

Chapter I - Jayrock

Planet Grebros

Jayrock Petrolons was startled by a loud rap on the table. As he looked up, Major Stonyx retracted the deep-saffron rock she had materialized on her knuckles.

"If you're quite ready, Captain Petrolons... I suppose you have had ample time to stare at your lap." Major Stonyx's husky voice grated against Jayrock's ears. "So, how did it come to you shooting your own comrade?"

A lean old woman with a firm face, graying hair, and slender claws for hands, Major Stonyx would have hardly looked any different if she were a corpse.

Jayrock absentmindedly shifted in his chair. Where to even begin? "We were at the amusement park, getting everyone evacuated. The bomb was ticking — there was no telling how much time we had. The terrorist was still somewhere in there. And" — Jayrock sighed — "we had no idea which ride was rigged."

"Understand that it is your right not to testify against yourself," the attorney, whose name Jayrock didn't remember, chimed in, half-mumbling into Jayrock's ear, half-announcing to everyone present. I understand enough, thank you very much, thought Jayrock.

From the head of the table to Jayrock's right, Colonel Sandywick leaned in toward him. "Also, understand that your comrades, who happened to see you shooting the young lad in the face, have every right to testify against you."

Colonel Sandywick was here representing the prosecution. Tall, stout, and with a downturned mouth, Colonel Sandywick had never looked so pleased with himself as he looked today — he was here to make sure Jayrock went out of the room with a fate worse than death.

"I do say I personally would prefer their version if you are not feeling up to it," Sandywick was saying.

They were seated at a long, heavyset table in a round, subterranean room with glass walls. The jagged bedrock, out of which the space was carved, was visible through the walls. The room was well-lit, courtesy of a large, domed skylight and a bright sun shining over planet Grebros. It was part of Fort Pedralt, a sprawling, underground Grebrik army headquarters carved into the foothills of Mount Pedralto.

The attorney was next to Jayrock while across the table were seated Major Stonyx and Major Kubbles, a pale, balding man with eyes so blue, they gave Jayrock the shivers. Both had notepads lying open in front.

Jayrock supposed he did not look bereaved enough. Out of habit, he had neatly combed his short, light-brown hair, which went along with his brown eyes and framed his square face. He was dressed immaculately in his service uniform — a teal coat, a starched white dress shirt, and sandy-brown trousers. His polished, black dress shoes gleamed in the sunlight.

No one saw me shoot him, you old fool, Jayrock thought. I told them. "That won't be necessary, Colonel Sandywick. I did come here with the absolute intention of providing a complete account," responded Jayrock noncommittally.

"Excellent. Continue."

Jayrock took a deep breath. He was back at the amusement park. The night sky was visible unimpeded since the park was one of the few places on Grebros built on the planet's

surface. Most of the infrastructure was found in underground cities covered with massive, transparent domes to escape the extreme, arid conditions on the surface of Grebros.

Jayrock wore his battledress with its teal jacket, matching cargo pants, and white vest. His black combat boots clacked against the concrete as he rushed along the avenue at the entrance, while his dog tag dangled about his neck.

The entrance was bathed in the glow emanating from the rides, kiosks, and restaurants. Huge cartoon figures frolicked against the night sky. The Fun Grebrik Express, far away, was still bustling along its overhead railroad.

A cacophony of screaming and wailing filled Jayrock's head as families poured out of the park, herded by the commandos.

The park was a one-eighty-acre expanse divided into thirteen different sections, each with multiple attractions. Everyone secretly believed searching for the bomb was futile. They could only cover so much ground in such a short time.

Intelligence reports said the terrorist was still on the premises. The only thing more futile than searching for the bomb was searching for the terrorist.

But Jayrock still searched. He scoured the rides in the Sandy Desert, the area designed after the most inhospitable regions of Grebros, the Lofty Mountains, capturing the immensity of the mountainous lands in the north of Grebros, and the Majestic Mesa, affording a spectacular view of the miniature canyons and ravines surrounding it. Neither he nor any of his comrades turned up anything. By now, he was wondering how much longer he would have to spend on this wild goose chase until he saw a ride go up in a blaze.

Just as Jayrock was about to take a look at the Dromedary Bumper Cars, he heard a familiar hoot coming from far behind him. He turned around to watch the Fun Grebrik Express approaching. He had seen it before coming toward the entrance and assumed it would stop there. Apparently, the train had completed its round and had begun its next one.

Jayrock's muscles tensed for a moment, and then he burst into a sprint. Only one place left to go to now, he thought.

As he raced back toward the entrance, he took out his transceiver. "Come in, command, this is Petrolons. The bomb is on the train. I am headed toward the operator's room to stop it. How copy?"

"Copy that, Petrolons," Sandywick immediately responded from the other end. "How did you discover it on a moving train?"

"That's exactly how, sir, it's still moving. It was supposed to stop and unload at the entrance."

There was a pause, but Jayrock could sense what was coming. "So, you're basically acting on a hunch?"

"It's not a hunch, sir. There are passengers, probably still on that train, waiting to be let out. Somebody obviously did not let it stop." Jayrock paused to catch his breath. "Could you please redirect a locomotive to pick me up — so I could get to the operator's room faster?"

Sandywick hesitated. "That's going to take a lot of time, Petrolons. You will probably get there faster if you just hurry. I'll direct one to move right alongside the train. They will jump in and defuse the bomb if it's in there. You just do what you can. Out." The transmission crackled off.

If Jayrock were not panting as he ran like he never had, he would have let out a sigh. He found himself hoping he would be in time to save hundreds of innocent children from certain death. And so, Jayrock kept running, his legs taking great strides as if of their own volition, his feet pounding against the concrete pathway.

Soon, he could make out the outlines of the restaurants back at the entrance. As he moved closer, his eyes rapidly scanned the buildings around the main avenue for the train station.

He noticed that the train tracks disappeared behind the buildings on the right side of the road before reemerging.

Jayrock bolted toward a small alley between two restaurants on that side, to alight on the back. With the bright lights and the noise behind him, it was much darker and silent here. Ahead of him were vast undulating fields dotted with shadows of hardy plants.

Surrounded by a grove of date palms, a few feet in front of him was the station. It was a pillared structure with a flight of stairs leading up to a railed balcony. Where is the operator's room?

As Jayrock strafed to the left to catch a view of the fields beyond the station, he caught sight of a decrepit, boxlike, wooden structure tucked between two argan trees in the distance. It had two windows on the side facing Jayrock, and there was a faint, bluish glow coming from inside.

Jayrock hunkered down and cautiously edged closer to the structure. His deep-saffron and amethyst, six-barreled machine gun, the Pebble Revolver, was aimed at the windows.

Suddenly, something got caught in Jayrock's left foot, and he immediately froze in place. He peered at his foot. It was slightly pushing against a thin, white thread stretched across his boot.

Jayrock swiveled his head to see where it started and ended. It was pegged in the ground a small distance to his right. To the left, it wound around a cactus, then up a branch of one of the argan trees, and finally, it ran all the way to a rifle mounted on top of the operator's room. The firearm pointed right at Jayrock, ominously ready to fire at the slightest movement.

Jayrock knew if he pushed any further, the trigger would be pulled. If he withdrew his foot, the partly uprooted peg would fall, and the trigger would still be pulled.

He contemplated chucking a rock at the rifle to deflect its barrel but quickly discarded the thought as the rifle would fire way before its barrel ever moved. Only one thing left to do, Jayrock decided. He encased his entire body in deep-saffron rock with translucent, amethyst gemstones covering his eyes.

Jayrock then yanked his foot back and rolled out of the way as fast as he could. The rifle fired a massive rock with a deafening boom. It caught him squarely on his shoulder, shattering its rocky covering. The impact knocked Jayrock back, and the Pebble Revolver went clattering away. Jayrock lay still for a moment, dazed. His shoulder was throbbing badly.

As he retracted all the rock back and rubbed his shoulder, a voice startled him. "Are you alive?" It came from inside the operator's room.

Jayrock quickly clambered to his feet, grabbed the Pebble Revolver, and aimed it right back at the windows in the structure. As simple as the maneuver was, an excruciating pain seared up his shoulder. It took everything to steady his arm and focus.

"Yes, you're alive. Just..." The voice trailed off for a few seconds, and then he heard it again. "Just go back, Jayrock."

Jayrock could barely believe his ears. "Cliff?!" he shouted. "Cliff, is that you? What the heck is going on? What are you doing here?" Jayrock crawled toward the room, careful to flank the windows.

"I was searching for the bomb, Jayrock," the reply came. "And now I am hurt and—"

Suddenly, the windows shattered in a shower of shards, and stone pellets began flying at Jayrock. Jayrock held out an arm to form a translucent, amethyst shield in the shape of a cut gemstone as he got up to his feet and ran to the side of the structure where there were no windows.

A pellet flew right by Jayrock's thigh, having punched a hole in the wall. Jayrock was about to return fire when the shooting ceased for a moment, and he heard a struggle inside. Two men were grunting, one of them Cliff.

No time to waste. Jayrock tapped the screen on a device suspended from his belt — shaped like a stylized mesa, it was deep saffron with an amethyst screen. The gadget glowed in the former color, simultaneously with Pebble Revolver. In a second, the glow faded from both objects, and the machine gun disintegrated into thin air. Virtual Backpack, or VBP, the device was called. Patented by defense contractors on planet Digitex less than five years ago, the VBP allowed up to six weapons to be stored digitally.

Jayrock leaped at the structure and formed rock from his hands and feet. It embedded into the wall so that Jayrock now clung to it. He then started up it, careful not to put too much strain on his right shoulder. Slowly and awkwardly, he reached the roof. In that instant, he heard a smack inside and the sound of a person slumping to the floor. There was movement inside, and stone pellets flew out again from the wall under him.

Jayrock clambered onto the roof as quickly as he could. Disengaging the rock, he got up onto his feet.

"Pebble Revolver," Jayrock whispered into the VBP. The voice activation system registered, and the VBP glowed. At once, the machine gun materialized in Jayrock's hands.

Jayrock then leaped into the air. As he descended, he formed a dense covering of rock on his feet. They came crashing down onto the roof with a loud thud. As rock slammed into wood, the entire structure rumbled and creaked, with splinters of wood tearing out of the site of impact. Jayrock tumbled down into the operator's room, along with a rain of splinters and dust.

As the mess began to settle down, Jayrock spied a man standing at the far end of the room, shielding his eyes. Behind him lay a motionless body in staff uniform. Cliff was lying in front, groaning in pain.

Jayrock aimed the Pebble Revolver at the man and pulled the trigger. The six barrels of the machine gun rotated, each spitting out a deep-saffron pebble in rapid succession. A stream of the projectiles spiraled its way toward the target. The man instantly dropped to the floor, the stream passing overhead. The pebbles drilled a hole in the wall behind and shot out into the night.

The man seized Cliff by the neck, held a gun to his temple, and propped his head up to shield his own. "Another move, and your little friend here dies," the man threatened. Slowly, he rose to his feet, pulling Cliff up with him.

Jayrock could see him better now. Half of his face was illuminated in a bluish tint coming from a screen to his right. He had a shaggy, unkempt beard that went almost up to his eyes. He had calm, gray eyes, and a tuft of messy, black hair sat on top of his head. Most of his body was obscured by Cliff's, but Jayrock could still make out the drab, overly long clothing he wore.

"Drop your gun!" said the terrorist, almost in a whisper.

"So you can kill me? And then lie in wait for the next commando who comes along?" Jayrock responded. He still had his machine gun trained, and he itched to take a shot at the hairy face peering back at him, but Cliff was in the way. The terrorist was struggling to keep the wounded Cliff on his feet. Jayrock hoped Cliff would fall out of his grasp.

Between his labored breathing, Cliff managed to speak up. "Jayrock, just... just go back. Save as many people as you can. There's nothing you can do here."

The terrorist let out a chuckle. "Put a gun to their head, and even the most airheaded fool will babble out the wisest counsel." He then tightened his grip around Cliff's neck. "I won't have to wait long, twerp. The bomb goes off in three minutes."

"Why are you still here, then?" Jayrock had never felt as helpless as he did now. He could do nothing but stall for time — for the terrorist to make a mistake. And yet, time was precisely what he did not have.

"Oh, I suppose for my plan to work, I had to make sure no one stopped by and pulled the train over, no?"

"I have notified everyone that the bomb is on the train. They are driving alongside it as we speak." Jayrock felt a lump rising in his throat as he carefully chose his words. "Someone will latch onto the train... they will get inside, and they will defuse the bomb."

The terrorist snorted. "Why are you still here, then?"

Jayrock was taken aback. "Someone has to keep an eye—"

"I really need to cut in your absolute load of hogwash before I blow my own brains out. Pretty much the only thing you got right, twerp, is the fact that there is a bomb." The terrorist pursed his lips for a moment, his gray eyes staring at Jayrock mockingly. "The bomb is not on the train. It's on the tracks at the Central Casa."

"On the tracks?" Jayrock exclaimed, doing a poor job of hiding his shock. He desperately wanted to reach for his transceiver, but he dared not take his hand off the Pebble Revolver.

"They will not find any bomb when they get inside. Instead, they will blow up with all the others once the train crashes into the bomb." The terrorist let out a smirk. "You do know how crowded that place is and how all those clay towers and those winding alleyways make it so ridiculously difficult to get out of there? As your wise friend, Sniff, here said, why don't you scram and tell your friends to look for the bomb on the tracks while they try to get as many people to haul butt as they can?"

"What about my friend?" Jayrock demanded.

"You're worried over his fate over all those poor mer outside?" The terrorist shook his head and clicked his tongue. "Wasting precious time, mate. By the way, you just got under two

minutes left before the train reaches the bomb." The terrorist motioned toward the screen to his right. On a map, a red blip was speeding along a light-blue line. It had already entered the area labeled as Central Casa. Below the screen was the lever that could stop the train.

"I need you to do something, Jayrock," Cliff struggled to speak.

"What?" Jayrock asked, desperate for any ideas.

"Kill me. And him."

"Have you gone mad, boy?!" The terrorist gave Cliff a violent jerk.

Jayrock felt himself going weak in the knees. The throbbing in his shoulder returned in full force as his mouth went dry. He took a good, long look at Cliff's face for what seemed like an eternity. Cliff's eyes were half-closed, his nostrils flaring and receding with each strenuous breath. "I'm so sorry, Cliff," Jayrock muttered.

The terrorist's eyes flew wide open. "Don't you dare—"

Jayrock pulled the trigger. The spiral of pebbles rushed at Cliff and began pounding at him incessantly. The terrorist attempted to move out of the way, but as Jayrock held the trigger, the spiral eventually found its way right through Cliff and into the terrorist's body. If there was a cry, Jayrock did not hear it over the sound of the Pebble Revolver churning out pebble after pebble. Both Cliff and the terrorist slumped lifeless as the spiral resumed its way into the wall.

That was when Jayrock had released the trigger and had run to pull the lever that stopped the train.

Major Stonyx's grating voice woke Jayrock to the present. "So, Captain Jayrock Petrolons—"

Jayrock interrupted robotically. "It's pronounced as 'Yayrock.'"

Major Stonyx stared at her notepad and then back at Jayrock, puzzled. "Captain 'Yayrock' Petrolons... if that is all, we need to consult a little further, and then we will pass our sentence shortly. In the meantime—"

"I beg your pardon," Colonel Sandywick cut in. "But I have a proposal that my honorable jury will find most suitable — for everyone in this room including the accused if he knows what options he has left," he said, eyeing Jayrock menacingly.

Solitary confinement for life, a death sentence — those are the options I probably have, thought Jayrock. He wondered what Sandywick had in mind that could be worse than that.

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