screen was interfaced with the optic nerves, and sensors on the spinal cord enabled the user to take part in virtual reality sessions.

One day, after school, I came across her standing in the centre of the main room, miming the placing and retrieving of imagined books into non-existent shelves. I coughed. She crossed her arms into the Moon Goddess position and came out of the session.

“Are you working a robot?” I asked.

“It’s more like a machine for handling books,” she said. “They’re real books - too fragile for humans to handle. We’d contaminate them terribly.”

“Where are they?”

“Several kilometers below, in the sealed section. It’s a Nitrogen atmosphere. Space suits only. For general work, the only access is virtual. Want to try it?”

“Would I!” I said, eagerly.

She went to a drawer and took out a small box. It contained a pair of spectacles and some gloves. I put them on. She applied a patch to the back of my neck. It felt cold, and suddenly, I felt myself falling through black, formless space. I cried out with fear at the initial shock. She grasped my hand, then appeared in front of me, holding me so I wouldn't fall. We were standing on an infinitely flat floor that stretched to the horizon.

“You're wearing a PIPPIN 2000 training set,” she explained. “It has two googols of memory and operates in quantum space at templon speed - No direct cerebral input, but accepts voice input in all internationally catalogued languages.”

“In a spectacle frame? That's impossible!”

“My computer's an implant. It operates biologically. It's so small, it works at the quantum level,” she said.

The scene around me crystallized, and I was standing once more in the room. The wallpaper design changed before my eyes.

“Hey!”

“What you see, is the image of the room we're in. We are really here, but you are seeing a virtual image of it.”

“But there's no difference.”

“Watch,” she said. The wall changed colour again.

We explored the room. To walk, I moved my calf muscles. Later, I was to learn to move my legs at the knees, and the program would move in any direction I desired. It soon became automatic. A turn of my torso, and my pseudo body turned left or right. It was like using roller skates. Walls were not transparent.

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To enter a room, I had to approach the door and use an access code. This ensured privacy, and, where necessary, secrecy.

“There are many places within the complex which are sealed,” Arna explained. “You shall be permitted access when you need it.”

“Do you have access to all the areas?” I asked.

“That is classified information,” Arna said. “When you are trained to work, you shall have access to all the areas you require.”

“What about the outside? Does this program let you walk on the surface?”

“No. The surface is monitored by our security guards. The ones who brought you and Mike into the complex. They are the only ones allowed outside. Once you enter the complex, you are never permitted to leave it. I thought they had told you that.”

I tore the glasses from my face and pulled the gloves off. “No. That’s impossible. You can’t keep us here!” I shouted, reaching for the patch at the back of my neck.

I felt the surface of the patch with my fingers, and the world slowed down. There was a peculiar sensation against the top of my spine. Had Arna done something to me? I slipped to the floor and the room faded away. I was deeply unconscious.

It was not her fault. My body reacted to the unpleasant information and the computer, sensing my stress, shut me down with an electronic jolt to the brain.

I woke hours later to a virtual reality world. I was lying in my bed, and would have accepted the illusion, but for one small detail - the walls were the wrong colour. There was an intensity that indicated “graphic” in everything I looked at. The human brain is still better at doing some things than any computer. For instance,

computers don't put floaters in the visual field, and I had one in my left eye. I looked at the ceiling. The annoying little spider had vanished. What I was seeing existed only in my head. I reached up with my hand and squeezed my index finger to my thumb. An "EDIT" field appeared in front of me. I moved my hand to "CLOSE" and flicked my finger. Everything went blank. I was blind - helpless. I tried to scream, but nothing happened. For a few moments, I panicked. Then I remembered what Arna had done, and closed my hands, placing them across my chest in the "Moon Goddess" position. The room - my real room - swam into focus. Arna was sitting by my bed.

"You're a smart boy," she said. "It usually takes a while for someone to work out that they've been wired."

"Why did you?" I demanded.

"It will help you to adjust," she said. "When you collapsed, it was a bad set-back. We nearly lost you, Danny. We didn't realise that you had such deep emotional problems. I had to move quickly to protect you from trauma. The interface we've implanted will help you."

"But you didn't ask me. You did it without my permission."

She had no answer to that, but mumbled that anyone should be proud to be interfaced with such a powerful computer.

I was well and truly bugged. Everything I did could be monitored. If I felt depressed, a counselor would appear within minutes and jolly me along. From this distance in time, it's hard to condemn their actions. They were concerned about my health and welfare. I must admit that I did feel better. I accepted, for the time being, that there was no way out of the museum. Mike and I were entombed, along with everyone else in that sealed, underground world. There were no exits to which we had access.

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It was a totally artificial world. Tunnels went everywhere, and they were usually painted military grey. Pipes for water, air conditioning, and electrical conduits ran along the walls or ceilings. Even though it was supposed to be a civilian installation, there was that background feeling that it was still under military control. For instance, there was the ongoing background noise of piped music, announcements, people being paged, and the never ending patrols by security teams.

Everyone was cordial and polite. A cross word would immediately be answered by a neutral reply, but later there would be the casual call to a counseling and reconciliation session. For a community sealed off from the real world, it had to be just so. There was no room for friction within the museum. If counseling failed, the miscreants would swiftly find themselves summoned before the curators for a swift pep-talk.

I was not obsessive about finding a way to the outside, but I did ask a lot of people. Counseling was inevitable.

Doc. Jagamarra was my counselor. I didn't mind talking to him. Although he was an adult, he looked strange, and that intrigued me. His skin was a deep brownish black, but he had blond hair. His face was so craggy, that it looked as if someone had carved it. His eyes held the wisdom of ages, and I believe he was the wisest man in the surviving world, not only because he had all the resources of the museum at his disposal and degrees in science and mathematics as well as medicine, but because he was the leader of the last surviving tribe from Central Australia.

“My people have lived here for Tens of Thousands of years, Danny. It is strange to think that we're now the guardians of the last outpost of nanotech civilization on Earth. Do you know how precious this place is?”

“I think so. If Omega hits, we'll be the only survivors.”

“If we’re lucky. There are no guarantees. There may be enormous earthquakes. If it lands directly on top of us, we won’t survive. But we think we have a good chance.”

“If the Omega project works, the asteroid will be blasted into space, won’t it?” I asked.

“Danny,” he said, “When you are older, you will learn much about the duplicity of politicians and world leaders before, during, and after the Chaos period. Their actions were shameful, greedy, and self-centered. This place, and the Omega project, was all part of the same gigantic lie.”

I looked at him, dumbfounded by his revelation.

“It’s got to work. It has to,” I protested.

“This place was built as a sort of Ark. The people who were supposed to come here were the elite. The politicians, world leaders, the rich and famous all bought themselves space under the desert. Here, because the rocks in this area are the oldest and most stable tectonic plates on the planet. This is an old, old land, Danny.”

“So why didn’t they come here, then.”

“Chaos. The system that the world had built up collapsed under the stress of knowing that it was mortal. People sold their shares in companies. The stock market collapsed. Too many rich and famous people wanted to get in on the survival act. There was sabotage, assassinations, war broke out. Germ warfare was used to stem the huge global population.”

“Exo.”

“Exo. It worked well. The real killer was a plant virus that destroyed grass. It was meant as an economic weapon. Most of the world’s population died of hunger. Rats became an

endangered species, and in many places, people turned to cannibalism to survive.”

“What about Omega?”

“An old space shuttle, well past its shelf life. An army of misfits putting it all together. That bird will never fly, Daniel. Omega was put where it is, in order to protect the museum. It has done its job very well. The Outsiders were held in check. Supplies got through. The general public - what was left of it - supported the project as a last ditch attempt to save humanity. Most of the supplies trucked to Omega Base ended up being sent on to here - where they would be used by the elite during their long underground funk out.”

He stood up to indicate that our long conversation was at an end.

“Stay with us, Daniel. They might succeed in blasting that ice moon to bits, but the news you’ve brought us makes it seem very unlikely. Stay with us, boy. Be a survivor. Don’t feel guilty about being alive and well off.”

“What if they attack us? They’ve got nuclear weapons to blast Omega back into space. They could crack us open any time they wanted to.”

He smiled at me and shook his head. “No. They don’t have the weapons grade material to arm the bombs, Danny. Our world leaders might have been inept, but they weren’t totally stupid,” he said, switching the room light off, on and off.

“It’s here. The reactors here are big enough.”

“Stay with us, Danny. We need every brain we can get. Forget the surface. They’re all finished up there.”

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“You should play with more of the other kids, Danny,” Mike said. He was putting on his ‘care-person’ role again. “They know all the lurks. If there is an exit that’s not guarded, the kids will know about it for sure.”

“You haven’t got a mother out there who’s a prisoner of Spicer. He’s mad. He could do anything. This is a gigantic funk hole to ride out whatever happens.”

“You know, Danny, The ones who organised this place never made it. They didn’t get here. It’s built to contain two thousand people, but it only holds three hundred. We - I mean, humans - could live down here for a thousand - ten thousand years.”

“I know. Jagamarra spent an hour telling me all about it. We’re safe here. I guess we should be grateful, but I’m not.”

“I don’t like it much, either, but there isn’t anything I can do about it right now, Danny. Just play it cool for a while, Kid. Something will turn up. It always does.”

He was right. At that time, I was too well monitored to be in any position to buck the system. I had to bide my time, curb my natural impatience, and submit to a benevolent authority that was killing me with care, concern, and kindness.

I immersed myself in my studies. My computer became my constant alter ego, and I mastered it with a rapidity that amazed Arna. While browsing the pseudo corridors and trying out doors in virtual reality, I managed to penetrate the security centre. The door should have been barred to my access. Perhaps it was left open to me on purpose. I shall never know. I stood before it in virtual mode and tapped my personal code into the lock. The door opened. I entered and found a bank of monitors that screened the complex. I could see all sorts of interesting rooms, such as the file room or staff conference room. Others were blocked to me.

Whenever I tried, I was told firmly: “Access Denied.”

The security centre was not often manned because the guards could do that job in the same way I was doing it - by remote V.R. I discovered the monitors that surveyed the outside world. My curiosity aroused, I indicated a screen with my gloved hand, only to find that the gesture opened a window which transported me to the top of a sand dune. I was able to explore virtual images of the surface by indicating any monitor. I soon discovered that I could program each screen to search as far as its cameras or sensors could see.

Whoever was monitoring me was asleep on the job. I commanded the computer to fix the location of the monitors in the command menu. Now, nothing could keep me out of that room once the location was fixed as a menu option, because I did not have to gain access through any door. I kept my discovery to myself.

Which was just as well, for events elsewhere caused the Curators considerable concern. Their monitoring of the surface increased, and my virtual excursions were eventually detected.

There was a gentle cough that came from behind. I turned around. The hard sand and gravel crunched beneath my feet. Arna was waiting behind me.

“Sprung,” I said, hoping to defuse a situation with a touch of humour.

“Very much so,” she said. “You’re taking up valuable monitoring space.”

“Want me to quit?” I asked.

“Actually, we want you to take a look at screen 507. We have intruders.”

I reached up and dialed 507. Arna latched on behind me. It was a rocky outcrop, overlooking the low stone ridges hiding the entrance. Two people in solar suits were surveying the outcrop carefully from their utility.

“Outside temperature is approaching fifty-eight degrees Celsius,” Arna said. “How do they stand it?”

“They’re outsiders, very tough,” I said smugly. “And I know them.” I said. One was tall and thin. the other small and wiry. “Chief Toran and Princess Tania of the Outsiders. What’s left of the Outsiders.”

“What do they want?”

“The Omegans scattered them - you remember. I told you at the debriefing. I’m glad they’ve survived. I like Tania. She’s sweet on Mike.”

“Why have they come here?”

“They’re looking for The Museum.”

“That is obvious. They won’t find us. There are no surface clues to the entrance,” she said. “I’ll have to consult with the Curators. You’d better come with me. I think they’ll want to talk to you. Ready to break off?”

“Yes”

“Then let’s do a tidy exit. Computer, close all files and exit.”

I must say she was a master operator. I felt myself fading slowly into a maze of colors and gently rising to the surface of reality as if awaking from a dream.

“Wow. That was great!” I said.

She was standing in front of me.

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“Are you mad at me?” I asked.

She smiled. “No. We detected your excursions but because they were virtual, we decided to let you have them. Call it therapy. Jagamarra thinks you’ll gradually wean off them.

I felt a flash of anger. “Never. I want my freedom. Mike does, too. You can’t keep us down here as prisoners. I want to find my mother and rescue her from General Spicer. He’s a rat. He wants to take over the world.”

“Danny...”

“He’ll do it, too. You don’t know how strong he is. He’ll get the Hydrogen bombs -”

“Danny...”

“the Star Busters. They can kick Comet Omega’s arse. They’ll crack this museum open like a nut. If Spicer gets them, he’ll use them.”

I raved on. Arna held me tightly until I was all played out. I stood trembling in her embrace. She waited patiently, until I calmed down.

“Are you all right now?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Sorry.”

She squatted in front of me, bringing her face to my level. I could smell her faint perfume. “You needn’t be ashamed of your feelings, Danny.” she said softly. “Come on. We’re keeping them waiting.”

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The curators were the members of the board elected to run the museum. The word “Curator” comes from museum terminology.

It is not surprising that such a group, cooped up underground for years in self-imposed imprisonment, would be ignorant of many things we take for granted - the smells of vegetation and the scents of flowers, the way shadows move during the day, the blast of hot wind on the face, the unpleasantness of sweat rash in the crotch, the gnawing pains of hunger.

Mike and I pleaded with them to allow Toran and Tania entry. The curators were strangely unmoved. They had their own isolationist logic, driven by fear. Jagamarra and Arna were the staunchest opponents of any plan to allow contact with the outside world.

Toran and Tania were to remain outside.

They searched in vain for the entrance. I watched them from my virtual world, a ghostly companion, unable to communicate with them in any way. Their supplies of water and food were dwindling. Water was their greatest problem. They needed it to maintain survival in that hellish temperature. The entrance to the Museum was brilliantly concealed under a small hill. Who on the outside could imagine the technology and power that hummed and throbbed thousands of meters below the ground?

Mike and I were cooped up together, but had drifted emotionally apart. We often avoided each other. Usually, I took to my little workshop to solder electronic components, while he disappeared into the communications facility.

Now, the events outside drew us together once more. We decided to take matters into our own hands. If we couldn't get out, perhaps there was a way for someone inside the complex to open the door and let someone outside - in.

We waited until Arna and Don were on duties that took them away from the apartment. I took the Pippin 2000 training set from Arna's drawer and showed Mike how to use it. He sat with me

and I patched him in to the jump which put us into virtual reality mode on the outside. Arna had closed the usual route, by locking the Monitoring Room's door.

“You've had all this power in your skull for weeks, and you didn't let me in on it?” he complained.

“You knew I was wired in. I was always complaining about it,” I said.

“Yes, but I didn't know it was like this. Am I patched in to you? Can I network?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

Mike started searching. He began with lists. Miles and miles of lists. I would never have searched that way. All my excursions were done in virtual mode. I had always looked for doors and vents, Mike searched for a data trail in operations manuals, original plans and specifications, and Lift Operating Manuals.

“You should have come to me with this problem ages ago,” he said as he consulted the Maintenance Manual on the access lift system. “Now this little program may do the trick.”

“What is it?”

“The original engineers had to check that the lifts worked correctly. The main access is not a simple process. All sorts of things can go wrong. I guessed they had a check program, and they did. I don't suppose anyone's looked at it for years.”

“But they keep the access secure with a security program. Nobody can work the lifts without clearance from the Curators.”

“Yeah. That's true, Danny, but the Janitor has to be able to sweep the floor. What I mean is, that in a system as powerful as this is, things can go wrong. There is a 5 million litre oil storage

tank to work the hydraulics. That system is powered by four pumping stations. Eighty percent of the Museum's power supply is used to work it. I don't think we can do it quietly, Danny."

"There must be a small lift. They wouldn't go to all that trouble just to let people go up and down."

"I can't find anything."

"List the lifts. Try 'Elevators' or something."

We tried for ages. Computers are brilliant, but they need to be driven. The information was available somewhere. We just had to find it.

It was 'Manual of Operations for Portal One'. We would have missed it except that I knew a 'Portal' was a 'Gate'. They say two heads are better than one. In the game of life, the Mike and Danny team had it made.

Portal One was accessed through the Security Area. We stood outside the main door to the compartment and requested access. It was denied. We looked at the roughly chiseled stone walls. Dust and dirt smeared itself on the floor, indicating that the whole area was seldom visited. It probably was used when we entered the complex, but that was weeks ago. Mike wrote "Clean Me!" in the dust on the door.

"Can you dig?" he asked.

"Not through solid rock," I admitted. "But I have an idea."

I switched myself into computer mode and virtually entered the computer monitoring station.

"Request Access." I stated.

"You are already inside." The computer said.

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“Then open the door.” I argued. “It isn’t logical to deny access to someone who is already inside.”

There was a long pause, while the computer ran this through its logic processors. The door opened with a compressed air hiss.

“One smart little brother,” Mike admitted. “Now, let us get out of here before some busy-body springs us.”

“But we’re almost there,” I protested.

“This is just reconnaissance, Danny. When we come back, we’ve got to be prepared.

It took us a day to get ready.. We had collected water in two litre bottles, and loaded a small trolley with useful gear - food, tools, and a set of f.m. radio transceivers. We decided to wear our U.N. Cadet overalls and caps for the mission.

“It’s possible that we won’t be back,” Mike said. “We need to be dressed for survival.”

“Everyone will look at us.”

“Oh, don’t be silly. People wander around here wearing anything. They’ll think we’re going to a party or something,” Mike assured me. Come on, Danny. Let’s get this show on the road.

He had added two mop buckets, some mops and a broom to the load on the cart, so it would look as if we were on a cleaning detail.

As we descended in the internal lift to the security area level, a security patrol joined us. They gave us a cursory glance.

“Been playing up?” one of them asked.

“We’ve just got to do a bit of cleaning and maintenance,” I said.

They left on the next floor. Moments later, we emerged from the lift and were standing in front of the steel door guarding the security section.

“Cleaning detail. Request access,” I asked.

The door hissed open.

“So much for hi-tech security,” Mike muttered.

“Don’t forget - we’ve been in before. It probably remembers us,” I said.

We walked through the deserted sentry post and found the lift. Above it was a simple label.

‘PORTAL ACCESS’

“Open Sesame!” I said, pressing the UP button. The door opened quietly. “Do your stuff, Mike.”

There was sufficient room for the two of us and the small library service cart. We left the broom, mops and buckets outside. The doors closed, and Mike commenced the test sequence, selecting Ascent, Upper Door Egress, and Surface Egress from a menu of possibilities. Our stomachs were dragged towards the floor, and the lift accelerated upwards.

Our front door was a huge granite boulder. The whole face was lifted by hydraulic rams, and this revealed the smooth concrete wall behind, on which a stainless steel logo declared: **“MUSEUM OF THE 20TH CENTURY”**. We knew that Toran and Tania had established a camp beneath some low scrubby bushes that helped disguise the entrance, and what they thought when their sleeping spot was shaken by the opening of the door, I’ll never know. Tania said that our arrival was “Dramatic”, and I’ll leave it at that.

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With raised hands, we greeted them. They stood in the harsh sunlight, squinting at us. I had forgotten that we would be arriving in the prime heat of the afternoon - Exterior temperature 55C. It was like being in an oven. I was glad we had brought the water. We offered it to them, then the food. They didn't say anything, but drank deeply and ate hungrily. It was a strange reunion. Tania grunted and patted Mike on the arm between gulps of food. Mike and I moved back into the shadow provided by the false front of the entrance.

"Stage one accomplished," Mike said. "Now what?"

"We can take them in with us," I suggested.

Mike walked over to Toran. "Do you have enough fuel and water to leave?" he asked.

"No. We have come with important information. The fate of the Museum may well rest with what I have to say," Toran said. "This is a United Nations facility. Isn't it?"

"U.N.E.S.C.O. built it. Security is maintained by U.N. Personnel." Mike said. "It isn't like Omega Base. I don't think our blue berets are warriors. They're all clerks and librarians around here. If you want to hit back at Spicer, these guys aren't the troops."

"I guessed that, Mike. The news I bring isn't good. I need to talk to whoever runs this place. Will you take us down to them?"

I nodded. Tania had finished eating. She grasped Toran firmly by the arm. "The Youwen - You said they were devils," she protested.

"They won't hurt you, Tania," Mike said. "You can leave your beamer in the entrance. I don't think they'll appreciate it if you enter the museum while armed."

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Toran nodded with agreement, so she placed the beamer against the wall. Mike closed the outer door. Several tonne of granite boulder slid into position to conceal the entrance. We entered the lift and it descended. Mike and I looked at each other.

“I didn’t order anything. They’re monitoring us,” he said.

“They’re bringing us down,” I replied. I could feel my heart racing. I wondered what sort of reception waited for us at the bottom of that long descent.

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Chapter Fourteen

Battle Front

Extracts from the memoirs of General Gillett

I've always told my men that I consider the following of orders to be the most important thing that any soldier can do.

I have always followed orders.

No matter what rank you achieve in life, there is always someone who carries more authority than you do.

My parents died when I was a baby. According to historical documents, they were massacred at the Adelaide Hills Refugee Camp. My family had fled there when order broke down in the city, but the camp was a hotbed of disorder, disease, and death.

Nobody knows why the army which was guarding us decided to kill everybody in the camp. Perhaps it was part of the global insanity that we now call "Chaos". Many think it was because of an outbreak of Exovirus. That deadly little bug was always cropping up. Adults were partly immune to it. They got sick, but most recovered. Children who caught it died. I'm speculating it was Exo. It might have been another virus altogether. So many were used during the chaos wars, that it's hard to pin down any particular infecting agent. They were all bad news. At any rate, our protectors took it into their heads to do away with us all. One morning, they opened up with everything they had. The camp was shot to pieces.

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Fortunately, there was a United Nations contingent stationed nearby, and they put a stop to the slaughter, but not before thousands of people, including my parents, had died.

I have often thought, in moments of fancy, that some tall, exotic figure, perhaps a black African man, dressed in camo' and wearing a baby blue helmet, strode through that dreadful carnage and heard the crying of an abandoned infant. I can picture him now, standing tall and erect, with a baby cradled in his arms.

My earliest real memory is of standing in line with dozens of other children waiting, bowl in hand, for ration biscuits. We were wearing Navy-blue coveralls, so I must have been in the military orphanage at Omega Base. Technically, we were cadets, so all of my life, I've been a soldier.

All my life, I've obeyed orders.

It was an ordered life, routine followed routine, day by day. We woke at six, sponged any dust off ourselves with second water, dressed in our coveralls, boots, sunglasses, sun-block and sky-blue kepi caps. Parade was followed by breakfast - survival biscuits and a drink of water. Stool, drill, school, drill, school, stool, and water ration. Then stand down at eleven a.m. until four p.m.

During stand down, we lay in our bunks and waited out the heat of the day. Some read, some wrote, some slept. some played quiet games. As the sun went down, we emerged from our shelters and played outside. By six p.m. we were ready for tea - two ration biscuits and the daily water ration.

Tea. It was the time of day I looked forward to most. It didn't take long to eat two biscuits and drink half a litre of water. We ate in a huge aircraft hangar that had been converted into a dining and recreation hall. Line after line of tables were filled with orphans. It was a grand nightly concert. There were films, solo acts, public

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address announcements, and games. We played on the huge tarmac outside, which was lit by gigantic tower lights.

Occasionally, there was an attack drill. We lined up and marched into shelters built beneath the base. As cadets, we were not armed and not expected to take part in real battles. It was a relatively happy time. People have asked me if I missed having a real childhood, missed having affection. I didn't miss affection. There was order. It was all we knew. There was also discipline. Until the revolution, there was always order and discipline.

Some scholars refer to the lack of affection in our lives. On second thoughts, I am wrong. Wrong. We did have affection. It came from the other cadets - older girls, and boys. They cared for us. As I grew older, I had my favorites amongst the younger ones. Some I liked more than others. We formed family groupings amongst our friends, and we cared for each other. The U.N. troops did their best for us, and so did the civilians, for the most part, although they had children of their own.

There was a fair share of bullying, rough justice, and injustice. Many of us were disturbed. Some were downright mentally ill, and a few were totally psychotic. We lived with bad memories, nightmares, bed wetting, explosive tempers, moodiness and depression. But we were alive. We were survivors. Even the bullies cared for us in their own way.

I remember my first hard lessons in obedience to orders. It was the custom to make defaulters attend "Saturday Morning Drill". Like most boys my age, I screwed up now and again. I forget the transgression that drew attention to my shortcomings, but I will never forget that first time on punishment:

The parade ground was stinking hot. The bitumen surface was melting, which made my boots stick. My thick, navy blue coveralls were a furnace. Lieutenant Spicer was in charge of the

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punishment detail. There were rumors about him. He was said to be a monster in human form. Some said he had taken a patrol of cadets into the desert and returned without them. Whether that was true or not, we were terrified of him.

The parade ground steamed beneath the brilliant, glaring sun. We ran, marched, drilled, and ran some more beneath that terrible sky. No water, no relief. Orders. More orders. Boys who collapsed were left where they lay. It was not the last time I would attend that little ceremony, but what made it special was that Spicer chose to make an example of me. Perhaps I should have feigned collapse, but I was a tough little nut. I wouldn't go down. Long after the other boys had been dismissed he tormented me. I had to do crab stands, squats, push-ups. We went on and on until the call for tea.

“Stand at attention,” he said.

I stood stiffly at attention. He walked away to the mess hall. I was alone on the parade ground. I didn't know what to do. Should I walk off and defy him? Tea was important. (We had little food as it was. To miss a meal was no small thing.)

It was a private thing, but I cried. Nobody could see me. I stood where I was, because I was too frightened to do otherwise. Overhead, the stars gleamed from a crystal clear sky. I was hungry, tired, and angry, but my mind was active, and in those stars I found a set of brilliant companions that kept me from boredom.

Much later, Spicer sent a cadet sergeant to tell me I could return to my dormitory. I had the feeling that I had won something. I don't know why I felt that way, but I did. Spicer expected me to rebel. That would have given him an excuse to punish me further. I wasn't so stupid that I would give him the satisfaction of giving me another session of Saturday morning drill.

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That didn't stop him. I became his off hours target. My attendance at punishment parades increased. There was always something - a crumpled bed, surly look (dumb insolence) or lateness to parade. I got used to nightly vigils.

After sunset, the parade ground is cool. Then it becomes cold - desert cold. We wore the navy blue drill overalls to protect us from the heat and Ultra-violet light during the day. It was so hot, that we usually wore nothing under them. To go from the heat of day to the cold of night was a painful, subtle, torture.

One night, his voice came unexpectedly from behind me:

“You're still here, Cadet Gillett?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I saw your head moving. What were you looking at?”

“Nemesis, Sir.”

“Ah. Of course. The doom moon. It will fall in its own good time. Then we'll all have a bloody good look. Until then, you'll keep your head still! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?!!”

“YES SIR!!!”

I had to stay there all night. He was a complete bastard.

He seemed to have found a new toy - me. Obedience. It chews up the time. Day follows day, day after day. My obedience was total. He called me, his “robot”. Gradually, I got older, tougher, stronger. Perhaps I no longer attracted him. He laid off his punishment gradually. I found myself being left alone. Spicer found younger kids to terrify.

I was promoted to corporal and schooled in the gentle art of running a section. When I became a cadet sergeant, the U.N. started to take notice of me. Things became distinctly better. We

were given special training. Once again, I was under the command of Captain Spicer.

“I want you cadets to understand the importance of discipline,” he said to our squad. “The cornerstone of discipline is obedience. Wouldn’t you agree, Cadet Sergeant Gillett?”

“Yes, SIR!” I said.

“Assume the push-up position, Gillett.”

I dropped on his command.

He placed his boot under my face. “Lick it clean,” he said. It was an illegal order. We both knew it. In moments like these, the mind works overtime - a sort of hyper speed. If I hesitated, he would have me, but if I did not obey ...

I pushed my tongue forward and moved my head down to lick his boot. Hating myself for being in this stupid position. Hating him for putting me in it.

He pulled his boot away as I went down. My tongue tasted the dust, and in my embarrassment, I fell face first into the dust. Everyone laughed.

I got to my feet and laughed at the joke along with everyone else. What else could I do? Inwardly, I was seething with rage. Spicer stood looking at me.

“Cadet Captain Gillett, always remember that some orders are difficult to obey. Some are unpleasant to obey, and some are impossible to obey. Nevertheless, you must obey them. The prime duty of any soldier is to obey orders.”

We stood in silence. He had our complete attention. My promotion to Cadet Captain had depended on his silly test. I had passed it to his satisfaction. Somewhere, I had heard of the

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expression “licky - kicky”. To get on, one must lick the boots of those climbing the ladder above, and kick the heads of those climbing up the ladder below.

His office was Spartan. I was surprised to see that every item in the room stood in perfect order. Every item on his desk was placed in lines and columns.

He was quite friendly: “I remember leaving a very angry little boy standing all alone on a darkening parade ground,” he said to me privately when he handed me my shoulder pips. “I gave him a hard time, and he took it.” He looked directly into my eyes. I could smell his sour breath, he was so close. “I thought you’d get scared and run off, but you always stayed at attention. Sometimes until well past midnight. Why? I’ll give you an order. Tell me the truth.”

“I was afraid,” I admitted.

“Afraid? Of the dark?”

“Of you, Sir.”

“Always remember, Captain Gillett. A well trained soldier will always be more frightened of his commanding officer than of the enemy who is trying to kill him.”

“Yes, Sir.” I said. “Thank you, Sir.”

He looked at me. I wasn’t at attention, but I was alert.

“Sir?” I asked.

“Yes?”

“Is it fear ... that stops a soldier from killing his commanding officer?”

He looked at me, startled. Then he burst out laughing.

“Gillett, you’ll be a Field Marshal one day. Now get out of here,” he said.

As I left the room, he was still chuckling.

I hated Spicer. But as I got older, I tolerated him better. He was a complex man, and with hindsight, I realise that he was insane. He was able to take a lot of people into his insane world, because the whole world was insane.

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Mary Blake was totally different. We all called her ‘Ma Blake’, but not to her face. She was always ‘Ma’am’ when we spoke to her.

I’ll go back to my early childhood. We graduated from the infant wards. I was seven years old. On the very first day I went to the Boys’ Dormitory, she was waiting to talk to us. We put our blankets and pillows onto the floor in neat piles, and lined up.

“I want you all to stand at attention so I know you’re listening to me,” she said.

We had seen the older cadets doing drill, so it wasn’t such a big deal standing at attention, at ease, easy, saluting. I’ve heard it said that children shouldn’t be raised like that, but they didn’t have much choice. The solution to mass childcare was - regimentation. We weren’t loveless brats. Mary gave us a lot of love in her own way.

I looked around. The dormitory was a long corrugated iron shed with steel frame. In shape it was a semi-cylinder. The beds were make-shift contraptions. Some boys had rectangles of rocks, mattresses stuffed with dry grass, and bedspreads made from patches of rags. The officers had steel beds and their own room.

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“If you work hard and become a sergeant, you’ll have a real bed,” she told us. We had just left the ‘real beds’ of our infancy behind us. The baby dorms were well equipped and staffed. U.N. nurses and orphanage personnel had taken care of us. Older cadets were assigned to help.

It was intensive care. We were coddled and loved. The idea was, that a healthy baby would grow into a healthy adult. When we were old enough, seven usually, we entered the U.N. Cadet Corps - The Military Orphanage. It was a savage break for seven year olds to make. They concentrated all the love stuff to the infants. At seven, you grew up and entered the real world.

Mary was our introduction to the real world. Planet Earth was in a mess. We had a radio-active comet fragment ready to fall from the sky and destroy everything that was left. The Omega project was being built - by hand and manual labor - to try and divert it. Elsewhere, humanity had been reduced to warring tribes trying to survive with little food or resources. One resource which the U.N. treasured in the hope that we’d survive to repopulate the planet was a refugee camp of five thousand children. Mary’s children.

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After the Omegan Revolution and the overthrow of the United Nations Corps, I was made an officer of the Omega Corps. My job was to guard prisoners. Our prison was the old “Bunyip Club”. From where I stood on the earth embankment surrounding that old powder magazine, I could watch Mary tending her miserable charges - the boys in the penal battalion. I was guarding them all- deserters, recalcitrants, criminals, politicals, and a few prisoners - of - war. My platoon stood around the top, beamers at the ready - ready for trouble.

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If I felt any sorrow, any conflict of interest, I suppressed it. Emotions do not win wars. To use useful troops to do the dangerous job of digging a trench towards the enemy is not good military logic. Such tasks are well within the capacity of prisoners. She was a traitor. The men with her were traitors. The boys were traitors. None of them deserved any mercy.

Every day, we marched them from the prison towards the front lines. Omega forces had surrounded Launchpad. Trenches had been dug to provide cover for the eventual assault. In the old times, troops in trenches would jump over the top and race towards the enemy. ATROS Robots do not miss, so such tactics could not be employed. To approach to within mortar range, trenches had to be dug through the tough, unyielding desert soil. Occasionally, a mortar from Launch Pad would be directed our way. Whoever was digging in the trench risked being killed. Fortunately, we did have some early warning, and prisoners doing the work were often able to take cover in side trenches. I have a personal account of life in the trenches, from one of the prisoners. I came across it in the archives a few years ago. I do not remember him, but he must have been one of my prisoners. I include it with these papers, as it seems relevant to this history:

EXTRACT: “A Brief History of Planet Earth”

An Account by Anthony Hall

Spicer tried to protect his trenches by making them zigzag towards Launch pad. Every ten metres or so, he had a deep hole dug, so that any grenades or mortars that fell into the trench would, in theory, roll into the hole and explode within, thereby preventing too much damage to his laborers.

Every morning, we woke before dawn and prepared for another day of hard digging. For breakfast, we had three ration biscuits

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and two glasses of water. We dressed in what remained of our coveralls, and covered any exposed areas of skin with a sun cream made from grease and ashes. We didn't know how effective it was in the long term, but it protected us from sunburn.

Mary organised our digging parties so that the adults and older children did the heaviest work, while we youngsters used wheelbarrows to carry the dirt back along the trenches to the entry points. We were not permitted to put the dirt on the edges of the trenches, for fear that such a move would give the game away and outline our position to Launch-pad's defenders. We dug and picked our way ever forward, until it became too hot for further work. Though Spicer was anxious to push the trenches forward at as fast a rate as could be borne, he was sensible enough to realise that any attempt to force us unreasonably, would be disastrous. The penal corps was small, and his forced labor units were valuable to him.

For our part, we worked as hard as we could. It wasn't that we had any enthusiasm for the trenches, far from it. Spicer had ways of making us redouble our efforts. Any boy too ill to work was tied, spread-eagled in the hot sun until we reached a quota that Spicer set. Not surprisingly, very few boys complained of illness. We managed to set up tasks within the magazine to keep the more frail boys occupied in ways that would satisfy the guards. One task was to get them sharpening the picks or touching up the blades of the shovels with files. If they could walk, they were set to carrying water to the digging parties.

Spicer's goons often paid us surprise visits to check on our progress. I was sleeping on a pile of sacks because the work had become too much for me, and I was exhausted. The other boys saw them coming, and tried to warn me. They were too late. I was discovered "shirking", which meant I was not working when I should have been. I looked around for Mary, but she was busy at

the head of the trench. They stripped my coveralls off and dragged me outside.

After a thorough beating, I was dragged to the top of a mound of earth. They tied me to a large pole, with my hands above my head, in full view of the boys working in the trench. My ankles were tied together, my bare feet were just touching the ground. They laughed as they left me there in the hot sun, suspended from my tied hands so that I could not move.

The sun blazed down, and I felt its burning power as my skin began to redden and blister. My only protection was a pair of briefs - underwear made of Hessian sack cloth. In the distance, I could see the huge vehicle assembly building, and the defensive walls of Launchpad. A hundred meters from the end of the trench, was a fully armed ATROS standing guard. I was in the open in plain view, yet it had not fired on me. I remember that I began to shiver in the heat.

Things became somewhat hazy, as the heat began to shut my body down. I felt urine dribbling down my legs, and realised that I wasn't able to control my most basic bodily functions. I stared into the setting sun, and felt the chill of evening wrap itself around my bones. My hands and arms were on fire with pain, and I remember screaming. The boys had left the trench and returned to the magazine. I saw Major Mary walk past with her face turned towards the ground. There was no way in which they could help me. The ATROS would kill anyone who approached the stake.

There was no moon, and darkness surrounded me. Overhead, the stars were brilliant, and I looked up at the Milky Way. My mouth was dry, and so were my eyes. I kept them open, for the lids shutting on dry eyeballs stung with a fire that I could hardly stand. I moaned, as much for self comfort as for anything else. The sound of my own voice was my only comfort. I prayed, as

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Mary had taught us. When there is no hope, there is always prayer.

The ground, in large lumps, rose up around me. I was surrounded by huge hillocks of dirt that grew upward like mushrooms.

“Easy lad, Keep quiet,” a voice said.

The lumps of ground broke open to reveal black and brown angels in camouflaged uniforms and painted faces. I looked at the two white eyes surrounding large black pupils, and fainted.

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The ATROS had saved me. Sometimes, the Automatic Targeting Robotic Sentries are taken off-line for service. The technicians had a fine view of me hanging on my post. Senior officers at Launch Pad decided that my treatment was – beyond the pale. I could have told them that, but they had a committee meeting about me, and sent a squad of their finest commandos to destroy the trench and rescue me in the darkness. I regained consciousness in a clean white room, inside Launch Pad, their medical centre.

Extract ends

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I was responsible for this incident, I remember it clearly. If there was a mistake, It was made by my junior officers and guards. A Commanding Officer must take responsibility for the misdeeds of his juniors.

I was awakened before dawn by an enormous explosion. One of the guards rushed into the room. He was carrying a lamp.

“Sir! Sir! Wake up!” he was shouting. His calls were not really necessary. The air was filled with dust, and I covered my face with a wet towel to prevent dust from choking me.

“Sir, four of the guards are dead. The prisoners have escaped,” he said.

“Get those windows closed,” I said. “Have we got dust masks?”

It didn’t take long before I restored order. The trench, that we had spent so many weeks building, had been sabotaged. The walls had caved in, and the once deep channel was filled with rubble. What was worse was that it was impossible to survey the damage without coming under the concentrated fire of three ATROS units that had been placed to overlook the ruins.

“It was a coordinated commando attack,” I said to Spicer as he surveyed the damage. “We had no indication that it would occur.”

He looked at me. His eyes were without emotion. “How many men were on duty?”

“Four, Sir.”

“In retrospect, do you think there were enough?”

“There has never been any trouble before. Four seemed adequate to ensure the prisoners were contained. We didn’t expect a surprise attack.”

“War craft one-oh-one,” he said carefully. “Good commanders always expect a surprise attack. It comes with the territory.”

“We have lost four men, and a trench. The enemy must have been aware of its existence for some time. Their attack was too well coordinated to have been a random act.”

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I expected a roasting at least, but he merely nodded and said, “Shit happens. Abandon this position. Make sure they see you leaving. Keep them entertained. I want their attention here.”

“May I ask – are we busy elsewhere?”

He tapped his nose. “You don’t need to know,” he said with a smile that unsettled me.

Spicer was most dangerous when he smiled. I should have seen the warning signs.

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Chapter Fifteen

A Desert Journey

Collected Papers of Princess Tania d'Toran

Rain had fallen across the desert which bloomed in brilliant hues of red, yellow, blue and violet paper daisies, hop plants, and spinifex. There were no grasses. Ancient roadways, which had been hidden in the dusty heat, were now revealed as compact earth tracks through the multi-coloured tracts of dry vegetation. The roadway to the South was well marked, but my father turned the pale blue U.N. pickup truck towards the East.

Danny and Mike stood on the back, holding tightly to the bar of the rear tray. Somewhere ahead of them, the Outsiders were camped in the hills. Toran knew where they would be found, but it could be a dangerous meeting for the two boys. They had no idea as to what awaited them. They could be received as friends and allies, or treated as deadly enemies.

It wasn't easy to get permission to leave The Museum. Toran was wise. He told the boys not to confront the Curators with demands or requests, but rather, to allow things to happen in their own time.

“You must be patient,” he advised. “Do not ask, for then they can say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and having said it, they feel they must stand by their decision and it will be hard to change once they have made up their minds. Rather wait for them to indicate they are ready to reach a decision, then encourage them to make the decision which you desire.”

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“That’s deep,” Mike said. “You really know your stuff, Toran,” Mike said. “I would never have thought of that.”

It was the wisdom of age. For years, my people had sat in the dust, watching strangers with their strange ways. The old people watched and studied them, then began to understand them and pass their knowledge on to the youngsters by way of stories and camp-fire yarns.

After a long, frustrating, time, the boys were summoned before the curators.

“We have decided to permit you access to the surface, so that you may contact the ‘Outsiders’. The people of Toran and Tania. You will be provided with a vehicle, fuel, tools, supplies, and a letter to their leaders.” Madame Chairman said.

“Thank you, Seniors. We are very proud that you have put your trust in us,” Mike said.

“You have planned this excursion for a long time. You placed your planning openly on the network system. It was not concealed in any way, in fact, you sought assistance from many researchers. Your project has been admired as a model of diligent research. Yet you have not requested us to make any decision about it. Why?”

“We thought that – if the project warranted approval – it would be brought to the surface under its own merit. A good project should not require lobbying. Humanity must be united once again, if it is to survive into the future.”

“On that, we are all agreed. Toran, as the elder of your people, are you willing to lead this expedition of contact on our behalf?”

“I have learnt much about you that I did not know before. We always thought of the Youwen as invaders – occupiers of our

sacred land, but I know this is not so. You have a mission. I would be very proud to act on your behalf, Head Librarian.”

There was a buzz from the other conservators, and they seemed to be taking a vote on it in their own way.

“Very well, we have decided. The project to contact the outsiders will proceed with Chief Toran in charge, accompanied by his daughter, Princess Tania, and the boys Michael and Daniel Blake.”

It was a momentous decision. After decades of isolation, concealed underground in the museum, the Librarians were moving to contact the surface once more.

I thought of all these things as we drove Eastward. Ahead of us, the mountains, rugged, dry, forbidding crags, rose up to challenge the sky with their brown dusty fingers. The recent rain had left its mark, and there was some moisture visible on the rocks, many of which oozed water. By mid day, it would all be dry again, as if the rain had never fallen at all. We camped by a ‘Gilgai’ – a waterhole created by rainfall into a natural depression.

The water was brown and muddy. Therefore, it was fit to drink. Outsiders know that muddy water is from fresh rain. Clear water has been lying still for some time, and is a great breeding solution for nasty tropical bugs such as Zhigella. I gathered cans of the water and passed it through ceramic filtration funnels. It came out clear, and bacteria free. It tasted good, too.

As night approached, we stopped to set up a camp site. Toran said we should camp in the open, without defences. There wasn’t much to defend against. Wild pigs and dogs were scarce. We were more likely to hunt them and they tended to keep away from mankind. Insects were a problem, but we covered our swags with netting. Even so, I had my Remington automatic by my side and felt secure.

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Danny and Mike collected wood for a fire. As the sun was setting, the evening became cooler, dropping below forty degrees Celsius for the night. They removed their sun suits and ran about in brief shorts, ignoring the small cuts and scratches that the spiky vegetation placed on their skin. They found some old wood charcoal and decorated their faces and bodies with black and grey so as to look like savages from the story books they'd read in The Museum. As for me, I found some thin plant fibres and plaited a wrist band, adorned with tiny white flowers.

We sat around the fire watching the tiny orange embers flying off into the darkness as if on urgent business. Above us, the thin crescent of waning moon headed towards the horizon, allowing the brilliance of the stars to glorify the night sky above us. In the night's total darkness, the Milky way stood iridescent and proud across the firmament, almost teasing us with its splendour.

“Oh dying race
You could be here,
But chose the path of greed.
So pass away anonymously
You are a failed breed.
Some other species will arise
To dominate your realm.
You shall become as fossils
And never take the helm
Of ships that sail amongst the stars
And take the rightful place

Of creatures wiser far than you

In that far realm – deep space.”

It was a sad poem, in doggerel style, that I came upon during my long sojourns in the Library. The Library – that magical place which documented the long record of humanity’s rise and fall. What were we now? An endangered species dying of radiation poisoning and uncontrolled illness on some minor speck of dust in the farthest reach of the galaxy. Perhaps it was always our goal – to die out like the ancient dinosaurs.

Danny poked the fire, sending up more sparks. I caught his eye and he grinned at me. Toran twisted his fire stick, roasting the large insect larvae he had stripped from a dried out twig of wattle. He placed it in his mouth, sucking the hot sweet morsel so that a tiny squirt of juice trickled down his chin.

“This is heaven,” he said. “Life as it should be.”

“Abandon technology altogether, and live as the ancient tribes?” Mike asked.

“That’s what we tried to do,” Toran said.

“Didn’t stop you fighting each other,” Mike countered. “I think humans are born to fight. There’s always someone who wants a longer spear or stronger bow.” He sipped hot tea from his metal cup. “But I agree with you. Life should be happy and simple.”

“Ah. I think I have a convert. The stone age was the peak of human civilization. When the first copper knife appeared, it was downhill all the way. The descent into the darkness of civilization.”

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At first, I thought that what I'd seen on the distant mountains was an ember, but it was far too still. "We have company." I said, pointing to the distant flickering fire.

"They are a long way off," Toran said. "Tomorrow, we will head towards them. I have no doubt they will be coming towards us."

"We could flash them with our lasers," Danny said.

"No," Toran decided. "That might encourage them to ambush us. We are not here for conflict."

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When we woke after an uneventful night, we packed the camping gear neatly and loaded it onto the truck. The fire was extinguished and buried. Toran even brushed the surface of the ground with branches to hide our tracks. I never questioned why my father did things. He had some reason to hide our presence, but it didn't seem logical to go through all the actions when we were probably under observation anyway. Whoever had the camp fire on the mountain must have seen us. They weren't trying to hide from us.

Before long, we were on the track heading East. Toran let Mike drive. I stood in the back with Danny. We were looking ahead at the indistinct track, tapping on the cabin roof for changes in direction. We had to stop to clear debris from the twin tracks that marked the road. There is a technique for driving along dusty desert roads without raising a huge cloud of dust behind. Mike more or less allowed the vehicle to roll without acceleration. By looking at the lack of a dust cloud through the rear window, he could tell when he was driving efficiently.

My father was an excellent tutor. He used to tell me about the 'old days' before chaos, when the roads were safe and he could

travel for hours, or days between the many small towns of the outback. They were gone – looted for building materials and anything useful, marked only by rotting fence-lines, foundations of buildings, overgrown roads or drifting sands. In many places, only the silent bones of the former inhabitants remained as there was nobody to bury the dead.

“How did we survive?” I asked him once.

“We are so far from anywhere,” he had said. “I suppose those who designed humanity’s death didn’t think we were important enough.”

We slowed down as we approached the gap between the hills. A log placed across the road was the signal that we should stop. A human skull was placed on a stake beside the log.

Toran climbed from the cabin. “We should get out of the vehicle here,” he said. He took a pole from the back of the truck and placed a white cloth on the top of it. It fluttered in the slight breeze. It was the universal sign to all desert people and outsiders. “We come in peace.”

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From: “Collected Papers” Of General Gillet

Garradan often discussed things with me, and grew to trust my advice. For an outsider, he was smarter than most, stronger, too, which made him their natural leader. He probably thought that I was a young, ambitious pup, devoid of anything but self interest. Yet this is not always so. One reason for being self-interested is often the major one of survival.

I could have stuck by my principles, declared myself as a U.N. supporter, and rotted away in the penal battalion digging useless ditches and earthen siege works. But I declared for Omega. It

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wasn't that I liked Spicer. I didn't. He was power hungry – king of a very small kingdom. He was also stark staring mad.

I knew that, even before I saw what he was doing to the boys in the Penal Battalion. He was starving them, and working them to death, slowly.

When Launch Pad troops rescued them, I was relieved. I didn't have to stand guard with my company and do Spicer's dirty work. Not that type of dirty work at any rate. Mary had escaped with the rest.

The whole of my company had to pay for the failure in security, and I was the prime target of his aggression. I thought he had forgiven us. He had even brushed it off, saying "Shit happens." I should have known better.

The next day, he had a mood change. He was raving. "You should replace the prisoners who escaped," he said, ranting and raving. Spittle drooled from his mouth and much of it sprayed on me.

"Four of my company died in their attack," I said. "They were taken by surprise."

"Those who did not die may well wish they had!" he screamed. "Four days of Field Punishment Number-one." He said. That meant being tied to a stake in the blazing sun with no food or water for four days.

"The cadets will die after two," I said.

"You are included," he said with an evil smile. "You always were far too close to that woman. Treated you as a son, did she? Is that why you let her go?"

"Sir, I had nothing to do with her escape," I said desperately.

My pleas were to no avail. Spicer lived on the suffering of others. It sustained him. His insanity fed on it. Twenty-six posts were set in the ground, and we were backed against them. Our hands were fastened behind the posts with nylon cord. We weren't going anywhere. He didn't even leave guards to supervise us.

The day promised to be stinking hot, and it was. We perspired. In the extremes of heat, perspiration seeped through our clothing, leaving white lines of drying salt on the navy-blue coveralls. Our eyes began to sting in the dry wind, and the saliva in our mouths dried to thick mucous. I got cramps, and I began to shiver in the heat.

As the afternoon began to turn to evening, Spicer arrived with another company of cadets. He stood watching us for a while, enjoying himself. Then he addressed us, almost condescendingly. "You are lucky. I have decided to forgive your carelessness. I have a duty for you, Sergeant Gillet. You and your company are to go into the desert and make contact with the Outsiders.

"There is a very good chance that they will shoot you on sight. They may eat you. They may not, and you could survive. Should that happen, you will tell them that we will not hold old grudges. We seek peace with them. We want them as allies. They will want a gift.

"What?" I asked briefly. My mouth was so dry I could hardly talk.

"You – and your company of gadabouts - are my gift to them. They can use you as laborers, or soldiers, or whatever they want. It's been done before."

I nodded in agreement. It wasn't the time to argue. If I refused his offer, he would simply walk away and leave us all to die of exposure.

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“You agree. Very sensible.” He turned to his company. “Cut them down. Help them to the barracks and see they are cleaned, watered, and fed.” He turned to me. “In the morning, you will parade your company ready for departure at 0900 hours,” he said.

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So it was, that I walked with my company, unarmed and unprotected, into the rocky hills that were known to hold the communities of outlanders. I carried a stick with a white flag, and a message addressed to the leader of the tribes, whoever that might be.

We reached the area that had once been their camp, before they had been attacked by our troops. I remember the slaughter that had taken place there. The area was vacant – a rocky widening of the valley where once a river ran. There was a particularly large hole which had been worn down by a large stone. I looked into it, surprised to find there was water in the bottom. Somehow, the hole was the entry to a buried stream. The water was flowing. It looked clean. We filled our canteens.

“People used to live here,” Jody Hazlet said, tugging at my sleeve. “Look – plants.”

It was true. Many of the plants that the outsiders grew had survived – probably because of the underground water supply, and the fact that they were shaded from the heat for much of the day by the high stone walls. We found pumpkins, tomatoes, and onions – set out in orderly lines. The gardens had been deserted, but that didn’t stop the plants from growing.

“They dug caves into the cliffs. That’s where they must have lived,” Gordon Watson said. He pointed upwards, and we went exploring.

“We could live here for a long time, and nobody would know,” I said.

Maybe it would be best. I’m sure the Outsiders will come back

“We’re supposed to meet the outsiders,” Brian Thompson said. “That’s what our duty is – to do what we’re told.”

“We don’t know where the outsiders are,” I said. “They could be anywhere. They probably come here now and then to check up on this place. Our best chance of meeting them, is to stay here and wait for them to come to us.”

“I hate the caps,” Jody said. “And I hate Spicer. I’d rather stay here.”

“Who else hates Spicer?” I asked. The boys didn’t seem at all anxious to own up, but one by one their hands were raised. Finally, I raised my hand and we all cheered and danced about like wild things.

“He busted you back to sergeant,” Brian said, “But out here that means squat. You’re our leader now. Captain.”

In the eyes of the boys, I was firmly re-instated as their leader. It made me feel scared, proud, and humble at the same time.

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At that time, there lived an old woman who roamed the hills. Her tribe had named her Mad Marralin. She was a solitary figure, distraught that her only son had been executed in the Arena of Sorrows. We became aware of her presence when night sentries spotted her visiting a particular spot to lay flowers. We did not challenge her, but decided instead to allow her to see two observers, placed in plain sight, but with orders to do nothing that might scare her away.

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Randal was one of the smallest boys in our company. He was on duty when Mad Marralin approached him. He followed orders and said nothing.

“You look like my Tomas,” she said, putting her arm out to touch his face. The boy did not scare easily. He reached his hand out slowly and let her touch it.

“Tell me about Tomas,” he said.

“They killed him. He was only a child – hungry. He stole from the granary, so they hanged him – over there. He took a long time to die.”

“That’s sad,” Randal said. “People can be very cruel.”

She looked at him in the moonlight and sat beside him. “My name is Marralin,” she said.

“My name is Randal. I’m very pleased to meet you, Marralin. My friends would like to talk to you. We are strangers in this place. We have just come here.”

“I watched you come.”

“We need your help,” Randal said. “You know much more about the valley than we do. You can help us live here – away from those who were cruel to us.”

“Don’t worry, love,” she said, putting her arm around Randal’s shoulders. “I might be mad, but I’m not stupid. Tell your friends that I will help them. We will build our homes here again, as they were once before.”

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Within a week, things were very much better in the valley. We were able to repair a lot of the damage that had been done to the water supply. We established the garden once again, and cleaned

out enough caves for our company. More people returned to the valley from outlying areas, and we became an appreciated minority, willing workers within the community of outsiders.

There was a general feeling of excitement running throughout the community. Marralin told us that we had received a summons – from the chief of the outsiders, Garradan. He was reputed to be a ferocious warrior.

Our platoon packed for a long journey on foot. Sigmund was to be our guide. He wasn't much older than us, but dressed in a hide that was rather ancient, and carrying a long bow and leather water bags, he looked very strong and athletic. It was like being led into the desert by an Indian brave from the books about long ago.

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Memories of Contact

(From the private papers of Michael Blake-Anvell)

I recognised Garradan at once, as he recognised me. There was no hostility in his eyes, merely curiosity.

“Michael,” he said, then looked at our group more closely, “And Daniel. I never expected to see either of you again. Where is your dog?”

“They marooned us on the Great Salt Lake,” I said. “Scamper died. Somehow, we survived.”

“How?” he asked.

“The Librarians found us. The Youwen – real ones.”

He nodded wisely, and walked towards Toran. It was a tense moment, for I thought they might fight, but they clasped each other around the shoulders like long lost brothers, and shed tears of joy at their meeting.

“Well met, well met,” he said, and held his hand out to me. I wasn’t sure if he wanted to hug me, too, but he merely shook hands, and I felt in his grip, something that men often share during such meetings – friendship.

It was easy to drive to the hidden camp, because now we had a load of passengers in the rear tray of the truck. They were able to remove any rocks or logs across the road, and replace them when we passed. I presumed they would assume ownership of the vehicle. It was in excellent condition, much better than the old truck that Toran and Tania used to get to The Library.

Finally, we arrived at their main camp. It was in a cleft between two hilly ranges that had been carved through the rocks by old

river systems. It wasn't the site of the village that unnerved me, so much as the sight of boys in navy blue coveralls and black kepi caps. Omega forces were present.

Danny squeezed my hand and pointed to one of the boys. "It's Gillett," he said.

"They're only cadets," I reminded him, but I felt uneasy nevertheless.

We unloaded the boxes that the Librarians had prepared. They contained useful trade goods: knives, grinding wheels, magnifying glasses for fire lighting, belt buckles, books on survival living, weaving, pottery, and crafts. There were no gadgets or electronic, just really useful things. The Librarians had really put a lot of thought into the trade goods. There was nothing that would grate against the outsiders ideas of returning to a clean, green, pristine society without technology.

He walked over to us, as if to speak, but I pushed a box into his hands and pointed to where they were being stacked. I picked up another box and walked behind him. He put it on the stack neatly, turned and took mine, placed it on the stack and looked at me.

"How are you, Michael?"

"I'm good, Andrew. What are you doing here?"

"Spicer sent our company as a gift to the Outsiders. I gave his note to Garradan, who rolled it into a ball and threw it into the fire. He asked me if we wanted to join him, or would we prefer to leave. We joined up."

"Why would Spicer want to give you to the outsiders?" I asked.

"He wants Garradan and the outsiders to join him in an assault against Launchpad. We are his gift to him. He's given us our

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freedom – to join him, or leave. By the way, your mum’s safe. She’s at Launchpad with John, and the ex prisoners.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“We were supposed to be guarding them in the penal battalion. Launchpad troops rescued them in a commando raid. We stuffed up. We should have fought back.”

“So?”

“Spicer wasn’t happy. That’s why we’re here.”

He offered me his hand, and I shook it. “Well met, Andrew,” I said.

“Well met,” he replied in a slightly hoarse voice. He looked at Danny. “You’ve grown,” he said.

Danny offered his hand, and Gillett shook it.

“Well met, Andrew,” Danny said.

There was something new in Danny’s tone of voice. It was strong, mature, and lacked any trace of childishness. My little brother had grown up, and I hadn’t noticed.

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Chapter Sixteen

Friends and Allies

From: “Chronicles of New Earth” Mary Blake.

The crunch of an artillery shell exploding is often followed by the whistle of it arriving. That’s because the sound waves reach the ear in reverse chronological order. We knew the Omega forces had procured new weapons, large scale howitzers that the Outsiders had once used when attacking us.

We could see them massed in battle order, just beyond the range of our weapons. Omega forces, and Outsiders, joined to defeat us. What an ungodly alliance, I thought.

Commander Hayes had organised the Marines in defensive position, where they could act as snipers. Mostly, we depended on the Atros robots for close defence, but the howitzers could neutralize them. Many of the boys wanted to watch, but I sent them to the security of the basement. John had recovered from the long period of imprisonment and Hayes appointed him as staff coordinator. It wasn’t hard for him to annul the charges against us. Once he heard our side of what had happened, he accepted our story without hesitation. He knew Spicer was a nut.

His commission came directly through the former U.S. command, so he wasn’t responsible to Spicer in any way. As far as he was concerned, his duty was to prepare the shuttle for space, and that was what he was doing. Anything else was a distraction from his task.

When Spicer created the Omega corps, and demanded that Launchpad be handed over to Omegan forces, he had directed his men to seal the complex off, and deployed Automatic Targeting

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Robotic Sentries, the Atros units, to prevent any incursions, and deployed the marines to prevent any attempt to take the facility by force.

Our rescue was timely, as far as he was concerned. Launchpad was short of manpower, as many of the workers had to be used in defensive roles. He asked how many of the boys were fit enough to be employed on the tasks of preparing the shuttle. Most of them were malnourished, and some suffering from severe illnesses. I had looked in on Anthony, the young boy who had been staked out to die of exposure for not working. He was recovering well, and was quite cheerful. “You know I couldn’t help you?” I asked.

“When I saw you walk past me, looking down, I felt sorry for you, and all the other boys. I knew you felt pretty helpless, and I was sorry to be causing you all so much sorrow, because you couldn’t help me.” He said.

I hugged him, and he smiled up at me. “Get well, Anthony. Launchpad needs you,” I said.

The boys didn’t have to work, but they chose to help in all sort of ways, cleaning, fetching and carrying, polishing components, cooking and doing delicate repair work to the circuitry. Doctor Humboldt was very pleased with their capacity to do micro-electronics. Many of the components were so ancient, they didn’t work, so the boys used lathes to grind small resistors and wrap new capacitors using re-cycled materials. Then there was the task of re-calibrating their work. They became surprisingly accurate and delicate. “Small hands, and sharp eyes,” Humboldt had said, examining their work.

He was holding a small circuit board that would be part of the fuel injection controller. It replaced a tiny chip that had burnt out. The boy who had wired it looked up at me. I didn’t recognise him

at first, in his white plastic overalls and cap. Then I realised – it was Anthony.

“Hello, Ma’am,” he said.

“Beautiful work,” Humboldt said, passing the card to me. I looked at it and handed it back.

“Well done, Tony,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. He looked up at me and beamed a smile that I will always remember.

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The besieging army of Omegans and Outsiders had dug into their positions, with trenches that made the job of military snipers quite difficult. I was able to view many of the positions through a telescope that had been owned by the son of one of the engineers. He had outgrown it, but it was useful in our situation.

To the rear of the besiegers, set apart, was a white truck with the blue ‘U.N.’ insignia clearly displayed on its side. It looked to be in very good condition, much better than most of the vehicles used by either Omega or Launchpad forces. There was a tent, with some human movement, but too far away to be seen clearly. Two figures moved about frequently. They weren’t wearing outsider type clothing, or coveralls. I recognised the garments as being sun-suits made from reflective plastic. They were silver and blue. A reflection from one of the figures made me realise it was someone with field glasses. They never moved forward to be with the besiegers, and I wondered if they were some form of observers. Omegans in their navy blue coveralls moved back and forward between the tent and their army, so some form of transaction was occurring, but none of us could see clearly what was happening.

A wooden structure was being erected in plain sight of launchpad’s defenders. It was a platform with a high bar crossing

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it, and a set of steps up one side. I wondered what it was. John came up to the viewing area and looked at it carefully. “It’s a gallows” he pronounced.

The snipers had not paid much attention to the construction, because they could see that those involved in making it were boys. The men who directed their labour were kept under the cover of the trenches and the mounds of soil placed in front of them.

John’s pronouncement was verified when they erected a central lever, and the front of the gallows dropped down. The Omegan forces then tried out their new toy with some bags filled with sand. I recognised Andrew Gillet and members of his platoon as they each carried a sandbag onto the platform, tied them with nooses, then stepped back while Andrew pulled the lever. The bags dropped quivering on the end of their ropes.

If this display was intended to frighten us, it had its effect.

“What does Spicer think he’s up to?” Hayes said with irritation. “Does he intend to take this facility then hang us?”

“Spicer could do anything,” I said. “Don’t expect him to behave rationally.”

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Extract:

From the personal papers of

Michael Blake-Anvell.

Danny and I told Toran that we could not take part in the siege of Launchpad, but he insisted that we should attend, even if we did

stay out of it. We drove to the battlefield, set our truck well to the rear, and rigged a tent for our comfort. That was where we stayed, and where we watched what was happening. Tania stayed with us. As the tribe's princess, she was not required to enter combat.

Garradan had joined the Omega forces for several reasons. The religious one was that Launchpad was the centre of technology and therefore the great realm of Satan, who hated science and progress. Satan obviously turned a blind eye to artillery pieces and modern weapons. Outsiders were permitted to arm themselves with Remington blasters. But that was different. Our truck was also permitted, but had to stay at the rear with us.

His second reason was that Spicer was his younger brother, and he was tribally bound to support him. Family ties and all that. Danny and I both understood family obligations. Ours were complex enough.

The third reason was, that he expected the Omegans to win, and there is nothing quite like being on the winning side. Launchpad had tons of rations and supplies that would be extremely useful. Of course, he would have to share them with the Omegan faction, but this was fair, especially if they would do most of the fighting.

The fourth reason was that Spicer had sent him Andrew Gillet and his company as a gift. They belonged to him, and he could do what he liked with them. I'm not sure Andrew really understood where he was in the pecking order of the Outsiders, but my guess was – he was the chook food.

As far as Garradan was concerned, the battle was a win-win situation for him all round.

When Spicer asked him to get a gallows built, and to have Andrew and his company provide the labour, the war chief had no hesitation. A gallows was built, assembled and dis-assembled, then taken to where Launchpad's defenders could have a front row

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view of the contraption at work. Andrew's company was now in the front line.

While we were sleeping, Garradan's lieutenants entered the tent and took us prisoner. We were gagged, hogtied, and carried off - helpless to do anything about it. Our next shock was to be dumped onto the carpeted floor of Spicer's command tent.

"Here are the boys you wanted, brother," Garradan said.

"So you broke the tribe's laws after all, I knew you had it in you. These boys will ensure our success," he said, removing our gags gloatingly. "Lazarus one and Lazarus two," he said. "I never thought I'd see either of you alive again. You must have charmed lives."

"Enjoying yourself, you maggot eaten piece of dog-shit?" Danny asked.

Spicer leant down to Danny's face. "What did you expect, little boy, a birthday party? I should kick the shit out of you, but I don't want to spoil our little celebration tomorrow."

"What are you going to do to us?" I asked.

"We're going to have us an old fashioned neck-tie party, and you and your brother are to be the stars. We hope your mother will attend, and her boy-friend."

We were removed from the tent and made to kneel against stakes driven into the ground. They were passed between our legs and in front of our hands. Then they pulled our legs back, and we were immediately pulled into the most painful position I have ever been in, lying on our stomachs, with our hands and feet high above us so our spines were curved and our heads unable to touch the ground.

“This is called ‘Satan’s Crossbow’” Spicer told us. “Hurts, doesn’t it?”

I groaned. My arms were on fire, and my hands and feet screamed with the pain. Danny began to scream. Spicer replaced our gags, so our voices were quite muffled.

“I can’t stand noisy boys,” he said.

It was a terrible night. We waited for the dawn, unable to move, and in great pain. Spicer wanted to break us as quickly as possible. He succeeded. We were physical, and emotional wrecks when they took us off the stakes in the morning.

“Please, Don’t kill us,” I sobbed. I was pleading to Spicer for my life. My worst enemy was enjoying himself immensely. It was all to no avail. They untied our feet and walked us, doubled over with the pain, through the ranks of the waiting outsiders, to the gallows.

We climbed the steps and stood on the drop. There was a problem. Someone had removed the lever for the hangman to work the mechanism. Immediately, there was consternation.

“Who did this?” Spicer demanded. Nobody owned up.

The lever merely pushed a piece of wood forward, undoing the latch that supported the drop. There was a large sledge-hammer left at the back of the gallows by a careless worker. Spicer picked it up. “This will do the job,” he said, swinging it like a golf club.

Danny and I stood side by side on the drop, facing Launchpad. My mother would see us die. Andrew Gillett had been told to walk to the facility holding a white flag of truce. If Mary Blake and John Colson wished, they could come forward and take our places.

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It was a totally cruel offer – typical of the madman who held our lives in our hands.

We waited, and we waited. The sun rose higher, and higher. The suspense was unbearable, but then I saw Andrew walking back from Launchpad with Mary and John. I couldn't believe it. They had given in to him.

Outsiders seized them and tied their hands behind their backs. Andrew led them up the steps to the scaffold drop. Five members of his company – all big boys – came with him. They positioned them in a line with us. Each of us had a minder standing behind to ensure things went smoothly.”

“You promised you'd release the boys if we surrendered to you,” Mum said.

“I lied,” Spicer said, poking her with the sledge hammer.

“At least let me hug them one last time before you murder us,” she asked.

“No. The sooner this is done, the better for all of us.”

“May you rot in hell,” John said quietly.

“That will be some time away,” Spicer said. He looked around. Garradan came up the stairs and joined him.

“Let the boy drop them,” he said, indicating Andrew Gillett.

“What a good idea,” Spicer said, handing the sledge hammer to the young cadet. Andrew took it and gave a practice swing towards the block. Then he took his position firmly and placed the huge hammer over his shoulder.

Garradan nodded to him.

“They’re watching us,” Andrew said, indicating Launchpad with his head.

Spicer looked up at the great vehicle assembly building as Andrew began his fatal swing. He stepped forward and buried the huge hammer right in the back of Spicer’s skull. There was a crunching noise, and I felt myself being pulled backwards. My mind seized me and hauled me to safety.

There was a shout of delight from the Outsiders thronging around the front of the gallows. Spicer was hauled to his feet. Garradan placed a noose around his neck below his shattered skull and kicked the latch with his booted foot. Spicer dropped into eternity.

Andrew released the noose around my neck and held me tightly. “Sorry for the grief,” he said.

“You’re forgiven,” I muttered.

Danny and I were released, and joined Mum and John as we watched the Outsiders dancing in glee beneath us.

“What the hell has happened?” John asked.

Garradan held his hand out and John took it.

“I believe it is called a military coup,” Garradan said. He took something from his breast where it had been concealed. It was a flag – a blue flag - A large U.N. blue Flag. So that Launchpad knew without a doubt what was happening, he unfurled it and waved it about proudly.

Below us, the outsiders were busily disarming the Omegan soldiers, most of whom seemed to have lost interest in the proceedings. Most of them were bare headed, having ‘lost’ their black caps in the melee.

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I turned to Garradan. “I thought you had sold us out,” I said.

“You were supposed to think that. Andrew and I thought up this plan. It didn’t matter if he could get the sledge hammer or not,” he said, drawing out his battle knife. “If it didn’t work, my brother was due to die at my hands. He was insane. He brought us nothing but dishonour. It was his time.”

“Can we end all this killing?” I asked.

He nodded. “It is time for that, too,” he said. His knife was sharp, and he cut a noose from one of the ropes, and handed it to Mum. She took it and looked at him slightly puzzled. “This is repayment for what you did to me in the Arena,” he said.

She laughed embarrassed, and reached forward to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheeks. “Best move I ever made,” she said.

The End