

HIDDEN CITY

By M S Lawson

ISBN 978-0-6455245-2-9 (e-book)

Copyright© 2025 by Mark Steven Lawson writing as M S Lawson
markslawson@optusnet.com.au

Published by Clearvadersname Pty Ltd

Website: www.clearvadersname.com

All rights reserved. The book contains material protected under international and national copyright laws and treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without express permission from the publisher.

Other books by this author

No Wolves in Los Angeles (ebook, 2023)

Obsidian's War – the winter city (ebook, 2022)

Obsidian's War (ebook, 2021)

The Musketeers of Haven – a science fiction story (ebook, 2020)

Claire Takes on The Galaxy (ebook, published on the website Dreame, 2019)

Darth Vader – The good guy who lost (non-fiction ebook, 2018)

A Planet for Emily (ebook, 2017)

Disgraced in all of Koala Bay (ebook, 2016)

The Zen of Being Grumpy (non-fiction published by Connor Court, 2013)

Cover image: devised using the website NightCafe Studio

Spelling and grammar note: the spelling in this book is mainly English standard. That is civilization not civilisation; colour not color, and so on, except that the spelling and grammar correction system I used often had different ideas. Readers will simply have to put up with the horror of the occasional slip. Read on.

CHAPTER ONE

Absorbed in testing circuits on a hover car lift-crystal unit, Alf did not realise anyone else was in the workshop until a shadow fell across his workbench. He turned to see an attractive woman in perhaps her late 20s, dark hair cut short in the fashion of the time. She wore a white shirt with a gold chain at the throat and black pants that clung to her figure in a way that Alfonso, or just Alf, admired. A brown, knee-length jacket plus a few touches of makeup underscored the general air of street chic, but with a grim underlying message of a shoulder holster containing a police issue Glock nine millimetre with a laser sight, barely concealed by the jacket. Despite all the technological advances, this classic weapon remained a reliable way to blow holes in people should the user decide to do so, as Alf knew well. Another problem was that the newcomer's otherwise bright eyes regarded Alf with a potent mixture of official disdain and feminine contempt.

"This is an honour, sergeant," said Alf, turning around and getting up. Police sergeant Ellen Pullen was model-tall, but Alf still towered above her. "I didn't hear you come in. You're looking good; figure's trim. You've been working out."

"Shut up, scum," she snapped.

"Ooookay," said Alf. He nodded at the second, auburn-haired female police officer just behind the Sergeant and said, "Senior constable." That police official, Samantha Pye, was not blessed with the same cheekbones or figure as her superior but was somewhat friendlier as she nodded back and almost smiled. "If this is about stolen spare parts again, I told you the last couple of times it's really Julian who buys and sells, and I'm pretty sure he's not into anything."

"It's not about parts," snapped the Sergeant. "I have questions for the hired slime. Julian's not in? We'll use his office."

"The boss's out on a job at the spaceport," said Alf. "Even us slimy mechanics get called in to help with the orbital shuttles from time to time." He eyed the police officer's figure again as they walked to the office. "Looking good, Sergeant. You've been putting that rowing machine in the gym to good use."

Ellen rounded on Alf.

"How do you know I've been using a rowing machine? You been stalking me, you creep?"

"Not at all, sergeant," said Alf, mildly. "We use the same gym, but I mostly stay on the boxing side, so you haven't seen me. I only saw you because some of the other gentlemen in the boxing gym made – um – admiring comments about a woman using the rowing machine, and I looked for myself."

"Ha!" she said. They went into the office, where she took the padded, swivel chair, leaving Alf and the senior constable to take two chipped, plastic stacker chairs used by guests. The office's large glass window looked out onto the cavernous workshop filled with ground and hover vehicles of all types. Both sides of the office were fitted with shelves crammed with equipment, including discarded, faulty parts and a couple of testing units Alf sometimes used. The only decorations were drawings done by the boss's very young children tacked up on the back wall. He also kept a framed picture of his family on the battered desk next to the computer. The Sergeant's eyes softened when it looked at those family items before switching back to Alf at full glare.

"Would I appreciate these 'admiring comments'?" she asked.

"They were raw compliments," said Alf judiciously, "that would have to be translated from male-speak to be suitable for mixed company."

The senior constable just managed to transform an emerging giggle into a snort, earning a glare from her superior.

(In fact, the cleanest of the comments made to Alf was that the girl on the rowing machine was a "prime piece.")

"Getting back from the gym," said the Sergeant, "I've been told you've been doing work on the star freighters in orbit; you got ferried up there for two days."

"Maybe I have, and maybe I haven't," said Alf carefully. "Is it a crime to do repair work? This business is called in for jobs at the port, as Julian will tell you."

The spaceport was, in fact, close enough for the occasional rumble of departing orbital shuttles to be heard and felt in the office. The suburb of Marshland where the workshop was located mainly existed to supply services to the port, ranging from machinery repairs to the less savory entertainments for visiting crews and the port's small garrison of Imperial auxiliaries, as well as housing many of its workers. However, those who could afford to do so lived on the other side of the port, in Creaghville proper, and pretended that Marshland and the adjacent marshes that gave the area its name did not exist.

"No crime in itself," said the Sergeant, "but when I heard about it, I took another look at the criminal record of one Alfonso Grego Martinez, a petty thief from the Sulu system."

"I'm flattered that you should take an interest in me, Sergeant," said Alf, inwardly cursing that someone had talked, although he'd asked for his involvement in the repair mission to be kept quiet.

"You don't want this sort of attention, scum," said the Sergeant. "The record of the petty thief that goes with the tracker embedded in your arm by Imperial law shows that he just scraped through school before being arrested for a series of crude smash and grabs. But I'm told you need at least a master's in space drive engineering to work on the engines of those big ships."

"What can I say, Sergeant? A man learns a lot knocking about the galaxy."

"The record also shows that you're supposed to be shorter than me, but I would barely come up to your shoulder, even in high heels."

The senior constable raised one eyebrow over that remark but remained silent.

"I guess being out on the rim made me grow in many ways, Sergeant, and you'd look really great in high heels."

"Do you seriously want to spend the night in a jail cell?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then stick to answering my questions. The listed weight is way off."

"I've been eating well," said Alf. "Those records can be inaccurate."

"The physical description doesn't match, nor does the picture." She leaned forward.

"Who are you, Alfonso?"

"Just a mechanic trying to get by in this grand universe of ours."

"Right!" she snorted. "Here's the thing, Scum, I was all for dragging your arse down to the station and sweating some real answers out of you instead of the crap you've been handing me. Whoever you are, if you've taken this petty criminal's identity, your actual identity must be way worse. There's also the question of what happened to the real Alfonso. But my inspector says to just ask for now."

"Nice of him."

"He also says to say you can earn some points for yourself by keeping an ear out about this crashed ship."

"Crashed ship?"

"Sure, a big ship meant to have gone down somewhere on the other side of the marshes."

"First I've heard of it," said Alf. "They were trying to get to the port. Wouldn't port control just track the transponder?"

"It's not like that," said the Sergeant. "Whoever was on the ship must be lowlifes like you. They didn't want to check in at the actual port, but they need facilities and mechanics to fix the ship."

"This is why you started asking questions around the port and checking records?"

"Why I started asking questions about your past isn't relevant, Scum," she said. "What you want to think about is your future. Help out the police on this, and we may just decide that you're not worth our time and the taxpayer's expense of a jail cell."

"I can certainly keep an ear out as you say, Sergeant," said Alf, "but it sounds wild to me. There's no place to hide a ship out there. Even a small escape pod would be picked up in any scan. Sounds almost as wild as that city that's supposed to be in the desert."

"Never mind the hidden city crap," said the Sergeant.

"We've chased a few rumours on that one," said the senior constable, speaking up for the first time, "And come up with nothing. No trace on scans either."

"Let's concentrate on the crashed ship," said the Sergeant. "Here is my card with the station's number. Someone there will listen to your report and replay it to me, any time of the day or night."

"You're giving me your number, Sergeant?"

"Work number," said the Sergeant, standing up. "Use it for anything other than business, and the city has a dark, cold jail cell with your name on it."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

Out on the street of downtown Marshland, Sergeant Pullen asked Senior Constable Pye if she had planted the bugs.

"Sure, one in the workshop, away from the electrical equipment, and another in the office under the desk. He was so busy looking at you he didn't notice what I did..." She giggled, "Admiring comments... Maybe we'll get something from the bugs, but otherwise, apart from learning that you're drawing attention at the gym, we didn't get much from that stop."

"Um, well." Ellen stopped to open her jacket and appraise her figure in the reflection of a glass shopfront. We learned that he noticed I'd been working out."

"Divorce finalised?" said Samatha who was a friend as well as colleague of Ellen.

"Yep."

"Going to do the dating scene?"

"Guess so, eventually," said Ellen.

"You know the talk around the girl's lockers in the station was that we should arrest Alf on the grounds that he's way more interesting a guy to question than the drunks we get from the strip clubs."

"The other girls know Alf?"

"Mostly by sight. I told them he's got personality and presence as well as looks. If you're going back on the dating scene, you could do way worse than ask Alf out, especially as he seems interested. But if you're going to date a guy, maybe calling him Scum, slime and creep is not the best way to start out."

"I call him that because I may yet have to arrest him," said Ellen, "and I don't know who he is. What's our next stop?"

CHAPTER TWO

After the police left, Julian called Alf from the spaceport to ask if anything had happened. Alfonso told him that an e-bike used for commuting, which wasn't recharging properly, had been brought in, and a gigantic diesel farm unit requiring servicing had been

dropped off, but he did not mention the police visit. Julian told him to close up at the end of the business day, which he did. Then Alf walked several blocks through the narrow streets of grey sandstone buildings to the gym, also frequented by Sergeant Ellen Pullen, where he earned a few extra credits as a sparring partner to aspiring kickboxers. Alf preferred boxing with its greater emphasis on footwork and evasion and thought that in a real fight, kicking at anything higher than the groin was asking for trouble, but kickboxing was the preferred sport in the outpost, and he had shown enough talent at it for one of the trainers to offer to coach him. Alf politely declined on the grounds that he was too old to start a career in competition.

"Too old to maybe go all the way," the trainer said. "But you don't need much training to step into a ring, and you could easily win bouts now. I even get the impression that you're holding back at times."

"Look, thanks for the offer, but I've seen too much fighting already. I can handle being a target for the fighting wannabes, but that's it." He did not mention another compelling reason – that winning a few fights might draw unwanted attention from people who would take a closer look at his identity

"Suit yourself," the trainer said. "Just keep my offer in mind."

"I'll do that."

Alf had changed into shorts and a sleeveless tee shirt and was waiting by one of the rings to be called, talking to one of the wannabes, when he was tapped on the shoulder. He turned to see a man almost as tall and a little wider than himself dressed in an ill-fitting suit with a black shirt but no tie. His head was shaven, and his face reminded Alf of a concrete wall.

"Office," said this mean-looking apparition, then he turned and left.

Alf remained where he was, talking to the wannabe, but adjusted his position so that he could see the thug return and try to grab his arm. Alf batted the man's arm away.

"Do I know you?" he said, facing the intruder squarely. The wannabe faded away. The other gym inmates stopped to watch this piece of workplace theatre.

"Office," said the man, sneeringly.

"I heard you the first time."

Alf and the thug eyed one another for a time.

"Come to the office now."

"Okay, so you want me to come to an office. Which office and why?"

The thug gestured at the boxing gym manager's office in the corner. "Mr Charles wants to see you."

Alf was being summoned to see the local crime lord.

"Really! Mr Charles wants to see me. Did he say why?"

"Come, now," said the thug angrily.

Alf thought the newcomer riled up nicely, but there was no point in riling him any further. If Mr Charles wanted to see him, he would go.

"Lead the way," he said.

The thug led the way to the office, opened the door, and stepped to one side, grinning most unpleasantly. Alf, who had dealt with thugs before, knew the man meant to push him in. Watching the thug out of the corner of his eye, he waited for the man to surge forward, then sidestepped and hauled on his assailant's arm with all his might, sticking out one leg to trip him. The thug flew through the door to land face down on the carpet, his head narrowly missing the corner of the boxing gym manager's desk. The man leaped to his feet – he was agile – and whirled, fists clenched.

"Thumper, that's enough!" barked a man sitting at the manager's desk.

"Mr Charles, I presume?" said Alf. "Sorry about that but your associate is no diplomat."

"His specialty is dispute resolution," said Mr Charles, with a slight smile. "And he's very good at it. You're lucky I've called him off."

Mr Charles had the face and demeanour of a suburban accountant, dressing in a light, grey suit and pastel tie as might be expected of such a comparatively humble but respectable post, all of which belied his reputation for ruthlessness backed by violence. Another thug stamped out of the same mould as Alf's opponent and dressed in the same way, sat to one side. The final occupant of the office, sitting in one corner, was a balding, squat, fresh-faced man dressed in a floral shirt and off-white pants and openly wearing a holster containing a police-issue handgun identical to the one carried by Sergeant Pullen.

"Alf, is it?" said the man wearing the police-issue holster as the second thug touched a button to turn the windows looking out onto the boxing area opaque. Thumper retreated to another corner to glare at Alf.

"Inspector," said Alf. He knew who the man was, although it was the first time he had spoken to him. "I had your Sergeant Pullen pay me a visit today."

"We discussed your responses to her questions and offer," said the inspector. "And now you've met Mr Charles."

"You are a man of consequence in what thriller writers would call the underworld, Mr Charles," said Alf. "I would have thought I'd be beneath your notice."

"Just a businessman, Alf," said Mr Charles, pleasantly. "Please sit." He indicated a swivel chair by the door with cracked green upholstery. "As it happens, I have a need for various people with different skills, and you may be able to make yourself some money."

"I had Sergeant Pullen ask around the spaceport," the inspector said, "looking for people who could fix starship engines and reactors who would also be discreet, and your name came up."

"Discreet?" said Alf. "The Sergeant said something about a crashed spaceship out beyond the marshes somewhere. Doesn't seem likely to me."

"Let's just say for the moment that I need your skills for a few days," said Mr Charles, "although I am curious on one point. You don't have any formal qualifications, yet I'm told you've been working on big-time technology."

"There's a loophole in the regulations," said Alf. "I can work for a qualified spaceship engineer as an assistant. There's nothing in the regs about the assistant having qualifications. The engineer is the one who signs off on the job and takes the fall if anything goes wrong."

"I see," said Mr Charles. "The word is the engineers think you know just as much as they do."

"Maybe, Mr Charles," said Alf. (In fact, the senior engineer had offered him a job and a chance to work towards his qualifications. Alf had said he would think about it.) "What concerns me now is what you'd expect me to do, how long you would want my services, and what you'd be willing to pay for those services. Is there a crashed ship?"

"If you take the job, you'll be taken to the site and shown what we want done."

"Then it's a matter of going out somewhere remote, beyond the marshes? I'm to be driven out to the site?"

"Yes, taken there."

"But what equipment is there on the site, Mr Charles? I can't just show up with a toolbox and hope to fix advanced engineering. If the system, or whatever this thing is, is down entirely, then I'll need to jack in a decent generator to reboot the software and use the diagnostics. Then it's usually a matter of ordering spare parts, and that should be interesting considering that the people who do that stuff only deal with known engineering firms."

"Hmmm, I see you know something about what you're doing," said Mr Charles. "Let's call it a preliminary scoping out then. A few days camping out in the wild so you can get an

idea of what has to be done. I'm told you're unattached, so there's no one to ask where you're going."

"That makes more sense. Yes, I'm unattached, but I still have a job and a boss who depends on my being at work. How many days are we talking about, and how much?"

"How many do you think you might need?"

"Mr Charles, how would I know," said Alf, spreading his hands. "Is this a ship? Did it crash? Is it a problem with the reactor or the drive? Is the operating system still in one piece?"

"There's no crash. The problem is that nothing seems to work. You touch a button, and nothing happens. Generators will be available."

"Hmmm, well, I'd ask for more details, but nothing beats going and looking for myself. Call it two days. It's Tuesday today, so take me out Thursday morning, and with any luck, by Friday afternoon, I'll have a plan of attack. If not, there's still the weekend."

"That's a plan," said Mr Charles. "My associates will give you pick-up details."

"As for my fee, ten thousand credits sounds good."

Mr Charles smiled slightly. "If you can fix the thing, sure."

Alf had made that offer expecting Mr Charles to bargain, but he had not.

"Half in my account tomorrow," he said. Mr Charles' expression hardened. "And if I can't do anything for you, I won't expect the other half."

"Why don't we see what you can do before throwing money at you?" said the crime lord.

"We live in a hard, cold universe, Mr Charles, where even respected businessmen can neglect agreed payments, especially as there is no way I can take you to court."

Mr Charles snorted. "Still seems rash to throw money at you. Why don't you go out to the site, and then we can agree on terms?"

"Where I'm at the mercy of your thugs, Mr Charles? With all due respect, I must insist that it's no pay, no show."

"You'll do as Mr Charles says," said Thumper.

"Oh, he's fun," said Alf, mildly, without looking at the thug.

"Not now, Thumper," said Mr Charles, waving one hand at the thug, who subsided but continued to glare at Alf. "Tell you what, I'll drop one thousand in your account tomorrow."

"Make it two."

"Fifteen hundred."

"And we'll call that my appearance money for this jaunt," said Alf after a moment's thought. "Make it three credit sticks each of five hundred left for me at the desk here by lunchtime, and I'll go. Leave instructions for the pickup with the sticks. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll get back to what I was doing."

After Alf had left, Mr Charles said to the inspector: "Your sergeant, can she be squared, Evan?"

The inspector shook his head. "She's divorced and out here because she made a ruckus when she found her husband was involved in scams."

"Shame, she could have been useful. She was certainly right about one thing."

"What's that, Mr Charles?"

"Whoever that guy is, he's no petty thief from Sulu."

CHAPTER THREE

Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen returned home to her tiny, rented unit in one of the almost-presentable sections of Marshland at the end of a day of chasing down rumours about

the phantom crashed ship, changed into pee jays, and a dressing gown only to find herself, yet again, thinking of the mysterious Alf.

"Stop this," she told herself angrily. "I might yet have to arrest him I can't date him."

To distract herself, she switched the home entertainment system to a popular drama and settled down in front of the screen when the front doorbell chimed on her personal assistant. Earlier generations would have thought of the PA as a mobile phone, but it was much more than that. Ellen's PA had even advised her when it was time to divorce her now ex-husband, and she had not regretted taking that advice. She had not asked the device what it thought of Alf on the chance that it might tell her to ask him out. Not expecting anyone, she looked at the surveillance cam on her front porch to see, to her surprise, Alfonso, the man she had been trying to keep out of her mind. He was holding a piece of cardboard on his chest with a message hand-written in large letters.

"Asked to go to ship crash site," she read. "Need to talk directly to you."

After taking a moment to grab her police Glock and take the safety off, Ellen opened the door and stood there, pistol in hand, glaring at Alf.

"You were told to ring the station, Slime," she snapped, keeping her voice down. Her neighbours had been known to inquire about male visitors. "And how did you know where I live?"

"I can explain everything," said Alf, also keeping his voice down for the same reason. "Just let me in – it's kinda exposed out here – and you'll hear it all."

She thought about this for a moment, then moved well back. "Sit at the table and put your hands on it so I can see them. Do not move from the table."

"Sure," said Alf. The table in question was a small, round affair set to one side of the living room, next to a kitchen nook. A couch and chair with an entertainment unit were on the other side. A door led to bedrooms and the bathroom. It was hardly luxurious living, Alf thought, but it was clean, neat, and comfortable enough and a major step up from his single room with en-suite in a run-down apartment building.

Ellen sat on the outer side of the table, slapping her pistol, the safety still off, on the table, and then slapping her police handcuffs beside the pistol to underline her point.

Alf caught his cue.

"I only found out where you lived today when I realised I had to talk to you directly," he said quickly. "We go to the same gym, remember, and I thought your address must be on the membership files."

"You hacked the gym's system?"

"I didn't even have to do that. I went to the front desk, thinking I might slip the guy who usually sits there a few credits to take a peek while he looked the other way, making up a story about someone owing me money. But he wasn't at the desk when I went there, and the desk unit was on. Didn't take long."

"Humph! I still don't see why you couldn't have rung the station and asked to be put through to me." Ellen said.

"When I went to the gym, I was pulled into a meeting with Mr Charles and a couple of his thugs, and your inspector, Evan Bara... something. I knew him by sight, but it was the first time I'd met him."

Ellen's face fell.

"Barastoc," she said. "Shit! I thought he was clean." She banged her pistol on the table again, causing Alf concern. The safety was still off. "This crap is endless."

"As I was going out, I overheard Mr Charles ask your inspector if his sergeant could be squared, and he said you'd ended up here because you wouldn't be in some scam."

Ellen nodded. "Close enough. Alright, you came here instead of the station, even if you had to commit a minor felony to do it. I'm still listening. What did Charles say?"

"He wanted me to go out to whatever this thing is – seems it's not a crash – and look at it. I tried to get details like what was actually wrong with this piece of hardware, or even what it was, so maybe I could take along the right equipment to fix it, but no go. All he would say was that nothing worked. In the end we agreed on fifteen hundred credits up front for me to go there and see what needed to be done."

"You're an expensive petty thief," exclaimed Ellen.

"Risk must be priced accordingly, Sergeant, and I'm at real risk in this. Initially, I asked for ten thousand without specifying that it would be upfront, and Charles smiled and agreed."

"He has no intention of paying," said Ellen after a moment's thought.

"I'll be kept out there with a series of excuses until I'm judged to no longer be of any use, then killed. Charles only balked when I asked for money upfront as he'd have trouble getting it back."

"Then why go at all?"

"Too late to back out," said Alf. "I am about the only person on this rock that might be able to fix whatever it is without screaming for the cops – even if they are in his pocket - and If I refuse to go, then Mr Charles will send his thugs to kidnap me or, worse, grab someone I care about and threaten them. At the moment, that's my boss and his young family. We're not that close, but I've had dinner there a couple of times, and I couldn't let anything happen to them. If I go, well, I've been in harm's way before and lived to tell the tale."

"Why are you telling me, then?" said Ellen. "You can go out, overcome Mr Charles' goons, and claim the ship, or whatever it is, for your own."

"I doubt I'll be able to do anything with ... the item, let's call it, but I was hoping that if I helped a certain rising police sergeant who would look good on news conference cameras..."

"Ha!" said Ellen.

"... locate whatever is out there, then maybe that same rising police sergeant, who in all other respects is far above me, will help me go legit so that I can take a job with one of the major engineering firms."

"Really?" said Ellen, interested in spite of herself. "You got an offer."

"Yep. An engineering firm wants to sponsor me to get qualified in spaceship engineering, and I'd like to take it."

"Humph!" she sat back and folded her arms. "Here's the thing; you see this little finger?" She showed Alf the little finger of her left hand. "I won't stir even this to help you until you tell me who you are, and no bullshit."

"I suppose that's fair enough," said Alf. "You recording this?"

She shook her head. "Wouldn't be of any use without a warrant unless I got your permission."

"Okay, well, record away if you want. My real name is Jake – Jake Christian Langston, and I was a Captain in the Forgotten Legion in the Rebellion on Martus Prime."

Ellen's mouth fell open. "What? How did you end up here?"

She had heard of the rebellion and even of the military unit, as one of the rebel units able to match the Imperial Legions but only as echoes of distant troubles. Martus Prime was a good chunk of the galaxy away from Creaghville.

"To start from the beginning, I come from one of the agricultural settlements way out on Martus itself, but I managed to win a slot at the Imperial Academy in the capital. I'd finished the basic physics degree and got into the masters of spaceship engineering course when the rebellion started."

"Then you already knew something about the advanced stuff?" said Ellen.

"Oh, sure. I knew enough to assist with repairing and adapting almost anything they could put into space in a cram course in engineering on the fly. It was a lot of fun. The Martus navy even won the first couple of battles. But then – and if I'd been older, I might have realised it was inevitable – the Imperials got organised and blew our navy to pieces. Then I was volunteered for the infantry and got altered."

Ellen's mouth fell open for the second time.

"What? But you look normal."

"I am normal for the most part – I look the same as I did before I started. But about half who underwent the treatment didn't make it at all, and half of the rest went psycho. Those of us who survived had advantages – increased mitochondrial activity and all that shit making us stronger and move faster – although just one-quarter of those who started the program got the benefits without dying or going insane."

"You agreed to try this?" exclaimed Ellen.

"No, I didn't. We were told we'd be given a few injections to protect against some Imperial bioweapon. We were all kept separate, so we didn't realise what had happened until after it was all over, and an Imperial official handed the survivors copies of the files kept on the program. We'd been given special training, diet supplements, and so on, and we thought the physical improvements were due to that. In reality, the interests behind the rebellion were desperate to find some way to counter the Imperial Legions in the land battle they knew was coming. They figured that if they could make it too costly to take the urban centres, the Imperium would come to some sort of compromise. We made a real fight of it, but in the end, the strategy didn't work."

"Quite a story," said Ellen. "What happened to you?"

"For most of those who surrendered, the proconsul took the American Civil War approach. If you handed in your weapons and swore allegiance to the Empire, you could go home, but not those who were altered. We were held on an Imperial Detention Order and subjected to all sorts of tests. I guess the Imperium was hoping to make super-soldiers of its own but without the high wastage rate."

"After a few months, I was told that if I wanted to be released, I could join the auxiliaries and fight for a time. I wound up as a sergeant in charge of a platoon stationed at a mining hell hole fighting semi-sentient worms that got their jollies from feeding on warm blooded creatures. Not fun. Don't recommend it."

"You were a sergeant in the auxiliaries as well?" said Ellen. The auxiliaries were either specialised support troops or glorified police and protection units, as distinct from the assault troops of the Imperial Legions. The Roman Empire had a similar system.

"Yep, for a time. Then the whole unit was abandoned."

"Abandoned?"

"The mining operations were shut down and I was told the unit was disbanded, all personnel discharged, but everyone was to remain on the planet until further notice."

"Okayyy... but you got out?"

"We still had our weapons, and some of the guys and girls were talking about rebelling, going rogue, all that sort of crap. I'd had enough of rebellions and, by chance, I met a freighter captain who was short an engineer. She was the sole crew on the ship when I met her – and she, well, took a fancy to me as a companion on long trips."

"Ha!" said Ellen. "You gigoloed your way out?"

"Kinda, I guess, although it's different for a guy, and I do know my way around engines."

"Where did the false identity come from?"

"I couldn't move around as Jake Langston, at least not in that quadrant. I didn't have any travel authorisation and, if intercepted, would be sent straight back. Somehow, my new

friend knew a place where identity capsules could be implanted. Once one of those is in your arm, you can pass the basic checkpoints at most spaceports. No need for any travel documents."

"What happened to the real Alf from Sulu?"

"No idea. I'm told it's possible to duplicate the capsules, or maybe he just wanted it removed so he may still be around, but I never met the man and didn't ask questions."

"You ended up here?" said Ellen.

"When we got to orbit here, we found that my captain friend's husband was in town."

"Oops!" said Ellen, amused.

"There was some quick cleaning up, and I was dropped outside of town with a few credits using an escape chute straight into the marsh, which was also not fun – icky, corrosive, and dangerous. I walked into town and started looking for work. My identity capsule was enough to get me tax status, and nobody seemed to care about anything else. I can't move off the planet, but at least here, no one wants to kill me or get me to rebel. However, I would like my old identity back, along with evidence of my basic degree and the course work I had done for my masters."

Ellen got up from the table, taking her pistol with her, grabbed a writing pad from the sideboard, and slapped it in front of Alf.

"Type out your name, rank, and unit designation both for the rebellion and in the auxiliaries; also, provide your friend's name, that of her ship, and where the identity was implanted. I'll try not to get your ex-friend in trouble," she added, seeing Alf open his mouth. "But I need to check everything. Petty thieves are skilled liars, and so is my ex-husband."

"Sure," he said.

"Assuming any of that long story checks out in the Imperial archives here, what did you want from me?"

"Part of the reason for my visit is just to tell someone I'm going and what's really happening. If I don't make it back, then you know it's because I've been killed out there, and you may be in a position to do something about it. Then there are the transcripts. If you're going to check the archives, which I can't access, it's not much extra effort to take copies of my academic and military records."

"I'll think about it," said Ellen after a pause.

"There's also the question of tracking me. I thought you could track me and get a location on this place. What's the range on my capsule?"

"We can track it for ten clicks out of town," said Ellen. "I can also send a drone to scan for it, but that involves telling my inspector what I want the drone for."

"I think I'm going way beyond ten clicks. You got any tracking devices down the station I might be able to hide in my socks, anything like that? They'll search me, but they'll be looking for weapons."

"Nothing I can check out without a good explanation. Why not try that shop two blocks beyond the gym? They've got all sorts of stuff like combat knives and security equipment."

"I know that place. Those bugs your offsideer must have planted while you distracted me with your feminine wiles...."

"I did nothing of the kind, Mr Langston!" retorted Ellen, looking at the writing pad Alf had slid back to her. "That cold, dark cell is still available for those who make remarks like that."

"... while you were distracting me with your forthright questioning, I plan on leaving them in place because they won't show anything."

"How did you know we'd put them there?"

"A device in the workshop scans every two hours or so. It's an old habit of mine. Even Julian doesn't know about it. I don't suppose the devices can be repurposed for tracking?"

"They're short range," said Ellen after a moment's thought. "So, no."

"I'll be back at about this time tomorrow night, sergeant," said Alf, getting up.

"And why will you be coming back, Mr Langston?" asked Ellen sharply.

"I have to show you what arrangements I've made for tracking me, and for the moment, you should continue to call me Scum or Slime, maybe Alf, if you can't be bothered putting me down."

"Okay, Slime," said Ellen.

"Your inspector will also probably want you now to get off my case – don't agree too easily; he'll get suspicious."

"I'll just tell him you're total scum and not worth another moment of my day."

"The sad thing is he might believe you," said Alf.

He left with a wave and a half smile. Ellen put her back to the door, closed her eyes, and let her breathe out slowly. Samantha was right; the man had a presence. Later, as she was going to bed, it occurred to Ellen that if Alf/Jake's story checked out, then he might be almost datable. She pushed the thought to one side. She might yet have to arrest him.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Alf knocked lightly on Ellen's door the next day, she let him in immediately, gesturing at the table. She was fully dressed this time but without a jacket to semi-conceal the shoulder holster and pistol she wore. Alf noted that the safety was on.

"Sit only at the table," she said, stepping back. "Hands where I can see them."

"I thought we were past the 'let me see your hands' stage," said Alf.

"You're scum until I say otherwise," Ellen said. She took a folder off the sideboard and slapped it on the table. Despite all the advances in technology, paper still had advantages.

"Amazingly, your story checks out. Jake Christian Langston rose through the ranks to become a captain and commanding officer of the tenth independent combat group in the Forgotten Legion. This time, the picture and physical description on file match you. How many people are in those combat commands?"

"Nominal strength was about three hundred, but it was usually closer to two hundred and fifty," said Alf. "As well as grunts with guns, we had medical, comms, heavy support weapons, and makeshift transport so that we could, in theory at least, fight on our own for long periods and even run away convincingly in the transport – hence the independent bit of the title."

He looked at the printouts. "Ahhhh yes! And my Academy transcript. That saves me a lot of trouble. Thank you for that."

"You're still scum," said Ellen. "Even if you took two wounds and earned two bravery commendations plus another note of approval in your file from your time in the auxiliaries."

"I did?" said Alf. He flicked through to his auxiliary record. "So, I did; that miserable Imperial Legion captain said I ran my unit well. I always thought he disapproved of me as rebel scum. This also says I've been discharged."

"The archives say your unit was disbanded and all members discharged. No outstanding warrants on your name or that of Alfonso. But I can still get you on entering the colony illegally, using a false identity, and messing with the gym's membership system."

In fact, Ellen had been impressed by Jake/Alf's academic and military record and was interested that no criminal matter of any consequence hung over him. Even the identity chop shop that Alf/Jake had used seemed to have been shut down in a police action. The offenses of illegal entry and using a fake identity could be glossed over by a colony that wanted to

attract skilled people, not throw them in jail. But she was not about to acknowledge any of that.

"Don't sound so disappointed," said Alf. "Can I keep this folder?"

"I included a digital dot, but sure. As for getting your identity back if we can shed some more light on the activities of Mr Charles, then I may lift my other little finger to help on that count."

"Here's where I'm supposed to meet the transport." Alf handed over a note. "It's early morning."

"Not far from here," said Ellen, looking at it. "On the edge of town. You'll be in their hands."

"They won't kill me yet. They need me to look at whatever is out there, and I'll give you this." He put a small device about the same size as a business card, albeit somewhat thicker and heavier, on the table and slid it across to Ellen.

"What this?"

"I don't dare ask for your number, so here is the twin of a tracking device I bought at that shop." Alf also had bought a small knife he could conceal in his boot, but he was not about to admit to that. "I'll get the other past the inevitable searches. The tracking data will show on your device, as well as text messages and images, and you can send the material to your other devices. You'll see I'm listed as scum in the contacts."

Ellen smiled slightly despite herself.

"You're beginning to understand your importance in this colony," she said. "That's good."

"As for the rest, we'll have to wing it, and I'd best go before your neighbours start wondering why that strange man they saw come in is staying so long. Keep an eye on the device."

"I will, although you're still scum."

"Now I know all the right people despise me," said Alf, standing up.

He was at the door before she could say anything – she had previously debated whether to offer coffee but eventually decided it would be a bad idea – and had closed the door before she could say "take care" softly.

Early the next morning, Alf arrived at the pickup point – a dusty intersection on the edge of Marshland - to find two others, a man and a woman of about undergraduate age, dressed as if they had just come from lectures. They also carried packs with clothes and night gear as they had all been instructed.

"Who are you?" asked the male, a slight, bespectacled youth.

"Alf, an engineer – waiting for Mr Charles' men." Alf may have revealed his true identity to Ellen, but he would call himself Alfonso for now as that was the name Mr Charles' thugs knew him by.

"Oh, okay," said the youth. "Brian, computer science. Also waiting for them."

They shook hands.

"Elsbeth," said the girl, an intense looking person with lank, blonde hair framing a narrow face. "Linguistics."

"Linguistics?" asked Alf. "How come we need a linguist?"

Elbereth shrugged. "They're paying me good money to come, and a PhD in linguistics is not a money spinner in this colony."

"Guess not," said Alf.

Before they could talk further, the pickup vehicle arrived – a semi-automated furniture van with all signage and emblems on the worn-looking canopy painted over. The van pulled up in front of them without ceremony and disgorged three of Mr Charles' thugs,

including Alf's old friend Thumper, grinning evilly. Alf allowed himself to be grabbed by this thug and thrown into the back of the van, where benches had been installed. Brian and Elbereth were flung in beside him, protesting. Alf had time to note that the front half of the van was filled with boxes and assorted equipment, including what seemed to be a large diesel generator, before Thumper turned him around and pushed him face first against the wall.

"Hands against the wall, scum," he said.

Alf thought it was much nicer when Ellen called him scum. Thumper searched him briefly, taking his phone assistant but missing the tracking device Alf had taped to his chest, then cuffed the engineer's hands behind his back with electronic restraints, slammed him down on the bench, and dropped a hood over his head. Alf could hear the other two protesting as they got the same treatment.

Some distance off, concealed in some stunted trees, Ellen was watching this byplay through her standard-issue police electronic binoculars with concern. All three persons had been waiting calmly, so why treat them like that? She looked at the tracking device Alf had given her. There had been a signal just before. Now, there was none. The van canopy might be metallic. Would that block the signal? Ellen did not know. She could at least run the van's number plates and try to identify the thugs from the video recordings made automatically by her binoculars. Even in the far reaches of the galaxy, police work followed certain procedures.

In the back of the van, Thumper was gloating.

"Now we'll see who's the tough guy," he said as the van drove off.

Alf supposed the remark was directed at him.

"You two go and sit in the driver's cabin," Thumper snarled.

"Mr Charles said not to leave you alone with our consultants," said one of the thugs.

"Especially after what happened with the last one."

"Last one?" thought Alf.

"He's not here; I am," said Thumper. "Don't worry, I won't damage 'em. Maybe warm up Alf a bit."

"The big 'un?" said the other thug.

"Yeah, he outsmarted Thumper in front of Mr Charles a couple of days back," said the first thug. "Now he wants pay back."

"No one outsmarted anyone else," said Thumper, "but Alf here wants some learning." He lashed out, thumping Alf on the side of the head, knocking him into Brian.

"We didn't sign up for this," squawked Brian from inside his hood. "Why do this?"

"Why handcuff us?" Elsbeth said indignantly, her voice also muffled by a hood.

"We're not going to do anything."

"Shuddup!" snarled Thumper. "No noise, and I might forget you exist. Get lost, you two."

The last command was apparently addressed to the two thugs, who, as far as Alf could judge from the noise, moved off to the driver's cabin through a sliding door. The vehicle was self-driving, but even with all the advances in AI, it was still a good idea to have a human upfront.

"Now we can have a few words," said Thumper in a nasty voice after a few moments.

"Is this the part where we bond?" asked Alf. His reward was another smashing blow, knocking him into Brian, who, in turn, fell into Elsbeth. Both youths fell to the floor, squawking.

Alf thought that this had to stop before someone got hurt.

"You know what I hate," Thumper said, grabbing the front of Alf's tee-shirt in his left hand. "It's smart arses."

Alf pulled away from him, forcing Thumper to pull harder while at the same time crouching down, half off the bench with his legs coiled underneath him. He could not see Thumper but as the thug was trying to pull him up, he thought he knew about where his face would be. Alf lowered his head and sprang forward with all the strength of his legs, his body a battering ram. His covered head connected with Thumper's face, driving it hard and smashing the back of the thug's skull into the side of the van. He head-butted Thumper twice more, using his legs and body as a powerful hammer. Alf stood back and shook his hood off as his opponent slid to the floor, unconscious, face covered in blood.

The two youths were whimpering.

"What's going on?" squeaked Elsbeth.

The sliding door from the driver's cabin jerked twice, then the thug inside banged on it.

"Thumper, open up!" yelled the thug. "What are you doing to the consultants?"

Thumper had locked the sliding door and there was no window.

"They're all fine," said Alf in what he hoped was a passable imitation of Thumper's snarl. "Tell us when we're close."

Alf's snarl was sufficiently convincing to make the thug in the driver's cabin stop rattling the door. The soldier searched the unconscious Thumper's pockets for the electronic key and then, after some fiddling, managed to insert the card in his cuff. He knew about electronic handcuffs from his time in an Imperial prison. Once freed, he grabbed Thumper and flung him so that his face connected with the edge of a container in the heap of goods on the far side of the van. After some thought, Alf used his hood to wipe the blood off Thumper's face – not because he cared about the thug at all but to disguise the fact that his hood had blood on it - then freed the other two.

"What happened to that guy?" said Elsbeth, going up to Thumper. "There's blood!"

"Think he tripped while belting me, with you two as collateral damage. He went quiet for a while, so I shook off my hood and found him like that. Then I got the key." Alf knew his story would not hold up for a moment under careful examination, but he didn't think anyone would care enough to ask questions.

"You know how those cuffs work?" asked Brian.

"Just to get off and on. I've had a varied career."

"Shouldn't we do something for him?" said Elsbeth.

"Why?" asked Alf. "To remind you of very recent events, that guy cuffed you, stuck your head in a sack, and was thumping you – albeit indirectly. I was getting it directly, which was no fun. He's still alive, which is a shame, and seems to be breathing strongly enough, so leave him."

Elsbeth shrugged and sat down again.

"Now we can talk about how we came here," said Alf.

The two youths were students at the local university who had answered an online ad about work that paid well but had to be kept confidential. Brian had a knack for hacking, or so he said. Elsbeth's inclinations had led her to study language structures and, eventually, to big-picture ideas about the nature of languages. She had been told her skills might be put to good use.

"Do you speak any other languages?" asked Alf.

"Some French."

"Were either of you told anything about a crashed spaceship?"

They both shook their heads, obviously surprised.

"Is that what you were told?" said Brian.

"I know something about phase drive systems and ship reactors, but I can't see what a crashed ship would be doing beyond the marshlands or why it wouldn't be a total wreck they could claim as salvage."

"Guess we'll know soon enough," said Elsbeth.

They talked about how much they were being paid. Both had been promised thousands of credits, but neither had thought to ask for any of the money upfront. Alf was tempted to tell his new colleagues that he suspected they had stuck their heads in a noose. But then thought that they might panic, and that might cause problems. Privately, he vowed to keep them alive if he possibly could.

Eventually, the van turned off the sealed road onto a desert track. The marsh just behind the suburb of Marshland was watered by streams from distant mountains, but otherwise, the area got little rain, meaning that it was hot, waterless, and unattractive scrub. After a few minutes, the road started rising, and they climbed to a plateau, so that at least it was cooler than on the Creaghville plain, but the country remained barren and largely featureless.

After another half an hour of bouncing around on the dirt track, the truck stopped. Alf pushed the back doors open and stepped out into a large area covered by some form of plastic sheeting supported by metal poles. There were several tents in this area – self-erecting affairs bought from sports stores, or so Alf suspected – two cars and more equipment in piles. At one end was a gate with at least one guard that Alf could see. At the other was an excavation set into the side of a hill, protected by a wire security fence.

One of the thugs from the van appeared, relieved to find the "consultants" had been released and were unharmed.

"Where did Thumper go?" he asked.

"Still in the back," said Alf, jerking his thumb at the van. "Whatever's behind that fence might be what we were called here to investigate," he said to the others. "Let's take a look."

They threw their packs beside one of the tents – Alf taking a moment to palm the tracking device from the sheath strapped to his chest and slip it into one of the pockets – and walked towards the fence. The thug came back.

"What the fuck happened to Thumper?" he asked.

"Seems to have tripped or something," said Alf over his shoulder. "He was thumping me and knocking me into the others; then he was quiet for a while. I shook off my hood, and he was like that."

"Yeah?" said the thug. "He's taken a hell of a knock."

"Look closely," said Alf, turning to face the thug. "Do we care? You guys cuffed us, put hoods on us, and he started belting me. We didn't sign on for any of that."

"Yeah, we didn't," said Elsbeth. "That guy terrified me."

"I checked he was still breathing and left him," said Alf. "I was going to open the back door and kick him out but then thought that someone might miss him."

"He won't be too happy when he wakes up," said the thug.

"Uh huh!" said Alf, turning away. "Maybe you can get Mr Charles to open a hospital wing for him."

The fence had a gate that was not locked and a sign that said, 'Authorised Personnel Only', which they ignored.

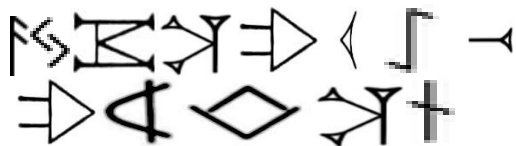
"Who's Mr Charles," asked Brian as they opened the gate.

"The gangster boss running this whole thing," said Alf. "Those guys work for him. Thumper's one of his chief enforcers. You didn't meet him before coming here?"

"No, I just had an interview with a woman at a recruitment agency," said Brian. "No one said anything about gangsters to me."

"Nor me," said Elsbeth.

Beyond was a metallic ramp that led down to the bottom of a pit. On the far side of that pit, hidden underneath an overhang, was a metal hatch. Much shorter and somewhat narrower than the hatches Alf was used to, the hatch was inset into a white, concrete-like wall. It had a security lock with a keypad set in the concrete on one side, but the symbols on the keypad writing on the door were entirely unfamiliar.



"Looks like a cross between cuneiform and Anglo-Saxon runes," said Elsbeth.

Several more words in the same script were stamped on the hatch, with another single symbol set above it to the right.

"This no ship," said Alf. "And it's alien."

CHAPTER FIVE

On his way out to lunch, Inspector Evan Barastoc stopped at Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen's desk.

"Sent you a couple of items," he said. "How's the domestic assault going?"

"Interviewed everyone," said Ellen. After some debate with herself, she had decided not to say anything to Barastoc about his being in league with the local gangster for now. The last time she kicked up a fuss about corruption, she ended up divorced in the Marshlands stations, albeit with a promotion to sergeant. She would bide her time. "Got the hospital reports. Just compiling the evidence brief now."

"All good, but the brief won't be wanted for a few days. You can check out that other stuff."

Ellen had been pulled off her inquiries at the spaceport the day after Alf appeared at her door and given a string of investigations, the juiciest of which had been the domestic assault against a sex worker by the girl's partner. The girl had been left for dead, and the man, a total pig, had been amazed that the police cared enough to investigate, and so enraged that a female detective was leading the investigation that he had blurted out admissions in the interrogation. This sort of investigation made a difference, but Ellen also knew that it had been thrown at her to keep her busy so that she would not check again on Alf.

"Beaten up guy in hospital," she said, reading the first item on her screen. "Could be anything."

"Hospital thought enough of it to pass on an alert. It's not a gunshot wound, so we're not obliged to do anything but go and talk to the man. See if he has anything to say for himself."

"Okay!" Ellen looked at the next item. "Dognapping?"

Barastoc shrugged. "The perpetrators of this crime are asking for two thousand credits for the return of... what was the animal's name?"

"Poppy. A cocker spaniel cross."

"There you are, a much-loved member of the family has gone missing," said Barastoc, "and two thousand credits is enough for us to pay attention."

The inspector wandered off, and Ellen checked the tracking device Alf had given her. The signal had vanished for a couple of hours after Alf had been thrown in the van but had

reappeared and had been static for some time. She had been able to access routine satellite pictures of the area with a surprisingly good resolution without anyone asking questions. There was nothing immediately obvious at the location, but on looking closely, Ellen realized that a rough vehicle track led up to the spot and then vanished. Under magnification, she could see a hint here and there of the edges of a carefully camouflaged roof – enough to mark out its area. Wherever Alf had ended up, someone was taking great pains to conceal what was happening. How interesting!

Being a conscientious police officer Ellen had opened an investigation file but had kept it out of the police database. Thanks to the satellite photographs, initial notes, and tracing the ownership of the van, the file was starting to look respectable – albeit without any evidence of a major felony.

Senior Constable Samanta Pye stopped at Ellen's desk to report.

"Finished the statements on the assault boss," she said. "Anything else?"

"I'm going off to talk to a beat-up guy in the hospital, and you get the dognapping case."

"Dognapping?" said Samantha.

"Sure," said Ellen. "Poppy is missing."

At the desert site, Alf's new colleagues were discussing his verdict on the hatchway.

"How do you know it's alien?" Brian asked. "It could be a door with funny writing on it."

"These markings look like standard messages you might find stamped on a hatch anywhere, but I've never seen letters like this. I mean, apart from Roman letters on Earth they have what? Latin letters, then Cyrillic and Greek. The Chinese have pictograms; the Koreans have a phonetic system. Hindi has a different alphabet, but nothing I've seen looks anything like this."

"I haven't either," said Ellen. "If humans did this, why wouldn't they use one of the major languages?"

"But an alien installation or whatever out this way?" said Brian. "We're just a place everyone passes through to go somewhere else."

"That's true," said Alf, "but we won't settle the argument by looking at the hatch. Any chance you can do something with the keypad."

"No power," said Brian. "Even if I figured out what to bypass, it wouldn't do anything."

"That's also true," said Alf. But if it's anything like the hatches on major ships, there's usually some manual override close by that only works if the power's gone entirely. Let's look."

Two short-handled camper spades and a steel rod that had evidently been used for probing were nearby. Within a meter of the hatch, they found a metal box showing signs of corrosion, kept locked by a simple metal pin. This contained a small control pad with two buttons, which also proved to be dead.

"Might have had an independent power supply, but the battery or whatever is totally flat," said Alf.

"We could jack in power for this, at least," said Brian. "I think I can get the cover off, but power tools would help."

"Lots of equipment up top," said Alf, let's check that stuff out. "In the meantime, Elsbeth what are you like at sketching and drafting?"

"Totally crap at sketching."

"See if you can find a notebook and measuring tape and put together some sort of plan of the area. You see, we're standing on a concrete platform."

"We are?"

Alf kicked some of the dirt to reveal a patch of concrete underneath. "This must've been the front porch. See if you can find out anything about its size and shape. Take pics of the door, the control panel, and so on with this device." He handed her the tracking device he had bought, which also took pictures and sent text. Alf had not thought how important those features would be when he got it but was now very glad that the device had that capability. "Just don't let our friends see you use it, or they'll want to take it off you like they took our digital assistants."

"Gotit," said Elsbeth.

The thug who had questioned them before came down the ramp, saw the box they had discovered, and was told what they were doing.

"Do you guys know what happened to the electronic key?"

"You mean the key to the cuffs? I threw it away," said Alf. In fact, it was buried in the dirt beneath the recently discovered emergency hatch opening box.

"What did you do that for?" said the thug.

"Do I have to go through the 'we don't care' speech again? We need some tools for this thing." Alf pointed at the newly discovered box.

The thug thought that there was nothing to be gained from arguing with Alf. "Boxes to the right at the top of the ramp," he said eventually, turning away. He would deal with Alf later. Among other pressing jobs to hand he had to take Thumper to hospital.

When Ellen arrived at the hospital bedside of the 'accident victim' she found the man's face swathed in bandages, but the bits she could see had that same evil look as the man she had recorded throwing Alf and two others into a van early that morning.

"You've had quite a fall, Mr Bianchi," said Ellen after introducing herself and looking at the patient's medical chart. "Fractured eye socket and cheekbone and broken nose, but no injuries to the chest or body indicating a fall, and major bruising on the back of the head. You told the hospital staff you fell off a ladder."

"Yeah."

"What were you doing up the ladder?"

"Setting up decorations."

"Really, what were you celebrating?"

Bianchi thought about that for a moment, his one good eye, pending work on the socket on the other eye, glinting. He had been interviewed by police before. "My good health."

"Which has taken quite a turn. Where did this decorating effort take place?"

"Don't remember."

"Don't remember or just don't wish to say, Mr Bianchi?"

"Whatever."

"Did this fall happen to take place in the back of a moving van, Mr Bianchi?"

The thug's good eye stared at Ellen in astonishment, and the policewoman knew that he was the same man.

"What van? Why are you talking about vans?"

"I was just guessing, Mr Bianchi." It occurred to Ellen that she might have said too much. "Is there anything you want to tell the police about this incident?"

"Nah!" he said.

Ellen gave Bianchi her card with the station number, which was procedure, and left thinking that now she had more to put into her investigation file, but without realising the trouble she had caused for herself by mentioning the van.

Back at the desert site, after almost two hours of fiddling with the emergency control panel, the two would-be door jackers finally hit the right combination of connections and jacked-in voltage from an instrument testing device they had found amongst the stacks of equipment at the site, to be rewarded by a distinct 'click'. The hatch reluctantly gave way, but the only thing revealed was a narrow stairway leading down to a second hatch with another security panel and more of the mysterious writing. But this time, there were no override controls that they could see; even after bringing down lights connected to a generator, they had come with them in the furniture truck.

Just as Alf and Brian were discussing the necessity of levering off the second control panel and shooting some power into that from the generator, the thug reappeared, crowding into the small space in front of the second door.

"Mr Charles wants updates. I see you got the first hatch open; when do you think you can get past this hatch?"

"Listen... what was your name?" said Alf.

"Hutch."

"Listen, Hutch, we're dealing with alien tech in a confined space, you tell me how long it might take."

"Alien tech?"

"Look at the writing. Sure, some human sect or group or whatever might have had their own funny writing system and got out this far, but none of that seems likely. Other than that, we don't know anything apart from the fact that it'll be lunch soon."

"Yeah, lunch," said Brian.

"Mr James wants you to keep working."

"Tell Mr James we'll work better when we've eaten," said Alf. "It's been a long day."

Hutch left, muttering, but the consultants got their lunch – sandwiches brought from a vending machine in Creaghville on a trestle table set up among the tents - with Alf taking advantage of the break to slip into his tent and send details of the site and his new colleagues to Ellen on the tracking device's twin. He included pictures of the inner and outer doors taken by Elsbeth. As it happened, Elle was at her desk and could shoot back a text response. The device's services did not extend to phone conversations.

"Saw badly beat up guy, an offsider of Mr Charles, in hospital," she wrote. "Do you know anything about that?"

"Must be a workplace safety incident," typed Alf, sitting on the bunk in his allocated tent. The device included a small stylus for him to pick out letters on a keyboard displayed on a touch-sensitive screen. "The workplace can be hazardous, as you know."

"Workplace hazards my rear end," wrote Ellen. "This guy tried to tell me he fell off a ladder, but I don't believe that either."

"And a charming rear end it is, too," wrote Alf. "And before you can call me scum or threaten me with jail time for that remark, I'm outa here. I've got alien tech to deal with."

"Scum!" said Ellen to the device, but she found herself smiling as she dropped the device into the top drawer of her desk. She had been concerned over the safety of Alf's two consultants, but the sight of Thumper in hospital had reassured her that Alf should be able to handle the situation. In any case, Ellen still had no legal cause to do anything at all.

Back at the desert campsite, while Elsbeth sat outside and studied copies of the writing examples they had found to date – sketches rather than images so that the thugs would not catch sight of the recording device – Alf and Brian finally levered off the control panel cover on the second hatch to be confronted by a series of metal plates and printed circuits connected to a cable.

"Looks like fibre optic," said Alf of the cable.

"Fibre optic for a door security panel?" asked Brian.

Alf shrugged. "Quality installation, I guess. At least we know our alien friends didn't do things by halves."

That still left the problem of getting the door open, and they went back to connecting various metal surfaces with alligator clips and shooting voltages through them, mainly using the instrument testing device. At one point, they made the panel at the top of the device glow, although nothing appeared on the display. Another time, they got one of the buttons to glow. They took to writing notes on slips of paper taped to sections of the metal surfaces. Then Brian accidentally tapped the end of one clip to a piece of metal he was not aiming for. The door clicked, swung slightly, and the air pressure equalised with a sigh.

They were in, or so they thought.

Alf pulled the lever on the hatch and pushed the assembly inwards. The lever was stiff, and the hatch creaked a little, but otherwise, it moved surprisingly easily for a piece of engineering that had not been used in a long time.

"Whoa!" breathed Brian. He called for Elsbeth as Alf pushed the door further open to reveal a dark corridor. The light they had been using was on the end of a pole mounted on a tripod. Alf took the pole off the tripod and pushed it through the hatch. On closer inspection, the corridor proved to be an undecorated anteroom, floor covered in dust. On one side was a series of pegs, one of which still held what could have been a hazmat suit too small for most adult humans; on the other were two doors. After they advanced cautiously into the room, sniffing the air, they discovered that the doors led to a dusty shower room with another security lock hatch at one end.

"Maybe a decontamination shower," said Alf. "That hatch must lead to the place where they put their day wear back on."

"No male, female, separation," said Elsbeth, eagerly sketching the various labels they encountered and sneaking the occasional pic with Alf's small device. She was putting together an alphabet, for what that was worth, but had no idea what any of the words in the writing they could see meant.

"Another lock to get through," said Brian.

After an hour of messing with clips and voltages, with Elsbeth busy sketching whatever she could see, the door clicked, then smashed open. Elsbeth would have been swept off her feet, but Alf grabbed her arm. Brian braced himself against a wall. The hatch smashed shut, then opened several times, eventually to stay open, the wild blasts of air settling down into a steady breeze.

"Now it looks like we're in," said Alf.

CHAPTER SIX

Mr Charles was not one to scare easily. In fact, he did the scaring. But he was wary of the supreme crime boss of Creaghville, a Mr Acheron. Very few people knew of Mr Acheron's role as ultimate crime boss in the settlement, and a few of those who did were still alive because Mr Acheron did not realise that they knew. He was also the main power behind the alien dig. Now Mr Acheron was on the phone with Mr Charles, one of several underlings through which he conducted business, and he wanted to know things.

"Passed the first hatch, you say?" said Mr Acheron.

"Last I heard, they were still trying to open the second hatch, Mr Acheron," said Mr Charles. "But they're working blind with strange circuits."

"I'm impressed they got the first hatch open so quickly," said Mr Acheron. Mr Charles let out a quiet sigh of relief. "Progress cannot be forecast in these things, and we knew the

facility was abandoned a long time ago. When they do get full access, you know our priorities?"

"Yes, Mr Acheron, I'll make sure of it."

"In the meantime, I'm concerned that someone has been looking at files of the rebellion at Martus Prime in the Imperial archives here."

"Is that a matter of concern, Mr Acheron? Martus Prime is a long way from here, and the rebellion is over."

"Yes, the empire crushed it," said Mr Acheron. "But there are matters connected with it that would best be left undisturbed, even here. It may be someone just doing a history project or looking at some unimportant matter, but I would still like to know who. The tip I had pointed to the police station in Marshlands. You have a contact there?"

"I do, Mr Acheron. What do you want me to do when I find out who it is?"

"Who and why, Tobias. Who and why. Tell me that, and I'll decide what action, if any, is required."

Beyond the final metal hatch, the trio of explorers found a small room with a bench for sitting, also covered in dust, a place where clothes might have been hung, and a door with a lever where a human would have expected to find a handle but without a security lock.

On one wall, Elsbeth found a framed poster showing a hominid creature with distinctly reptilian features, including a jaw that looked as if it could bite a human face off, very pale skin, and lank, grey hair. But the creature was dressed in colorful clothes and might have been smiling, as far as they could tell. In the background was what looked to be a cave with glittering columns of stalagmites and hanging curtains of stalactites. There was a single word in large type on top of the poster and several in smaller type underneath.

"It's a travel poster!" shrieked Elsbeth. "This is what the creatures who built this place look like. This is a huge, huge find. There's been nothing like this anywhere. This is an entirely new civilisation. It has to be broadcast to the Empire. We have to tell those guys."

"Elsbeth, don't tell them!" snapped Alf. "Don't say anything when Hutch comes around, especially about broadcasting the find."

"But it's true," she protested.

"Of course it's true," retorted Alf. "The trouble is our hosts are not good sharers. The gangsters behind this have spent a lot of time and money getting this far, and they'll want to see a really good return on their investment, or they'll be around asking why not in an unpleasant, if not downright nasty fashion. That's why it's important they don't see you with that device of mine."

"How nasty?" asked Brian.

"A hole out in the desert that is forever yours, that's how nasty."

The two college types were shocked into silence.

"They wouldn't dare!" said Elsbeth, eventually.

"Watch them. But I'll do my best to keep you guys from harm. They won't do anything for a few days, and we have a whole alien facility, whatever this place is, to get lost in. Keep an eye open for ways to slip out unnoticed."

"Into the desert?" said Brian.

"Still working on that part," said Alf. He had decided not to tell them that a member of the police should already have a location on the site.

Hutch came in at that moment, obviously delighted at the progress. He even spared a glance for the travel poster.

"When can we access the complex itself?" he asked.

As an answer, Alf pulled out the lever on the door and pushed it open. "Knock yourself out, but we're calling it for tonight. Note that there is still a breeze, so there's a

pressure difference somewhere. That means we shouldn't be this far in without proper equipment like breathing masks and maybe those helmets with a light that the miners have, and it's really late. Tomorrow guys. We'll get kitted out properly and start exploring the whole complex."

Another reason for stopping for the night was that the engineer wanted to report what had happened to Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen – he did not dare think of her in any other terms, even if she was cute – and ensure the find was safely recorded in off-site databases.

"I see what you mean, a real breeze," said Hutch, holding up his hand to feel the airflow. "We need to go on now."

"Turn off the generator when you leave," said Alf. He led the consultants out to a dinner of frozen packaged meals heated up in a microwave.

"Why do we need masks?" asked Elsbeth.

"Cave explorers, spelunkers, who go into cave systems that have been sealed carry them," said Alf. "The air quality on the surface here is below Earth normal as it is. Judging by how the pressure equalised when we got that last door open, I think the atmosphere in the bunker-facility-whatever it is, was different somehow. I guess it's been sealed for a long time. Maybe much of the oxygen got absorbed into the alien concrete or something. I seem to recall that happening when they were experimenting with people living in closed systems back on Earth. Nitrogen is inert, so it wouldn't get absorbed.

"I saw some basic masks in the equipment stacks – from the same sporting goods store as the tents, I suppose. They have air quality monitors of sorts and small oxygen bottles. I'll show you how to use them tomorrow."

"Have we any idea how long it's been closed up?" asked Brian.

"Apart from a lot of dust, it doesn't look all that old," said Alf, "but it's been locked up in darkness, and the air is dry. This colony was first settled, what, eighty years ago, and the planet was surveyed at least a couple of decades before that without anyone finding traces of an advanced civilisation. Call it a century, at least, but anything beyond that is a guess. We need archaeologists here sifting the ground."

When they went to their tents, Alf repeated much of this in a text message to Ellen, who examined the pictures laboriously transmitted to her – the device uploaded only slowly - with considerable interest. She was still up and sitting at a small desk in her bedroom.

"Am I still scum?" he asked at the end of the uploads.

"Slime," she retorted, "but slime that is proving marginally useful. Keep it up."

"Are you in that cute dressing gown of yours right now?"

"Now you're back to being scum about to go up on charges of making disrespectful comments to police. Go to bed and report tomorrow."

Ellen deleted the text exchange on her device because she did not want it to go into the case file, but when she dropped the device into her bag for the next day, she caught herself smiling.

Alf went to bed and was well into a dreamland that featured Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen in her blue dressing gown behaving in ways inconsistent with her role as a police officer when he found himself pressing the small knife he had brought with him against the belly of Hutch. The thug had come into the tent to shake him awake, and Alf had acted on instinct.

"What the...", said Hutch. He knew the feeling of a knife against his belly. "Where did that come from?" Alf's other hand gripped the thug's right arm. Hutch tried to shake it off but could not move his arm at all.

"First, you tell me why the fuck you're sneaking into my tent," said Alf, head still on his pillow. "I'm not the sort of guy you sneak up on."

"I guess not," said Hutch. "I came 'cause three of my guys are missing in that Alien place."

"Missing?" said Alf, pushing the thug away and getting up. "What do you mean missing?"

"I mean, they went in on the boss's orders and haven't come out."

"How long have they been gone?"

"Three hours. One should have come back by now at least to say what's happening."

"These were the three guys I saw around before, right? They didn't strike me as scientist types. What were they hoping to do that us consultants couldn't, apart from some sightseeing?"

"Boss's orders," said Hutch. "Straight from him."

"Do you know where in the underground base or whatever it is they might have gone?"

Hutch paused before answering and seemed to undergo some internal struggle.

"Third level," he said eventually.

"Third level? The place has been sealed and forgotten for at least a century and probably much longer, and they know to go to the third level? What else do you guys know about this place that you haven't told us poor, hard-working consultants? Like how you knew that the entrance to the facility was there in the first place."

"There were plans for the place in some archive somewhere," said Hutch. "I dunno what archive, I dunno where the boss got them from, and I haven't seen the plans myself, but there's something on the third level they wanted."

"Were there any warnings along with the plans about what might be in this place?" asked Alf.

"I know just what I told you. We weren't told of any warnings."

"Did your guys take masks?"

"Masks? Were they supposed to?"

"Didn't you hear me say to the others that we shouldn't be this far in without masks?"

Hutch strained his brain with thought for a moment. "Oh yeah. But the place has oxygen."

"Doesn't mean all the air is good. This isn't my problem, but I guess we can't leave your guys down there without trying something." He thought but did not add, that Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen would not approve at all of people being left to die, even thugs. "Go grab five masks from the crates by the pit, I'll change. Oh yeah, and there's a big first aid kit there. Grab that."

A few minutes later, they were at the entrance to the facility, and Alf was explaining about the air quality warnings. "It's an audio warning thing. If it's just ticking, there's no problem. If the ticking starts increasing, look at the needle on the gage. Check how far it is from the red area. When the air gets really bad, it starts shrieking 'warning' 'warning'; that's when you want to put the masks on quickly. There is a smart air filter and an oxygen bottle with fifteen minutes or so air. There's also a speaker so we can talk to one another without taking the mask off."

"Have you used these things before?"

"Something similar. I looked at the manuals for these briefly yesterday."

"When did you have to go underground?"

"Like I told the others yesterday, I've had a varied career. You want to find your colleagues or not? Let's go."

Besides the masks which they carried strapped around their necks, ready to put on at a moment's notice, and the air monitoring devices clipped to their belts, they had mining hard

hats with powerful lights at the front, good for about two hours, plus heavy-duty flashlights. They stepped through the final hatch into a corridor beyond.

The first impression Alf had of the Alien installation was of absolute silence; the second was of darkness. The lights on their mining helmets made little impression on the inky blackness. The corridor stretched off to the left and right, and there were doors.

"Any idea which way to this third level?" asked Alf.

"I didn't think to ask. They said they knew."

"Wait!" Alf saw something on the floor. "Look at this. The dust has been disturbed to the right. There are footprints in the dust. We can track your guys."

"All right, lead the way," said Hutch.

They followed the obvious tracks to another door with a security lock, but this one was lying on its side, and there were scorch marks around the lock.

"You guys blew it open?" asked Alf in astonishment.

"Way faster," said Hutch, unabashed, "and it's not a heavy-duty hatch like the others. Just an internal security door."

"Whatever," said Alf and stepped through. Beyond that door was an ordinary one with a lever, which opened onto a gallery at the top of a vast, open space. The walls on either side of Alf melted away. In front of him was a waist high wall of blue material with nothing beyond that.

He looked down. Far below, he thought he could see a tiled floor and long seats fitting with what might have been green cushions. Above him was a roof of pale, ribbed arches filled in with the same blue concrete/plaster material used in the wall. The arches were, in turn, supported by Greek-style fluted pillars set into the galleries, with an additional vast column that they could just see in the middle of the space. Alf could not see any end to the galleries to his left, but to his right, the structure curved around and flattened out. In the lights from the mining hats, he could just see the other side. The space had both elegance and grandeur.

"Impressive," said Alf, then added, "your friends went around to the right."

They followed the tracks. Sightseeing could wait, although Alf glanced in the occasional window. Some of these windows had lettering on them; others did not. Occasionally, he glimpsed what might have been bits of furniture. Overall, Alf got the impression of a giant, emptied out, very dusty, underground shopping mall.

At the end of the galleries the tracks merged into each other in front of two sliding doors.

"Looks as if they were hoping to get the lift," said Hutch.

"They would have been waiting a long time," said Alf. "No power at all."

The tracks moved on to what was unmistakably a set of stairs, although small for humans. Two levels down, the tracks veered off to the right again.

"This must be the third level," said Alf. They followed the tracks down a broad corridor, and then Alf stopped abruptly.

"Wait, what's this," he said, stepping to the edge of the corridor.

In the dust was another, completely different set of tracks. They were of two small feet, perhaps the size of a chimpanzee on Earth, but with a flatter sole and three toes, including a massive, big toe. There was no dust at all in the second set of tracks and no indication that the men who had passed that way had paused to inspect them.

"These were made after your colleagues passed through," said Alf. "Whatever creature made these tracks, I think it's following your guys."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Senior constable Samantha Pye was pleased with herself.

"I cracked my dognapping case," she told her superior, Sergeant Pullen, when she came in.

"Poppy is saved?" said Ellen.

"Turns out that it was an inside job, and that Poppy was never in any real danger."

"Do tell."

"One of the husband's sons by his first marriage grabbed the dog and used a disposable assistant unit to text the threats. He had the sense to use a credit stick to pay for the phone but forgot about the security cameras in the store. His dad identified him and got Poppy back. The family has declined to make any formal complaint, which suits me fine."

"And me," said Ellen. "If we present a brief on dognapping to legal, we'd never live it down. The family is happy; the crime has been cleared from our records; we can go back to trying to trace stolen parts."

Then Inspector Barastoc appeared and summoned Ellen to his office.

"I was just looking at the inquiries made by this station and saw you were making record requests for the war on Martus Prime," he said after he had closed the door.

"Yes, sir," said Ellen, thinking fast. She had not thought to cover her tracks on those inquiries. Now, she was confronted by one of her major failings as a police officer: her inability to do undercover work. Brilliant at interrogations and playing one suspect off against another, she was no good at acting and subterfuge. She decided she could tell part of the truth.

"I, um, was just following up a lead, sir, about that mechanic you were interested in."

"The petty thief from Sulu?"

"Yes, sir. He let slip to one of the people at the airport that he was in the rebellion on Martus Prime."

"Was he in the legions?"

"If he was Imperial, what's he doing all the way over here under what is clearly an assumed identity? Maybe he was a rebel."

"Ah! That makes sense. But the rebellion's been quashed, and the rebel soldiers allowed to go home."

"Yes, sir. I was trying to work that out, but I couldn't find any trace of an Alfonso on the rebel side, and those bugs we have on his workplace indicate that he's called in sick. Do you want me to pick him up from his home?"

"Ah, hmmm!" Barastoc pretended to consider that action, although he knew full well that Alf was at the Alien site. "May as well leave it until he reappears. Did you hear anything more about the ship crash thing?"

Ellen shook her head while being careful to continue to look directly at Barastoc.

"No, sir, nothing."

"Okay, well, there are perps lifting engine parts left and right – maybe see if we can find out more about that gang."

Ellen 'yes sired' and left. After she had gone, Barastoc reached for his phone.

Alf switched on his big flashlight to take a closer look at the tracks in the dust.

"What could be down here?" said Hutch. "You said the place had been sealed."

"For a century, maybe, at least, but we're just guessing," said Alf. "Look at tracks; you can see regular marks here and here, outside the footprints on the right and a long trail here on the left."

"What could be causing that?"

Alf thought for a moment. "Maybe it's also using its hands to walk, like a guerilla or chimp on Earth? The travel poster showed a creature that was lizard-like but with longer arms like that of a chimpanzee. The feet are small, which also suggests a chimp."

Alf had never seen a chimpanzee, even in a zoo, but he knew about them from films.

"An alien lizard-chimp?" said Hutch

"Maybe. I dunno," said Alf. "Now that I think about it, your guys must have made a hell of a racket when they blew that door open. Must've been able to hear the boom all over this place. There are no other tracks. This creature must not come up here unless it has a reason."

"How many would there be?"

"Hutch, I have no idea. I can see one set of tracks, and it's going in the same direction as your friends. Let's follow them. This place gives me the creeps."

"I hear you," said Hutch.

They walked on, keeping an eye on both the human and the other set of tracks, which did not vary until they came to a corridor, turning to the left this time. The creature's tracks also turned to the left. As they entered the corridor, the air quality monitors suddenly started ticking harder, and the voice warnings kicked in.

"Alert! Alert! Put on masks now!"

As they put on their masks, Alf thought he heard a stealthy shuffle, a whisper, or was it a whimper? He switched on the flashlight again to see, through the mask, a hint of a grey form and a glimpse of two brief points of red in the distance. Then, nothing but ticking from the monitors.

"There they are!" said Hutch. All three men were on the floor in front of a door. Two had simply fallen. The other had been flung across the corridor to the wall on the opposite side and had slid down to the floor, the front of his tee shirt glistening with blood. Alf had only time for a glance at the scene but saw that one of the shoulder bags the men brought with them had been flipped open, and the contents, including a small stick of explosives and a plastic lunch box, had been emptied out. The top of the lunch box had been ripped off, and the items – a packet of sandwiches, a drink box, and a fruit bar – spread in the dust.

"This guy's been shot but still breathing," said Hutch. "What's wrong with them?"

As an answer, Alf grabbed one of the spare face masks, pulled it over one of the thug's heads, and turned on the air bottle. After a moment, the man stirred and then sat up.

"Do that guy," said Alf pointing at the wounded man. "I'll do this other one."

Two of the thugs were soon sitting up, glad to be breathing properly, but the wounded man was in a bad way. Now that he was conscious, he was in pain.

"You two," said Alf to the thugs, "where was this guy when he got shot?"

"In front of the door," said one, still breathing heavily. "Touched the handle."

A closer inspection of the door, with Alf careful not to touch the handle or step in front of it, showed a small round hole that might have been one end of a gun barrel.

"Booby trap, I guess," said Alf. He looked at the wounded man. The bullet, if that was what had come out of the barrel, had gone under his ribs and might have gone into his intestines. There was no exit wound.

"Your guy needs to go to a hospital now," said Alf. "No messing around. We'll have to carry him out." He rummaged in the medical kit. "Some morphine here, you allergic?" The wounded man shook his head. Alf dosed him with an injectable ampule, slapped an auto-bandage on the wound, and picked him up. "Grab the feet," he said to Hutch. "We'll carry him out that way. Have your guys grab their stuff, and let's move."

"What about the creature?" said Hutch, who had also glimpsed a grey form.

"Don't think it's going to bother us. It seemed more curious about the weird creatures in its domain than hostile."

Alf and Hutch carried the wounded man up two flights of stairs before the other two men felt recovered enough to carry their comrade. The three men in the original party had started to feel the effects of the air as they went into the corridor and foolishly tried to carry on. They later realised that the further they got from the only open door, the more dangerous it was to be without masks.

The camp was still in darkness when they got to the surface.

"What am I going to tell them when we get to the hospital?" Hutch asked Alf as Junot, the wounded man, was loaded into a large passenger car that was also at the site. The obvious gunshot wound would be reported to the police.

"Hutch, I don't care," said Alf, standing by the thug as he typed in the password for the car's AI. "But in the interests of avoiding police involvement here for a while longer, keep it as simple as possible. Just say you found him somewhere, and he's a friend of yours. Remember that they'll ask questions about where you found him and why you found him, the dust on his clothes, and so on. Start thinking of a story and make sure Junot knows it."

Before he went back to bed to grab another couple of hours' sleep if he was lucky, Alf sent a text to Ellen saying that another of the men at the site had been taken to hospital and, no, it had nothing to do with him. The man had set off a booby trap at the site. There were also indications of a creature on the site.

The news that the alien installation was inhabited also caused Alf's colleagues considerable surprise the next morning at breakfast. They sat at the camp table they had claimed as their own, with the two thugs from last night's expedition keeping an eye on the consultants from a separate table.

"How can anything biological still be alive down there?" asked Elsbeth.

"Is it just one?" asked Brian.

"No idea on both counts," said Alf. "But the tracks were recent and unmistakable, and both Hutch and I glimpsed the creature itself. Maybe there's another way in, but you remember how the hatch blew when we jacked the lock. The place had been sealed for a long time before we came along. Also, there were no other tracks in the galleries, and I didn't see anything like animal droppings."

"Automaton?" asked Brian.

Alf shrugged. "It's a thought. My guess is that it's only one and doesn't bother much with the area we were in. But it heard the noise when our friends blew the door and came to take a look. I don't think it's hostile – it didn't hurt the guys on the ground – just curious. It looked at a lunch box that was in their packs and threw the stuff around."

"Poor thing," said Elsbeth. "It's been down there at least a century alone."

"If you do see this creature down there, poor or not, don't approach it," said Alf. "If you're between it and an open door, get out of the way so it can escape. If it gets used to us being around, maybe we can work out some way to make contact."

"Gotit," she said.

"What were our friends looking for, working off this plan they didn't share with us?" said Brian.

"A good question," said Alf. "Whatever was behind that door, it was protected by a booby trap that's managed to remain in working order for a century or so. There was a single word on the door, which didn't mean anything to me. Maybe it's a piece of Alien tech they somehow knew about, maybe it's weapons, maybe it's advanced ship tech. Whatever it is, I'm not about to ask our friends."

"This is such a huge find," said Elsbeth. "The Alien races we know about are the Poolers and the Fronde, who we've been fighting. But all the physical contact we've had has been crashed ships and a couple of markers set up by the Poolers – all of it coreward, in the opposite direction from Earth to us. Then there are the Spacers, who seem to have just

vanished. We know their main language thanks to the Poolers but not much else, and now we're sitting on top of a whole fucking installation built by a race using an alphabet that bears no relation to anything we've seen so far. This is not just huge; it's humongous. Scholars will be coming from all over the Imperium."

"When it's announced," said Alf. "Like I said before, the interests of our hosts are not scholastic, and they'll be worried about you blabbing when you get back to Creaghville."

The other two were silent for a moment.

"They're going to kill us, anyway," said Elsbeth softly.

"When we stop being useful," said Alf.

"We're not getting any money from this?" said Brian.

"You guys didn't ask for any money upfront, did you?"

They both shook their heads.

"Or even tell anybody where you were going or with whom?"

They both shook their heads.

"Shit!" said Brian quietly. "I thought it was such a sweet deal."

"It still can be," said Alf. "When this gets out, the Empire will throw money at the research for this place, and you two will be in prime slots for jobs."

"We're still back to this point about when it gets out," said Elsbeth. "How do we get the word out? How do we get out?"

"Okay, it's time I came clean," said Alf, "now keep your voice down when I tell you this ... I've been sending all details of this place out to a police sergeant who's been compiling an investigation file."

"With that device of yours?" said Brian.

"Uh-huh."

"Who's the sergeant?" asked Elsbeth.

"Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen, she works out of the Marshlands station."

"Why her?"

"She was hassling me about other stuff at the time, and I overheard a snippet of conversation between her boss, Inspector Barastoc, and Mr Charles that indicated she isn't corrupt. Barastoc's in Charles's pocket but not her."

"Good to know," said Elsbeth.

"If you talk to any police, only her. Come to think of it, I'll see if she can release her file to a lot of people and the media all at the same time. If all this," Alf waved his hands, "becomes generally known, there won't be any point in killing us."

"Release it now," said Brian.

"Let's just take more of a look inside," said Alf. "I couldn't take pics last night, and maybe we can see how far that gallery extends. Hutch may not be back for a while, and our friends over there won't care."

Alf told the thugs where they were going and went through the air-quality breathing mask drill with his colleagues. They strapped on miner's helmets, grabbed large flashlights, and walked into the Alien structure, this time trying the handles of any doors they came to in the first corridor. The trio carefully examined each door first and then stood to one side when they pushed on the lever. A few opened, mostly to reveal dusty chairs and tables, all small for humans, but the occasional artifact. In one, they found a small box with a keypad.

"A control wand, maybe?" said Brian, wiping the dust from it and looking at the keypad. In another, they found, high up on a shelf, what looked suspiciously like a laptop with a fold-out screen, albeit smaller than the ones they used. "Oh man, think we can jack it?"

"We can try," said Alf. "Let's stop the room to room stuff and see how far we can get on that gallery floor."

They stepped through into the vast main gallery.

"Whoa," said Elsbeth reverently.

"It's so quiet," said Brian. "Like a tomb." He clapped his hands. It echoed. They walked around to the stairwells.

"You said there was a lift or elevator around here?" said Elsbeth.

The soldier led them around to where last night's group had paused. "I think those are the equivalent of lift doors," said Alf.

Elsbeth studied the doors intently for a moment and then the doors of the same lift on the next floor.

"There," she said, pointing at a symbol on the right above the sliding doors. "That might be a floor number."

"Counting up or counting down?" asked Brian.

She shrugged. "We'll have to see, but it's a place to start."

On level three, they walked around to the side gallery so that Alf could show the other two the tracks he had spotted the other night. Elsbeth gave a small shriek when she saw them.

"Oh, my stars, it's real," she breathed.

"Still can't see how anything bio could survive down here for so long," said Brian.

They got to the bottom and examined the seats that had once been upholstered in some form of glossy fabric, which still looked good but cracked the moment Alf touched it. They took pictures and moved on, keeping to the side rather than out into the vast central space.

"Look," said Alf, shining his light on the dust on the gallery floor, "our friend has been here."

"Recent?" said Elsbeth, bending over to peer closely.

"Difficult to tell, but seems so," said Alf. "There are no other tracks. It doesn't seem to have bothered with this area at all until we started messing around."

"There's a big passage off to the right up here," said Brian.

Just then, the air quality monitors started shrieking, "Warning! Warning! Masks on now!" The trio obliged.

"Let's take a peek through that passage and then come straight back," said Alf through the speaker on his mask. "These air bottles don't last long."

The passage was short, and at its end, the trio was confronted with another waist-high blue wall beyond which was a vast, black space. After a few moments of staring into the darkness, Alf thought he could see a lump in the near distance. He aimed his light at the lump and played it back and forth until he realised that it might be the head of a statue looking like the head of the creature they had seen on the travel poster. On a whim, he got one of the commercial light sticks he had found in the equipment bins, cracked the tube so that it glowed, and threw it. As it arched over the void, the stick shed tendrils of light on the grey mass, which was indeed a gigantic statue of one of the creatures that built the city, dressed in a cloak and holding a spear, the tip of which almost touched the ceiling of the vast chamber it was in. Beyond and to both sides of that statue, the explorers caught a glimpse of more galleries and statues before the stick hit the smooth, patterned floor far below.

"Oh my," said Elsbeth.

"Behold the Kingdom of the Dwarves," muttered Brian.

"This isn't just an installation; it's a whole city," said Alf.

After another minute or so of the trio using their flashlights to get some idea of the colossal size of the place, Alf noticed two tiny red dots just visible in the gloom about where he thought the base of the statue would be on the floor of the chamber.

"Elsbeth," muttered Alf. "No shrieking but look directly in front at about floor level. Do you see two red dots?"

"Oh yes," she said.

"I think that's the creature checking us out."

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Ellen and Samantha got into work, Inspector Barastoc had a job for them.

"Some guy 's come into the Marshlands hospital with a gunshot wound," he said.

"They're operating on him now. Be there when he wakes up and see if you can get a statement."

Thanks to Alf's text, Ellen knew that the wounded man was from the Alien site in the desert and that they were unlikely to get any usable statement out of him, but they had to go through the motions. When they got to the hospital, the investigating duo's first act was to take charge of the slug extracted from the thug's intestines and place it in an evidence bag where Ellen pronounced it "unusual." The standard police evidence scanners both officers carried with them didn't offer any further details, but then Ellen had not expected it to.

A scan of the fingerprints of the thug Junot Romero before he woke up indicated that his career had been of considerable previous interest to the police. As a result, when the anesthetic wore off, Juno found himself confronted by two notably unsympathetic female police officers.

"That's an unusual slug the doctors dug out of you, Mr Romero," said Ellen after she had gone through the preliminaries of introductions. "With your history of bad behaviour, we're kinda interested to know who shot you and where you got shot."

"I didn't see who shot me. I was walking, and the next thing I know, I was in hospital."

"Where were you walking?"

"By the marshes."

"Where exactly?"

"Somewhere close to route three."

"What time was this?"

A pause. "Bout one in the morning."

"What were you doing out there at one in the morning?"

"I couldn't sleep. I wanted to walk."

"Our records show that you live on the other side of the spaceport. That's quite a drive to walk off a bout of insomnia. Why out there? Why not walk in Founder Park?"

"I like the marshlands."

"You're one of the few who do. What do you like about them?"

"I just like 'em."

This went on for some time before Ellen decided to wind up.

"Here's the thing, Mr Romero," she said. "Under Imperial law, if a gunshot wound victim is proving uncooperative, I can ask for warrants to search their place and anyone else involved, including the person who dropped you off. The hospital security cameras and facial recognition software show this to be a Joffrey Hutchins, another person who has proved of some interest to the police over the years."

"I was answering your questions."

"Most unconvincingly," said Ellen. "When the men in our relationships lie to us, we can't do much about it. But when the men we interview for work lie to us, we can apply for warrants. Under that same law, we can ensure you cannot get to a phone for a few hours to warn people. Is there anyone you'd like us to notify?"

Junot thought about that for a moment. "My mum," he said eventually.

"Give us the details, and we'll be on our way. A police officer will be stationed outside for the rest of the day. After that, you'll be free to go – depending on what we find, of course."

The ladies left.

"You going to check with the inspector about the warrants?" asked Samantha as they left the hospital.

"It's just standard procedure," said Ellen, who suspected that the Inspector would try to divert her back to chasing stolen spare parts. "We can take a couple of extra steps before reporting. It's better than investigating petty theft at any rate."

"It is," said Sam.

By the time the consultants had emerged from the Alien city, as they now believed it was, with Elsbeth taking sketches of whatever writing she could find, Hutch had returned from his mercy dash, full of information.

"You were in the rebellion on Martus Prime," he said to Alf as the consultant climbed out of the pit.

Thanks to a text from Ellen, which had been almost apologetic, saying she had revealed that information, Alf had a reply ready.

"Uh-huh."

"You were in the Imperial Guard?" said Elsbeth.

"Other side."

"A rebel?"

"Yep."

"Front line?" asked Hutch.

"Wounded twice."

"And you ended up all the way over here?"

"I took a tour for my health."

"Long way to come for your health," said Hutch.

"I had a lot of health issues. Now, if you'll excuse us, we've got some processing to do."

"Are those IT devices?" said Hutch, seeing the control wand and the unit they thought might be a tablet.

"Yep. We searched the rooms close to the opening. Then, walked through that gallery to the end and took a quick look at the city beyond."

"City?"

"As in underground structures several times the size of what we saw last night - a very large gallery with big statues, and we think several galleries of the same size leading off it. Didn't your plans show you that stuff?"

"Just the part we saw and a passage on the bottom level leading off."

"That's the passage that leads to the rest of the city," said Alf. "Go back to your boss and ask him if there's more to the plans and tell him that if he wants us to look at alien tech – that's what all this is about right?"

Hutch nodded reluctantly.

"Then you need to get more advanced masks to go into that city - ones that recycle the air we breathe as well as use bottled air. They last for hours. And how about you show us these plans?"

"I'll ask the boss," said Hutch, "but for now, he wants us to look in that room."

"What's in that room that's so important?"

"He's not sure himself. Once we get in and look, he'll tell us what to do."

"My only suggestion then is to blow the door, like you did with that locked door to the gallery," said Alf. "I had a quick look at it last night. There's no security pad or anything else to work on. I suspect it's unlocked from a computer console somewhere else, and that could take us weeks or months to find. If you're that keen on getting in, blow it. Just don't be around when you do. Use a timer."

"Gotit," said Hutch, relieved to have a straight forward, easily understandable solution to the problem in front of him. "Say, what about that creature we saw? Did you see it again?"

"More tracks, but we think it was out there watching us."

"Boss was really weirded out at the thought of whatever it is. Was wondering if we should shoot it."

"No way," said Elsbeth looking up.

"Tell Mr Charles it seems curious about us, not hostile, and even if it's hostile, he'd never be forgiven for ordering it shot."

"You bet," said Elsbeth.

Hutch shrugged. "I'll tell him. I don't think he cares, but I'll tell him."

By the time Alf sat down to the consultant's sandwich lunch, Elsbeth was stressing out about the information she had collected.

"I can tell the difference between letters, numbers, and symbols," she said, "but I dunno which way the number sequence goes. Is it counting up or counting down? Do these guys read left to right or right to left?" Then she caught sight of the suspected control wand by the alien tablet computer, squealed, and pounced on it.

"Numbers on the keys. She looked some more at the keypad. Okay, I think that's a symbol instead of a letter or number," she pointed at a button at the top, "and that may be zero." She pointed at a button at the bottom. "This is the reverse of the elevator door sequence, and there are twelve buttons. The gallery we were in had five floors, and the door in that lift space had that symbol on it – five from the top button. Maybe it's a five at the top in that elevator shaft we saw and one at the bottom, with these guys counting by twelves rather than by tens like us, and now I'm pretty sure they read left to right." She sat back.

"That's pretty good, Elsbeth," said Alf, genuinely impressed. She beamed. "But it is still just one small step."

She nodded reluctantly. "Mind you, there's a number three on the first hatch you guys unlocked."

"As in entrance number three?"

She nodded again.

"It makes sense that there'd be more than one entrance to a place that size, but why haven't the entrances been detected well before this? I mean, maybe this place has been abandoned for centuries, but not thousands of years – not enough time for erosion and soil deposition to cover large entrances."

"Maybe it's like that weird archaeological site on Earth they still haven't figured out," said Elsbeth. "It's a huge site ten thousand years old, and they initially said it might have been deliberately buried."

"Göbekli Tepe you mean?" said Alf. "But they later decided it hadn't been buried. Hmmm! If these guys deliberately buried everything, it's one explanation for why we haven't found any traces of them before now. Where are the farms, the mines, the connecting roads, and the holiday resorts?"

"Maybe the resorts are also underground," said Elsbeth. "You saw the travel poster. They like to visit caves. Maybe everything's underground."

"Maybe," said Alf. "Another difference, now that I think of it, is that religion plays a big part in Göbekli Tepe, but I don't think our alien friends are into religious rituals. We didn't see any carvings showing anything that might be religious scenes or anything much in

the way of decorations apart from the statues on the gallery floor, and we didn't get a close look at them.

Brian, who had taken no part in the conversation in favour of tinkering with the computer notepad they had picked up, suddenly ripped off the bottom half of it.

"That was it, the keypad lifts out. Look! Circuits are densely packed but all sealed, so it might still work."

"Got any points we can put leads onto?" asked Alf.

"Think so," muttered Brian. "No external power jacks, but this might be the main power system. Low voltage to start?"

"Let's try."

While they ate the sandwiches, Brian brought over the battery system they had used on the locks and tried a low voltage to be rewarded with a gleam of light inside the device. They increased the voltage again and got a block of what appeared to be a soft mist hanging above the top of the device. It took Alf a moment to understand what they were looking at.

"It's a holographic screen display," he exclaimed.

They could not put the keypad back in with the jacking wires in place, but Brian pressed some of the contacts. The mist cleared, and a series of symbols appeared. After looking at the keypad, he pressed the contact he suspected corresponded with enter on a human keyboard and was presented with a series of words in the alien language.

"Until we can read this stuff, I can't do much else," said Brian.

"At least we know how to power it," said Alf, "and we know they used holographic images."

Hutch came to the table to exclaim, "What the fuck! You got one of their devices to work!"

"We got a response from it," said Alf, "but it doesn't mean anything until we can work out the language."

"Boss wants us to try blowing the door after lunch," said Hutch. "You guys going to come?"

"I think we will. Tell us when you're ready."

Elsbeth waited until Hutch left and then whispered fiercely. "Are we really going to help out in this alien tech scavenger hunt of theirs?"

"They won't get to keep any of it, remember," whispered Alf back, "and I think it might help us take a closer look at the creature."

An hour later Alf was hiding around the corner in the passage off the gallery where he had seen the tracks on the previous night. Brian was beside him with a flashlight, and Elsbeth was a little further away, crouching behind one of the pillars in the walls.

Behind them, Hutch and company abruptly blew in the door to the room they were interested in with an ear shattering boom that seemed to echo throughout the enormous, empty, underground city. No wonder the creature had come to check it out. They waited. Eventually, Hutch called on the cheap two-way radios they had found in the equipment stacks. The devices had proved effective enough at very short ranges inside the city.

"Alf, can you come?"

"Soon. Wait there."

Then Elsbeth, who also had a radio, whispered excitedly. "I see something."

A little later, Alf also saw the creature as a dim outline in the distance shuffling along, moving chimp-like on hands and feet but with its left arm limp and apparently useless, trailing in the dust. So that was the reason for the odd track he had seen the night before. He was aware that Hutch had walked in behind him.

"Don't do anything," he said softly.

"Boss wants to know," said Hutch, having the sense to keep his voice down.

Alf waited until the creature was within about twenty paces, then swung himself out into the side passage, raising both arms, hands palm outwards as if surrendering.

"Want to talk," he said. At the same moment Brian switched on the large flashlight so that Alf was lit up, clearly visible to the creature.

Better able to see the creature, despite the darkness and being lit up himself, Alf realised that it was wearing clothes. Its coat might have once been a smart blue with shiny buttons but was now so old that the color was mostly grey; all but two buttons had disappeared, and the sleeves looked as if they might fall off. A pair of grey trousers with a black belt were so torn and tattered that they revealed more than they hid.

The creature's face was of the same basic plan as that of the individual in the travel poster, with a snake-like jaw and nostrils up front and a skull and ears that bore a passing resemblance to that of a human. Part of the creature's face had cracked – not scared, but cracked as if it was a type of plastic rather than flesh. That meant it was an artificial being, although the creature's eyes seemed to glow with intelligence. Otherwise, the greenish skin was smooth, without either fur or scales, including a completely bald head.

All this Alf saw in the brief moment the creature stopped, exclaimed, "Aaaagh!" then turned and raced off down the gallery. Then, as it reached the doorway it had come in by, the creature turned and stopped to look at Alf. He saw that the human had not moved and that no one else was chasing it. The creature then raised one arm, hand out in the same gesture Alf had used, with the left arm still hanging limp and useless. It remained that way for a few seconds, then bolted through the doorway.

"Oh, my stars," shrieked Elsbeth over the radio, "I think it's sentient."

CHAPTER NINE

Ellen and Samantha found enough items of interest at the homes of both Hutch and Junot to get the wounded Junot handcuffed to his hospital bed while they questioned him again.

"An impressive collection of firearms at your place, Mr Romero," said Ellen, "and you took some trouble to hide them. But detective senior constable Pye here has more experience than she wants in men hiding things from her."

"Hard won experience," said Samantha.

"Self-defence," muttered Junot.

"You need both an assault rifle and a high-powered rifle with top-of-the-range optical sights for self-defence?" asked Ellen. "Our tech guys nearly wet themselves when we handed those over. Now they're happily firing them and comparing the fired slugs with bullets recovered in past cases."

"Boys and their toys, Sergeant Pullen," interjected Samantha.

"And the boys liked that machine gun of yours, Mr Romero," said Ellen. "They told me all sorts of stuff about it, like it uses standard 7.62-millimetre cartridges and has an impressive rate of fire. You might have gotten away with possessing the other weapons if you had a license for them, but you don't. The machine gun, however, and I don't need any guy to tell me this, is flat out illegal. For the record, I have to ask, who or what were you planning on defending yourself against?"

"Bad neighbourhood," said Junot after a pause.

"Didn't seem that bad," said Ellen. "Did you think it was bad, Detective Senior Constable Pye?"

"I'd buy there," said Samantha. "Although it wouldn't be my first choice. We spoke to the residents of your building, Mr Romero, and they seemed to think that they were the ones who needed protection from you and friends of yours that come around."

"Trouble with neighbours," said Junot defiantly.

"Really?" said Ellen. "Which ones? The grandmother, the single mum with two kids, the husband and wife real estate agents, or the student share apartment? Did any of the residents seem threatening to you, senior constable Pye?"

"Couldn't see any threat at all except to my sanity, Sergeant Pullen," said Samantha.

"Mr Romero," said Ellen, "your digital assistant is with our tech guys now, who are busily going through emails, texts, and the occasional digital file you have been entrusted with, and I expect to find many interesting lines of inquiry. In the meantime, I'll do the paperwork on the arms charges. I'd wish you a speedy recovery, but I doubt you'd welcome moving from a hospital bed to a cell."

"I have friends," said Junot.

"You'll need them, Mr Romero," said Ellen.

"What did he mean when he said he had friends?" asked Samantha when they were back out on the streets.

"He's one of Charles' thugs," said Ellen. "He's hoping the boss can pull a few strings. I also know where he got shot."

"You do? Where did he get shot?" asked Samantha, "and how do you know where?"

"Time for lunch and for me to tell you what's going on," said Ellen.

Hutch finally managed to persuade the consultants to leave off discussing their encounter with the creature to look in the room they could now access. The group stepped over the pieces of a ruined security door, paying briefly to inspect the booby trap mechanism – a pistol mechanism with what seemed to be three cartridges, all ruined by the explosion – and then shone their flashlights on several rows of what they took to be security droids sealed in tubes filled with some form of greenish liquid. The droids were built along the same lines as the race that inhabited the city in that they were half-human-chimp, half-reptilian, although somewhat larger than they thought the city inhabitants had been. The bodies of these droids were encased in a dull-grey armour but without tac helmets, which they found in cases fixed to a table. Racks of arms were mounted in transparent cases filled with more of the green liquid recessed into the walls of the room. The arms were further secured by metal bars inside the case with no apparent lock or fastening.

"Sorry to disappoint your Mr Charles," said Alf, examining the weapons through the case, "but these seem similar to special forces assault rifles with a built-in grenade launcher. See the tube grip at the front? Better than holding it by the barrel. The optical sights seem advanced, but I can't tell much else until I can handle the weapon. Good luck on getting them out of that rack."

"What about these things?" said Hutch, pointing to another rack filled with stubby weapons resembling old-fashioned submachine guns with a circular magazine, except that the magazine was very thick and the barrel very wide.

"Looks like it fires explosive rounds – grenades. Lethal, particularly in confined spaces, but it's not very innovative technology. Looks like they were fully equipped to crush any dissenting groups in the city or any groups outside of it."

"Such as who?" asked Hutch.

"How would I know? Until we can work out their language and gain access to their information systems, we're flying blind here."

Rifle-like weapons in a third rack puzzled Alf. "Looks like these do something electrical. See the prongs there? I dunno what they do, but these may interest your boss. You'd have to take one out of the rack, point it at something, and try to fire it, then dismantle a couple to see how they work. This rack," Alf pointed at another row of weapons inset in the

wall, "seems to be batons that you use to hit people with. The basic technology has been around a while."

Their tour took them to the back wall, which was full of what looked to be lockers.

"What about these?" asked Hatch.

"Same basic problem as the door and the weapon racks," said Alf. "There's nothing for us to hack. There's no security keypad or any sort of central control for us to jack that I can see. The whole thing must be unlocked from elsewhere."

"And you can't find that place?"

"If we had some means of talking to the creature, assuming it can talk, and it didn't run away the moment we spoke to it, then maybe we could ask it, but I wouldn't hold your breath. In the meantime, we'll look around the city to see if there's anything that helps us get a handle on the language or point to where the city's AI might be holed up. While you're waiting around, why not just try cutting through the weapon cases and the lockers? They look tough, but you've got some mean cutting equipment in the camp. Just remember to check for booby traps."

After that, the consultants were left alone to explore the city, reaching the floor of the main arcade they had seen on the previous day, thanks to improved mining breathing masks brought in by Hatch. These filtered the air and had much larger air bottles. Mr Charles, they were told, had grumbled about the expense. The explorers had assumed the gallery with the big statue was the main part of the city, but when they got to its floor via staircases, they found that it was simply the end point of two larger galleries that stretched off into the darkness.

They looked at the statue of the creature wearing a cloak and holding a spear and at an inscription on the base of the statue, which meant nothing to them. Then they walked to another statue, just as large, of a creature in a cloak and hood looking dramatically off into the distance, clutching a book. Elsbeth also studied the inscription at the base of that statue, although she could make little of it.

"All their words seem short, with distinct letters – they don't join up at all – and I think the end of a sentence is marked by this line here," said Elsbeth, pointing to a bar.

"There are languages on earth that use something similar."

"Okay, another piece of the puzzle," said Alf. "Good work. You may also be interested to know that our friend is looking at us from the corner of the intersecting gallery. Don't turn around! Elsbeth stopped turning. We'll do everything slowly. Brian, can you shine that light on me?"

Alf turned around and raised his arms, palm outward as before, while illuminated. Then Elsbeth and Brian did the same thing, all to show the creature that they knew it was there and would not do anything. After that, they studiously ignored it in favour of looking at a third statue. That sculpture was a figure in a hood and a cloak with one hand on a sword worn on its right hip. The inscription in the statue's base meant as much to them as the first two had.

"Is he still following us?" asked Brian.

"Yes, but a little closer," said Alf.

"Why couldn't it be a 'she'?" asked Elsbeth.

"Ships are 'she' creatures found in long abandoned cities are 'he,'" said Alf, "until we have further information." They walked on and realised that the galleries they had been in were simply the outlier for a vast central area, a forest of stone columns interspersed with awe-inspiring, domed spaces.

"These guys really knew how to engineer," said Alf. "There's masses of rock and dirt above us, but there's not a crack or a seam anywhere in these chambers. Maybe we should call the creatures that built this place The Engineers until we know more."

They came to what they thought might be the city's centre with a massive statue of another of the lizard-chimp-humanoids that built the place. That one was dressed in what might well have been an archaic costume, albeit a few centuries after the first statues, consisting of a coat with buttons and braid and holding what looked very much like a ship's spyglass. In front of this statue was a large stone bowl with a spike, which they realized must be a fountain without the water. In front of the fountain were a host of small benches made of stone.

"One of the city's meeting places. Let's see if our friend will sit with us?" said Alf.

They sat down on one bench in a row, facing outwards, one of the large flashlights on a stone bench in front of them, the beam parallel to them. Alf stood up, facing toward where he knew the creature was, and pointed at another bench a few meters from them. For a minute or so, the profound silence of an empty city settled over them, and then the creature came closer, walking slowly, its feet hardly seeming to make any sound. Eventually, it shuffled up to the bench and sat on the edge, still just as ragged, grimy, and forlorn as it had appeared in the upper chambers, left arm dangling.

Alf stood up slowly, placed a hand on his chest, and said solemnly, "Alf." Elsbeth stood up and declared herself "Elsbeth," followed by "Brian."

Then the creature stood up, placed a hand on its chest, and after apparent difficulty in getting its mouth to work, said, "Sill."

"Oh my! Oh my! Oh my!" breathed Elsbeth.

Alf got up again and said, "I am Alf," then pointed at the creature, "You are Sill." Elsbeth did the same, then Brian. Sill then obligingly went through the same process in what they took to be its language. All the two men could say about the words used was that it involved a lot of hissing. Elsbeth, however, busily took notes and cursed Alf's tracking device. It recorded sound but was hardly fit for purpose and did not do video, which was important for such work.

Alf asked by sign language if they could sit on the bench closer to Sill, and the creature nodded.

"Nodding means yes," breathed Elsbeth.

Sill did not look any better close up, although his eyes gleamed with intelligence as he looked at each of the intruders in his domain in turn. Once they were seated, however, the conversation stalled as the humans could not think of anything obvious to ask. Then Alf pointed at Sill's useless left arm and said, "Bad? What happened?"

Sill looked at Alf for a moment, then stood up and stepped back.

"You've scared him," said Elsbeth.

But Sill did not back away. Instead, he said something that sounded like "Shade" and waved his good arm towards himself as if wanting them to move. He repeated the word and the gesture.

"I think he wants us to follow him," said Alf, and that proved to be the case. Sill led them down what might be a processional way that led off the meeting place – in the light of their mining lamps the avenue looked very much like an extended cathedral nave on Earth but without the stained-glass windows and with statues every few meters.

"We've got maybe another two hours on our masks," said Brian.

"One hour, then, if we want to allow plenty of time to get back," said Alf.

Sill led them to a door off the processional way and then down six flights, all the time looking back to make sure his new friends were following.

"How far down does this city go?" grumbled Elsbeth.

Sill finally turned off onto a corridor, and they marched on, passing any number of doors (the consultants soon lost count) until he stopped in front of one and pointed. Words were printed on the door, but like every other piece of writing in the city, they meant nothing

to the humans. When Alf walked forward to get a better look, he stepped on something. He picked up the object and turned it over.

"It's a hammer," he said after a moment.

The tool was simply a lump of metal inset on a handle of indeterminate material. One end was flat, and the other was shaped like an axe.

"Look at this," said Brian. "There are marks on the door around the lock."

Alf pointed at the hammer at Sill and at the marks on the door. "Did you do this?"

Sill nodded, somewhat reluctantly, Alf thought.

"What's the lock like?" he asked Brian.

"I think it's biometric," said Brian, "but still has the same basic architecture as the other locks we've cracked."

"Sill here has been desperate enough to get in to attack the door with a hammer," said Alf. "We can earn some goodwill by jacking the lock and seeing what he wants."

CHAPTER TEN

Inspector Barastoc was in the uncomfortable position of having to explain to Mr Charles that, despite the money the crime lord was paying hard-working police officials, he had been unable to sabotage the activities of an eager subordinate, namely Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen.

"If I'd known it was one of your guys, Mr Charles," said Barastoc, "I would have gone down myself and interviewed him. No one told me about a shooting at this place. I was trying to keep the sergeant busy and away from inquiring about this crash site." Barastoc had now begun to suspect that there was more to the story than a missing space transport, but Mr Charles was not paying him to ask questions.

Instead, he had to explain to the crime boss that the search warrants were standard procedure in such cases and that Sergeant Pullen should have informed him what she was doing but had not required his permission or authorization to do so. The sergeant apologised for that oversight, saying that she had gotten caught up in the moment. Barastoc did not suspect that this was a lie, but in any case, the action had occurred, and the searches by the two female police officers had proved surprisingly efficient. A handgun recovered at the residence of Joffrey Hutchins was not covered by a permit but otherwise had proved of little interest to police. The arsenal recovered from Junot's abode, however, was proving to be a treasure trove of forensic material and raised a host of questions.

The discovery of a full machine gun in a quiet Imperial backwater, in particular, had excited the interest of various senior officials. Where had Junot got such a weapon and ammunition? Unfortunately, from the point of view of Mr Charles, this information had been automatically forwarded to various police squads in Creaghville police HQ, and the matter was out of the inspector's hands. Already, the thug had been transferred to HQ for further questioning.

Mr Charles sighed. Somehow, Junot had to be silenced, and the evidence lost, and that would take money. The episode was disrupting business, potentially threatening him personally, and costing a great deal – funds that Mr Acheron might not repay.

Back in the abandoned city, now having some experience in jacking alien security locks, Alf and Brian used tools they had brought to rip off the lock's outer casing. After inspecting the metal array underneath, they ripped that out as well and started putting leads from the high-voltage battery they had brought with them on various likely surfaces of the exposed circuitry. After a few minutes, they were rewarded with a distinct 'click', and the

door swung inwards slightly. But before they could move, Sill barged through the door into the room beyond. The three humans followed to find themselves in a workshop.

There was a bench with tools placed neatly in a rack in front of it. Unlike the weapon racks they had seen earlier, the tools had not been sealed in any way but still looked almost new, if dusty. On another wall was a succession of diagrams showing mechanical arms, legs, and torsos, which they had only a moment to examine before Elsbeth called.

"Guys, look at this."

Sill had opened one of a line of lockers and pointed at an item on a shelf, which the linguist pulled out. It proved to be an arm identical to Sill's arm but wrapped in a form of plastic. One end was shaped like a shoulder joint and had various clips, connections, and a power cable.

"Look at that; it's a left arm like the one not working," said Alf. "This must be some sort of android workshop where they'd fix guys like him. He knew where it was but couldn't get in."

"Must have really wanted to fix his arm for so long," said Elsbeth.

Sill pointed at the replacement arm, then at his useless left arm, and looked at Alf. The human thought there was a hint of pleading in the android's eyes.

"Can we replace his arm?" asked Brian, a note of disbelief in his voice.

"Well, um," said Alf, then he remembered the diagrams on the wall and walked back to the workshop area. "Look at that." He pointed to one. "It's the steps for an arm replacement like the diagrams you follow in assembling something from a box."

"And I usually get wrong," said Elsbeth, "even when I know the language of the instructions."

"Sill here has been designed so that his limbs can be easily replaced, and these diagrams show step by step. We can't read the words, but we can follow the diagrams. These straps here must function like tendons, and the electrical cable is the power and nerves. At least we can have a look."

Alf knelt before Sill and gestured for the robot to take his coat off. Sill undid the two remaining buttons of his blue jacket which not so much fell off but seemed to disintegrate, the scraps falling around the feet of the android. The skin underneath was flesh-like with shallow muscle divisions that were more for show than any function. Above and to the left of where a belly button would be on a human were two tubes that looked as if they could be plugged into something, which Alf thought that he must ask about if they were ever able to talk to Sill.

After feeling the arm, Alf realised that he could pull up a flap of this flesh, but not very far. He then leaned on Sill's shoulder while pushing the creature's arm in the opposite direction and found that he could take the arm out of its elbow socket, much as a human arm can be dislocated. Sill did not say anything while Alf explored. He just stood there, looking straight ahead.

"Brian, there's a tool in that diagram for reaching under the flesh and unclipping those straps we can see – the tendons. See if you can find one in that rack?" Alf was aware that Elsbeth was off elsewhere in the workshop, looking in lockers.

Brian found what looked to be the right tool. It was undoubtedly slim enough to fit under the flesh, although they had to pull the flesh back a little further to operate the device. Sill stood there, not even looking at his arm. After a few stops and starts, they managed to release the three straps and then pop the elbow joint out of its socket, only to find that something was still connecting the arm to the body. After some messing around, Brian pointed out that they had forgotten about the electrical cable. That was unclipped, and the arm came out freely.

"How about that - android amputation," said Alf.

Attaching the spare arm proved harder. For one thing, the diagrams indicated that the shoulder joint had to be greased with a lubricant. A search uncovered a sealed, shallow round tin strongly reminiscent of the type of container earlier generations on earth used for shoe polish in a set of drawers below the bench. The diagrams also indicated that it had to be applied with a heavy glove, which was too small for the men but not for Elsbeth. She greased the joint and reached into the empty shoulder cavity to grease the elbow socket.

"Ergh!" she said, but she did it.

Then, it was a matter of attaching the cable and the straps, which required some dexterity. They stood back. Sill looked at them for a moment, his arm still hanging limply, then he moved his fingers and lifted it, eventually clasping both hands together on his chest in what might have been a gesture of appreciation.

"No problem," said Alf, "but what engineering? This stuff still works even after a century or so. The guys who built this place and Sill here knew what they were doing."

"Can we add alien android repair to our CVs?" asked Brian.

"Sure can," said Alf. "But what was wrong with the old arm? Doesn't seem to be anything amiss with the connections or the bits we can see."

"Maybe something in the internal circuitry," said Brian. "The arm probably has its own chip, and maybe it stopped synching with the main motor system for some reason. Good to see if we could re-condition it somehow."

"Leave it here for now," said Alf. "It's too hard to conceal up top, and we can come back for it."

Sill pointed at the still open tin of lubricant and then at his other shoulder joint and two leg joints.

"He wants a grease job on the other joints, but we're seriously out of time," said Brian.

"Shit, you're right," said Alf, looking at the gauge on his air bottle. "We've gotta roll people."

"Here," said Elsbeth, handing Sill two bundles wrapped in the same material as the replacement arm. They were replacements for the uniform coat and pants Sill had been wearing. "I found them further back. There is only one size, so it must be right." Sill grabbed the bundles and nodded vigorously. "Are we going to take him with us?"

"Not a good idea, Elsbeth, not this time," said Alf. "If you recall, our friends up top were talking about shooting him, and there's the problem that he hasn't been in the open air for at least a century, as far as we know."

"I suppose," said Elsbeth. "Will he be all right by himself down here?"

"Elsbeth, he's been down here at least since before your grandparents were born. Another day or so won't matter. We'll leave him by the city centre fountain and try to get him to understand we'll be back."

By pointing at their tanks and miming choking, they seemed to make Sill understand that they had to go, and he led them back to the fountain, where they tried to get him to understand, by pantomime, that they would be back and that he was not to try to contact the other humans. Those other humans were bad (much pointing at the upper gallery and shaking of heads). They left Sill at the fountain and hurried on, anxious eyes on their air gauges. Finally, they emerged in the open air, relieved to be out of the dark, airless, tomb-silence of the city. It was after dark, with the pit illuminated by a single lamp near the hatch entrance.

"There you are," said Hutch from the darkness at the top of the ramp to the pit.

"Thought I might have to go and get the bodies."

"No need to wait up or go out late," said Alf, "our bodies would have waited until morning."

"What took you so long?"

"Got turned around down there," said Alf quickly before the others could respond. "You know how I said there was a big gallery beyond – there's even more beyond that, including what we think is the city centre. There are also levels below. That's where we got turned around."

"Shit!" said Hatch. "Mr Charles wants us to find the power system for the city."

"Must be in those levels. We'll try again tomorrow, but good luck getting any of the machinery to work after all this time."

Hatch shrugged. "Whatever – just find that stuff to start."

"Give us spare air bottles, and we can stay out longer."

"Sure... Say, did you see that creature?"

"He was there. We all saw him." The others nodded. "But he kept his distance. He's not hostile; he's just curious but shy."

"Humph!" said Hutch meaningfully and walked off, leaving the consultants to discuss their day over a packaged dinner, speaking mainly in whispers.

"You were talking about sneaking away," said Elsbeth. "What do we do with Sill then?"

"When we go, I guess we'll have to take him with us," said Alf. "Hutch and friends might start hunting him. But there's still the difficulty that he hasn't been outside for a long time. Direct sunlight and heat could be a real problem. Also, we don't know how he works. Where does he get his energy from? If we take him, we need to take at least a chunk of that android workshop along with replacement limbs, which should be interesting. You're at the Imperial Academy, right?"

Elsbeth nodded.

"Who is your doctoral supervisor?"

"I only have an AI supervisor. The plan is to send my thesis to academics at Mid-guard for assessment when it's ready." (Mid-guard was a major population centre further out along the galactic arm.)

"You have a senior academic who keeps an eye on you?"

"Dr Kalapsy – we call him Dr Creepy, but he's not such a bad guy."

"What I don't get," said Brian, "is that the city still seems viable, or at least we can't see what's wrong with the place that made everyone leave."

"Don't think it was any calamity," said Alf. "There's no sign of any disorder in any of the spaces we've seen. Everything is incredibly dusty and likely to crack if touched, but there's nothing left lying around. Do you remember the workshop? The last technicians there put all the tools back in their place and even locked the door, unfortunately for Sill."

"If you look at Earth, the Maya abandoned a host of cities before the Spanish turned up. Scholars aren't sure why – they say a lot of interrelated reasons – but anyway, the cities were completely forgotten and swallowed up by the jungle until explorers started stumbling across them."

"Angor Wat – a huge temple-city complex in Asia was also abandoned," said Elsbeth. "I did an essay on it as part of my degree. In that case, they know the elites shifted towards the growing trading centres along the Mekong Delta, but there were also problems with the water system and the varying climate. An invasion or two probably didn't help. But I don't think The Engineers would be worried by changes in climate and there's no one around here to invade them."

"Except us," said Alf.

"Huh?" said Brian and Elsbeth together.

"We'd never threaten them," said Elsbeth.

"Oh, I agree," said Alf. "We'd have wanted to talk to them. But maybe they didn't realise that. The Empire hasn't been violence-free, as I know only too well, and it fought a

war with the Frondes. We were attacked, but, again, maybe these guys – The Engineers – were not to know that. After all, the city's only been abandoned maybe a few centuries at most – I'm just guessing, but if it's thousands, then Sill would have worn down long ago, and a few hundred years is just a blink of an eye in astronomical terms. The only thing that changed around here at that time was us. Maybe this place was in decline anyway, and rather than defend a declining outpost against assault by evil humans, they elected to abandon it and cover all traces of its existence. Then they could deal with us on their terms when ready."

"Wow, we're evil," said Elsbeth.

"My mum thinks I'm strange, not evil," said Brian.

"Just a thought," said Alf. "When we announce, scholars will swarm all over this place, and there'll be more than enough theories to go around."

"You bet," said Elsbeth.

"You'll have to tell Dr Creepy your thesis is changing to this place," said Alf.

"Sure is," said Elsbeth. "I just have to have a focus."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next day, the three consultants got spare air bottles and batteries for the lamps. Hatch had adopted Alf's suggestion that they run an air line connected to an air pump in the pit as far into the gallery as possible. That meant the thugs had less need for masks and, as they found walking in the city, "spooky," were happy to keep at the task of wrecking the armoury they had found.

Alf thought the thugs had managed to get into some of the lockers, but he had not been told what they had found and was careful not to ask. He also did not care. Of more immediate concern was that when Elsbeth used his tracking device to send a reassuring text to her mother, she happened to read some of the exchanges between himself and Sergeant Pullen.

"Why does the police sergeant who we are depending on to help get us out of this and publicise the city call you 'scum'?" she asked as they walked across the floor of the upper gallery.

"She calls me that whenever I compliment her," said Alf, "as well as slime and a creep."

"Have you given any reason for thinking of you as scum, apart from the compliments, and how come you've seen her in a dressing gown?"

That required some explanation, which Elsbeth listened to in silence. "Your assumed identity is this petty thief from Sulu, but this sergeant knew that was wrong?"

"There are, unfortunately, marked differences between me and the file description of the person who goes with the identity capsule. I had to tell her my real identity as a soldier in the rebellion before she would help me."

"Are you wanted because of the rebellion thing?" asked Brian, who had been listening.

"I'm not wanted – at least not for anything major – and I've got no real reason to hide, but I didn't realise that until after I got here, and that's all I'll say. Stick to calling me Alf. I'll tell you the rest after we get out of this."

"Well, okay," said Elsbeth, "but I want to know, is there anything between yourself and this sergeant you compliment?"

"I only wish," said Alf, "but as you can see, I am but scum to her."

Elsbeth thought that the texts mostly did not show any marked disgust by the sergeant and that Alf would be a good proposition for any woman but decided she had taken the issue far enough.

Back in the Marshlands police station Sergeant Pullen had been handed a missing persons case.

"At least it's not another dog," said Samantha.

In fact, the only person missing Jubilee Egret, Jubee to his friends, was the man's parole officer. Jubee had not turned up for his regular appointment, and his sister had not seen him for a few days, although that was a good thing as far as she was concerned.

"Had to let him stay here after he got out," said Honey Egret after the two policewomen had tracked her down, "but it really cramps my style, you know." A low-rent blonde – to be kind – who was nearly bursting out of her top, Honey mixed club stripping with sex work, or so the policewomen suspected, sticking to trusted regular customers to avoid the need for a pimp and keep under police radar. But she still needed somewhere to take her clients, and the brother had been getting in the way.

"Jubee got himself mixed up in some serious stuff, I see," said Ellen, "getting past security locks for a gang to clean stores out of high-end merchandise. Did he say anything about where he was going?"

"Just said something about how he'd got a high-paying gig out in the desert. It's no big deal that he's not around. He'll come back – worse luck."

The two police officers exchanged glances.

"Did he say who offered him this desert job?" asked Ellen.

"Just people he knew through the gang," said Honey, "he also thought that it was on the up."

A few more questions later, they were on the street outside Honey's small unit.

"Worth asking around the gang members – they'll be on record – about who was recruiting?" asked Samatha. She had been given a copy of Ellen's growing investigation file.

"Why not? There're also the people who recruited Alf's friends in the site. We can ask who wanted the recruiting done."

In the city, the consultants found Sill waiting by the fountain.

Alf pointed at the arm, "All, okay?"

Sill nodded and lifted the arm to show that it was working, then said "shade" with a distinct hiss at the "s" and gestured for them to come as he had the previous day, but this time he did not lead them to the android repair room. Instead, he led them much further down the grand processional way to a square fronting what looked to be a civic building with grand Greek-style columns out front and a huge arched doorway in which the doors had been left open. Beyond that was an anteroom with two grand staircases leading to an upper story, with a grand, arched doorway between them. Sill led the way through the grand opening to a corridor with desks on either side and then to another grand door. That door opened to a large chamber with rows of seats on two sides and a box at one end where a single person sat when the chamber was in use.

"It's a council chamber," said Elsbeth, in awe. "The king, or speaker, or president sat there. She pointed at the box.

But the council chamber was simply a side trip on the way to the place Sill really wanted to show them. He took them back out to the antechamber and then to a side door that had been left open, down two of the narrow sets of stairs used by the city inhabitants, and into another large room.

For a moment, the consultants did not realise where they were. All they could see was a series of what looked to be panels. Then Alf pushed the light between two of the panels, and it dawned on them that they were looking at bookcases, running as far as their eyes could see. They were all filled with books.

"A library!" gasped Elsbeth. She shone her light on a panel displaying large characters on the end of one of the panels. "Those are numbers. There must be a central index."

"Didn't these guys go digital?" asked Brian.

"Books can still be convenient," said Alf, "and you don't need a computer to read them or the power to be on."

Sill wanted to lead them further, and they followed. He pointed at a table with several books on it.

"He's been reading," said Elsbeth.

"But it's pitch black in here," said Brian.

"I'm pretty certain he can see in the dark," said Alf. "His eyes glow red like that of an animal."

They moved on with Sill, looking at signs at the top of the bookcase ends that the humans had not previously noticed.

"Subject categories?" guessed Elsbeth.

Finally, Sill turned into one row and walked along, looking at the volumes until, perhaps a hundred human paces along, he stopped and waved at the books on one side, looking at Elsbeth. She looked at the titles of the books, wiping away dust gently with a handkerchief. The books varied considerably in width and height but had been bound in the same grey material with the title on the spine in silver letters with what might have been the library reference number on the bottom. Unlike the seat covers in the city, the material did not crack at a touch.

"No, no," she said. "Nothing here I can understand ... wait! This one is in the Spacers language. It'll be possible to read it." Elsbeth pulled on the spine only for it to crack badly. "Shit!"

"I was going to say be gentle," said Alf. "These books have been there a long while."

Elsbeth pulled the tome out with more care, rocking it back and forth until it slid out, then put it on the floor and opened it without causing more damage. The pages were not paper but some form of thin plastic. The pages cracked ominously when turned over but did not break.

"We should be wearing gloves when we handle this stuff," said Alf. "But we haven't got any."

After flipping over a few pages, Elsbeth squealed again. "Look an illustration!"

Alf and Brian looked to see a line drawing of a thin creature with a domed head dressed in a robe walking along what looked to be a castle battlement, deep in thought.

"A spacer in archaic costume?" guessed Alf. "Is it some sort of storybook?"

"There's an app for this language. It's in the open-source section of the Imperial archives here. I looked at it when I was hunting around for thesis topics. I can put it on that tracking device and Brian might be able to rig up an image recognition interface.

"Can do," said Brian.

"Be able to read word by word," said Alf. "Better if you know the grammar, but at least you'll be able to get an idea of what the book's about. Progress, but doesn't get us far with the Sill language."

"No, it doesn't," said Elsbeth, chewing her lip. "But these guys obviously had contact with the Spacers. Maybe..." She scanned the bookcases around the Spacers' book, without finding what she wanted, then climbed up to look at the top-most shelves. Alf intervened by putting his shoulder under her bottom and hoisting her up as if she were a child. She giggled. "Thanks. Um, go along to the left. Some more." This time, she shrieked, grabbing at a book. Sill looked on in alarm. Was something wrong?

Elsbeth carefully maneuvered the book out of its slot, then put it on the floor, carefully flipped open the cover, and squealed again. "I don't believe it; I don't believe it. This

is a Spacer-Engineers, Engineers-Spacer dictionary. My parents had an English Latin dictionary that fascinated me as a child. See, the first half has words in the Engineer's language, and the definition is in Spacer. The second half," she flipped over a lot of pages at once, "has the words in Spacer and the definition in Engineer. This is the Rosetta Stone for this place, not to mention my PhD thesis, my professorship, and my ticket to an Imperial Research Institute dedicated to scanning and reading all these books. I mean, just look at this place?" She spread her arms, face shining. "Even with AI assistance and image recognition, there's years of work here."

The linguist turned to Sill, who was still looking on in alarm, put the book on the floor, and clasped her hands in front of her chest - the same gesture the creature had made when his arm had been replaced. She waved her arms at the book and repeated the thank you gesture. Sill's eyes seemed to widen, then he straightened up and bowed, staying in the bow for several seconds, eyes down, before straightening up.

"Okay, another example of Sill etiquette," said Alf. "We'll look around a little more. Check the shelves on the other side. We'll mark this place and the row and come back. We've still got to give Sill his grease and oil change and make an effort to check out the lower levels for the power generators and city AI to keep Hutch off our backs.

"And have lunch," said Brian. "What's a Rosetta Stone?"

"When scholars first started taking a serious interest in Earth's ancient Egyptian civilisation," said Elsbeth, "they couldn't read the Hieroglyphs carved on all those stone monuments. They knew it must be a language, but anyone who could read it had been dead for a thousand years. Then they discovered, by chance, a stone at a place called Rosetta that set out a royal decree in both ancient Egyptian and ancient Greek, and scholars could read the Greek. That proved the key to deciphering the whole thing. This is way better than any Rosetta Stone as it's in a form we can readily understand. I might be able to communicate basic words to Sill tomorrow by pointing to them in the book. Brian, I need that app downloaded and hooked up to image recognition as soon as you can."

"Alf's little device has got a camera, so sure," said Brian. "I can hook something up."

Sill looked from one human to another, apparently wondering what they were talking about.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mr Charles thought that Hutch, now his senior guy at the excavation camp, was at least an improvement on the homicidal Thumper in that he did not execute those recruited to help, as had happened with the security lock expert his people had found. He had also done a reasonable job opening up the city – albeit with the help of consultants. But he was still a thug dealing with alien technology.

"We've been hacking away at this armoury, Mr Charles," Thumper said in his daily call to the boss. He had stepped away from the other thugs to a corner of the above ground camp under the camouflage awning. "But the alien metal and plastic material is the hardest shit the guys have ever come across. We've opened some of the lockers, but I dunno what I'm looking at."

"What about getting the base power online? I was told it was possible to start it."

"With all due respect, Mr Charles, it's not a base we think it's a city."

"What?"

"Alf's group's been right in, and they say there's a city centre with big statues and a fountain. I've just been to the end of the gallery that's on the plans, and as far as I can tell, there's a whole other, much larger gallery beyond that."

"How can there be a city there undiscovered even if it is underground? It's only about two hour's drive from Creaghtown."

"Alf's saying that he thinks whoever was here covered up all entrances and traces of their activity before leaving. He doesn't know why or if they meant to come back or what, but it's a big site, and not easy to find the generators or whatever. He says there're a whole lot of floors below the city centre, and the generators may be there."

"Floors? How many?"

"He went down five," said Hatch, "but he said there were more, lots more."

"Lots more than five. Shit! I must think about this," said Mr Charles. "What about this creature?"

"Alf says it's followed his guys around, but it's curious, not hostile. They think it's some sort of robot servant that got left behind and survived this long because whoever built the city were good engineers."

"Humph! Just keep at it for now. I'll consider the options."

Mr Charles hung up and tried to think what he would do. The situation was getting out of hand. He knew that the site was of Imperial-shattering importance, but he also knew confessing his involvement now would result in too many questions. Maybe the Imperial Senate Investigation Commission – a body that struck fear into the hearts of wrongdoers everywhere – would take an interest. But how in all the Empire could he cover up his involvement once word of this discovery leaked, not to mention hide the fact that an earlier worker had been murdered? He knew Mr Acheron was considering various plans to eliminate all evidence and witnesses. Maybe they could be brought forward? Charles picked up his assistant unit again and called another number.

Down in the city, the consultant trio regreased Sill's joints while Elsbeth made a little more progress with the language. She got Sill to point out the only word she knew, "shade," which she thought meant "come" or maybe "follow me" in the dictionary. Being very smart for a servant droid Sill was able to do this. Then she got him to point out the letters for his name and then to the first-person pronoun "I." She did not know if she was asking the right questions, as she told the others, and wasn't sure of the answers as she did not know the grammar or syntax of the language. But it was a start. There were notes about the Engineer's language at the beginning of the Engineer-Spacer part of the dictionary – at least, that's what Elsbeth thought they looked like – but pending the installation of the Spacer language app when they returned to the surface, that did not help very much.

"We'll have to come back tomorrow, Elsbeth," said Alf after a time. "For now, we need to know where the main generators for the city are so that Hutch doesn't think we've been wasting time with the local inhabitants."

By tapping the power button in the android workshop a few times and pointing at what they thought was a light fixture overhead – the Engineers used buttons rather than switches – then gesturing at the machinery and making noises, the humans conveyed the need to find the city's generators, or hoped they had. Sill led them down two more corridors, several more flights of stairs, and another corridor before pointing at a door with a prominent label and what appeared to be a warning sign – a disc that might have been bright orange when it had been fixed on the door and still glowed a little despite the years. The door had a security lock, which Brian and Alf made short work of, while Elsbeth wrote down the words on the door and got Sill to point them out in the dictionary.

Inside was a room full of screens with glass-like material on three sides, which might have looked out onto something but initially, all they could see was a black void. By turning off all other lights and focusing the beam of one of the flashlights Alf could just pick out a series of machines on the floor beneath them.

"We need to get down there," Alf said to Sill, pointing at the machines. This time, Sill shook his head and lifted his shoulders, arms outspread, in what seemed a very human

gesture. Then Alf saw through the control room window a metallic catwalk-style stairway leading from the level they were on down to the machine room floor. They returned to the corridor, jacked the lock on the next door, and walked down the stairs. The grey hulking masses of the machinery dwarfed them.

"This is definitely it," said Alf after a few moments' inspection.

"How do you know?" asked Brian.

"See that rounded structure with distinct fins in the distance?"

Brian thought he could see a looming grey mass.

"That's the fusion reactor. All these other machines are to kick start that reactor. They need a lot of power to become self-sustaining."

"What are these machines?" asked Brian.

"They look a lot like diesels, so alien diesels, except that they have boxes on the side." Alf flicked dust from the side of one of the boxes. "Look, each has some sort of indicator, and they plug in about where you'd expect the fuel tank to go. A solid-state fuel tank?"

"Why wouldn't they just use diesel?"

"Even under ideal conditions, you can't store diesel for more than a year or so. It goes off. Anyway, whatever, it's time to make plans to skip town, taking Sill with us."

"Yes!" said Elsbeth. "Being around people who may want to kill me makes me nervous."

"Same here," said Brian.

"But first off, I want to make sure that we won't kill Sill by taking him out of the city. We'll spend tomorrow trying to work out what makes him tick and where he gets his energy from with the help of Elsbeth's dictionary. For now, we're out of time, so let's go, people. We'll leave Sill at the workshop and get him to understand we'll meet there tomorrow. I may have to show Hutch the engine room, and I don't want him to see Sill waiting for us anywhere."

They dropped Sill off at the workshop, got him to understand they would meet back there the next day, they hoped, and walked back up to the main square to see that there were lights by the fountain – a strange, bright sight after their group had walked for so long in darkness. The lights belonged to Hutch and another of Mr Charles' goons – Alf thought his name was Chris. He was a little larger than Hutch, lank-haired, unshaven, and foul-mouthed. They wore mining hats on top of the breathing apparatus and carried the big flashlights they had been using. Fortunately, the books Alf's party had taken from the library were stowed in their packs.

"You guys found your way here," said Alf.

"This place is fucking creepy," said Chris. "It's so quiet and black down here it gives me the shits."

"Mr Charles was getting anxious about the generators," said Hutch, ignoring Chris.

"We were just coming back up to tell you we've found them," said Alf.

"Great, where are they?"

"Ten floors that way," said Alf, pointing down. "I'd show you, except we're at our safety limits."

By way of an answer, Hutch pulled another air tank out of the bag he had been carrying on his shoulder. Alf sighed.

"You guys go up," he said to Elsbeth and Brian. "You know the way. Stairs by the statue of the guy with the book."

"Who's this guy," said Hutch, indicating the statue by the fountain.

"Elsbeth can't read the inscription yet," said Alf as Elsbeth and Brian moved off. "But it's a safe bet that the race that dug out the city wouldn't put up a twelve metre high statue to just anyone. He must've been an important dude."

"It's a fucking big piece of crap," said Chris, eying the monstrous thing.

Alf thought it was a significant piece of art but did not respond. Instead, he said to Hutch, "If you want to see the generators, let's get this over with."

They moved off, keeping an eye on the atmospheric monitors.

"That girl, Elsbath..." said Chris as they turned off into the access corridor, Alf reminding Hutch to remember the two statues so he could find the place again.

"Elsbeth," said Alf.

"You fucked her yet?"

"No."

"Could go her," said Chris. "Not my usual ho, but I ain't fussy."

"Do you apologise for him a lot," Alf said to Hutch, "or just ignore him."

"Mostly, it doesn't matter," said Hutch.

Chris sneered but shut up. Later, when they were walking down the corridor to the control room, and Chris thought that Alf was not looking at them (in fact, Alf always watched them out of the corner of his eye), he pointed the fingers of his right hand and motioned with his thumb as if his hand was a gun and his thumb was the hammer while jerking his head at the consultant. Hutch shook his head, and Alf heard him mutter, "Mr Charles will tell us when."

They were still marked for execution. They had to escape soon, hopefully taking Sill with them.

A couple of floors down, Hutch asked, "What unit were you in the rebellion?"

"You writing my biography now?"

"Just curious."

"I was in The Forgotten Legion."

"Tough guys, I heard. Gave the Imperial legions a hard time."

"I guess," said Alf. "In the end, it was all for nothing."

"How come you got called the Forgotten Legion?"

"It was a joke. We got left off the order of battle one time. Nothing more than that. The name sounded cool, so we kept it."

By then, they were at the control room, where Hutch started examining the panels.

"What are you looking for?" asked Alf.

"A big, red button," said Hutch. "Like they use to launch missile systems was how it was described to me."

"Really? How would anyone know there was supposed to be a red button down here? Place has been sealed for maybe centuries."

"Just what I was told, Alf," said Hutch, still looking at the panels. "I'm a shit kicker taking orders."

"Same way your bosses knew the city location and where they got the partial plans from, no doubt," said Alf.

"Above my pay grade," said Hutch diplomatically. "And I can't see it."

"There's still the machine level."

"Where's that?"

By way of answer, Alf jammed one of the flashlights against the control room window and pointed it down. One of the Engineer diesels was visible in the gloom.

"Take us down there," said Hutch.

A few minutes later, they stood among the diesels, with Alf explaining the basic setup and what he thought were dry fuel cells. Hutch responded by playing his flashlight over the back rows of the diesels, then diving into one row. Alf and Chris followed him to find the thug standing by one small panel on a pedestal. The panel had a screen, two dials, and a

single button set underneath a transparent case. Despite all the years of disuse, the button looked red.

"What's it meant to do?" asked Alf, although he thought he knew and was beginning to doubt the wisdom of helping Hutch find it.

"Just told to find it," said Hutch. "Whadda, you reckon it does, Alf?"

"The starting point for the whole thing is my guess," said the engineer. "It'd start one of the diesels, which starts the others, and that generates enough power to kick start the fusion chamber – at least, that'd be the idea if the place had just been built. I'd laugh at the idea of starting a diesel after a few decades of disuse, without serious overhaul work, let alone after a century or so, except that these guys were real good engineers. Then there's the problem of whether the reactor's been left set up with enough Helium3 and the magnets which contain the plasma still work, and the computer monitoring systems reboot correctly, and I'm just getting started."

"What happens if the diesels work, and the reactor fails to start?" asked Hutch.

"Nothing. Fusion reactors don't blow up. If something goes wrong, they just stop working or don't start in the first place. The diesels wouldn't have the power to run the city. After a while, they'd run out of fuel and stop working too."

"How come the button has a plastic cover over it?" asked Chris.

"So, guys like you don't carelessly put a coffee cup on it and start the process," said Hutch. "Anyway, we've found what we wanted to find. Let's get back topside."

"Are you guys going to do anything about the button?" asked Alf.

"Like I said, I'm just doing what I'm told," said Alf. "But if we did decide to push it, and it worked, what's the problem? Might get the lights and ventilation system going."

"The problem is the security droids we saw. If the city comes to life, so would they, and they might classify your people as a threat."

"We can handle the droids in that room," said Hutch.

"You can sure try, but what about the other rooms we don't know about?" said Alf. "Elsbeth can read the numbers, and she saw a three on the entrance we jacked. That might mean at least two other entrances and two other rooms – this place is vast, and we haven't even been to all the main areas, let alone mapped it."

"Okay, I'll pass that on," said Hutch.

Alf did not think the machinery would work, not even when it had been designed by The Engineers, master engineers as they were. But there was always that chance, and he suspected Mr Charles intended to have his people push that button. When that happened, he wanted to be well away from the city.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mr Charles had been sufficiently displeased with his chief thug Thumper not to visit him in hospital. Instead, on Thumper's release, he had summoned the enforcer to his office to sit on the hard chair in front of the crime boss's desk, face still heavily bandaged.

"You were giving strict instructions not to harm the people I sent to the site unless absolutely necessary or until I sent instructions," Mr Charles said. "Instead, you murdered the first man sent and were messing up that Alf guy when you had this accident."

"The first guy was useless with the locks and a real pain, Mr Charles," said Thumper. "I was just teaching Alf some manners, making him easier to control."

"Looks like you were the one taught some manners," retorted Mr Charles. "How did you do so much damage to yourself in the back of a van? Hutch says he found you lying on top of some of the equipment in the back."

Thumper shrugged. "Last thing I remember, Mr Charles, is smashing up that shithead Alf."

"You had him handcuffed with a hood on?"

Thumper nodded.

"You might have underestimated him. Hutch says he and those other two had freed themselves and were out of the van and wandering about the campsite when he came to get you. I've since been told this Alf, if that's his name, was in the Forgotten Legion in the rebellion on Martus Prime."

Thumper sneered and was about to say something when Mr Charles cut him off.

"You can sneer, Thumper, but those guys really served it up to the Imperials, using captured or improvised equipment, and there's something about him that'd make me wary of the man. If I give the order to terminate, you do it quick and clean, preferably by a bullet to the back of the head before he knows you're there, and no macho crap about trying to prove you're a better fighter or whatever. Now I'm seriously displeased about you offing the first guy without clearing it with me. Go away and come back when the doctors have given the okay."

"Yes, Mr Charles," said a more subdued Thumper. "Just that... the woman police sergeant who saw me in the hospital..."

"What about her?"

"She seemed to know that I'd been injured in the back of a van."

"Did she? Hmmm! What did she say?"

"She asked if I'd fallen in the back of a moving van."

"Really?" said Mr Charles. "Oddly specific."

"Thought maybe she'd been watching me, but I ain't never seen her before."

"I'll take it up with others, Thumper. For now, go away."

"Yes, boss."

When Alf emerged from the city to sit down to a late dinner at the communal table, he found Elsbeth deep in her translation work, using Alf's device. Brian had downloaded the app she wanted with ease and connected it with surprisingly powerful image recognition software he happened to have in his personal library. A full translation of the texts they had encountered to date would take weeks of painstaking work, but sensibly Elsbeth had decided to concentrate on just a few key words – mainly verbs, with a few nouns and adjectives thrown in - in the hope that she could communicate with Sill by pointing to them in the cross dictionary. Grammatical niceties would have to wait. This work was hidden from the thugs on their separate table by the consultants scattering a few other books around and Brian blocking the view by sitting beside her to work on the device he had picked up. Whether it was the obscured view, the books, or the fact that Elsbeth was concentrating on them – the thugs did not like "smart chicks" – or because they did not care, the others had not come near them.

"Your police sergeant sent a couple of texts asking what was happening," said Elsbeth quietly after Alf had sat down with a packaged meal of beef rissoles at one end of the table to help block the view of Elsbeth's work. "I answered the second one, saying who I was and that we'd found a library with this dictionary, and I needed to do some work on the device. I said you'd report later, and by the way, I didn't think you were scum."

"Okay, that's interesting," said Alf. "Did she reply?"

She said, "Tell him he's still scum."

Alf sighed. The other two chuckled.

"It could be worse," said Brian. "The last time I got dumped, I got called a 'piece of shit dropkick.'"

"Dropkick!" exclaimed Elsbeth. "I haven't heard 'dropkick' for a long time."

"Did you piss this lady off in any way?" asked Brian.

"No, just complimented her, as I said before," said Alf, "although she was mainly interested in the fact that I entered the colony illegally and was working under a false identity. After I told her who I was..."

"While she was in her dressing gown," interrupted Elsbeth.

"I like the dressing gown part," said Brian.

"I was discouraged by the fact that she had her police pistol, with the safety off, and handcuffs on the table while we talked. Anyway, she said my transgressions could be overlooked if I helped the cops in certain matters."

"Okay, you have to pay your dues," said Elsbeth. "What happens afterwards? Does she have a boyfriend?"

"Do matters always have to come back to whether this policewoman has anything but total revulsion for me?" asked Alf. "Leave my personal life in peace, Elsbeth, and listen up. We have some decisions to make."

Alf told them about the machines and the button.

"The city might start if they push that button?" asked Brian.

"Maybe," said Alf. "I mean, look at Sill, still walking and talking after all those years locked up in the dark. He only needed one appendage to be changed and a grease and oil job on his joints. Not bad going at all."

"What do we do?" said Elsbeth.

"Tomorrow, you ask Sill if there's another way out of the city."

"Okay... but he's never left."

All ways out would be locked and buried, but Brian and I can jack the locks, we hope, and find one that's less buried. There must be heaps of ways out of a city that size. We're not far from the access road to the mines up North. Get to the road, thumb a ride, and ask if it's alright if our alien android comes along too."

"You think we can take Sill out of the city?" said Elsbeth.

"We've also got to work that out tomorrow. Take something to throw over him in daylight and the sports bags we brought our stuff in for his equipment – that grease tin, the tool we used for the tendons, and a few appendages. You know, android stuff."

"What about his energy supply?" asked Brian. "He must get it from somewhere."

"Good point," said Alf. "See if you can work out how to say, 'where does your energy come from?', Elsbeth, as well as 'where are the other exits?'"

"Got it, I think," said Elsbeth. "Anything else impossible you want?"

"Don't pack your own stuff, incidentally, just valuables, credit cards, identification, and so on, and we need to take water and some food. With any luck, we'll come back through the front entrance behind a heap of the Imperial auxiliaries and local police and grab what we left behind. After we get out, we're going straight to the proconsul's office, screaming about what we've found. Elsbeth, get your supervisor to meet us there if you can. Tell him there's academic credit in it – having a brilliant student and all that."

"I like the brilliant student part. Do it now?"

"Not now, when we're charging towards Creaghville. We've got to check that the proconsul is in her office and not on some tour of the districts or whatever."

"Why not barge out through the front entrance," said Brian. "We can jack one of the cars here."

"I know the AI password for one of the cars," said Alf. "I was standing by Hutch when he took the guy who got shot to the hospital and noted what he typed in. But coming out this way may be too hard. There's only one route to take through the entrance and up the ramp, and I might have to start shooting. I don't have anything to shoot with and dropping

bodies unless we had direct proof our lives were in danger wouldn't look so good to the police."

"Then let's call in the police," said Elsbeth.

"No major reason to call for them," said Alf. "We know they want to make us part of the desert after we've stopped being useful, but we can't prove that. What we can do is send off a text to Sergeant Pullen before we go in telling her to start releasing the file she's compiled to everyone she can think of, including the media, the proconsul, and senior members of the local senate. She has the location, so a lot of people will be turning up looking for the alien installation, but we still don't want to be hanging around the entrance tomorrow when things start moving, or Mr Charles may give the order to have us wacked. Let's get up before the rest of the camp and lose ourselves in the city."

Back in Creaghville, Mr Charles was making certain concerns known to Ellen's immediate boss, Inspector Barastoc.

"That sergeant of yours, Sergeant Pullen, seems to know more about our project in the desert than is good for her or us," said the gang boss.

"She hasn't said anything to me," said Barastoc. "And there's nothing in her case files or anything about her behaviour indicating any suspicions."

Mr Charles told Barastoc about Ellen's comment to his thug.

"I agree it's specific, Mr Charles," said the inspector, "but it's not much to go on. Maybe Thumper misheard the Sergeant."

"Maybe," said Mr Charles. "But check it out all the same. The project is getting out of hand. Drastic measures may be needed, and we don't want loose ends."

"Yes, Mr Charles." Barastoc knew what happened to loose ends, and despite being bent or crooked for some time, he remained enough of a police officer to be repulsed by the idea of any harm coming to a fellow officer and colleague, especially one under his command and who had proved as capable as Ellen Pullen. But he reminded himself that he was in too deeply with Mr Charles to back out now, and face the same fate himself, not to mention the hardship it would cause to his family.

Barastoc sighed, got up, and looked out of his office door into the station's detective's room. As it was past normal hours and there were no urgent cases, it was empty. He went to Ellen's desk and rummaged through the drawers, trying not to disturb the contents too much. In the second drawer, under a folder, the inspector found a printout of a satellite photograph of the entrance site in the desert. The photograph did not show much, but Ellen had used a marker pen to highlight the corners of a square. The inspector puzzled over this square for a moment until he saw that the material in it was subtly different from that of the surrounding desert and that there was a track leading up to it – a track that ceased abruptly at the side of the square. Ellen had marked that, too.

Barastoc thought Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen knew far more about what was happening in the desert than she had told him. But how much did she know, who had she told, and why hadn't she said anything to him? There was nothing for it but to confront her and then tell Mr Charles that there was a loose end, and he did not want to think what would happen after that.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alf crept into Brian's tent before dawn and shook the computer geek awake, putting one hand on the young man's mouth before he could exclaim.

"Time to go, Brian," he said quietly. "Assault teams five minutes. We'll have breakfast inside."

"Assault teams?"

"From when I was a soldier. Get up and get dressed. We're going."

"Okay, before you go." He put one hand on Alf's arm.

"Yes?"

"I've been meaning to speak to you alone. Elsbeth - do you know if she has a boyfriend?"

Alf thought this was an additional complication to the task of getting everyone out of the city alive. He liked both Brian and Elsbeth, and if Brian asked Elsbeth out it was no business of his, but it was hardly the time for young love.

"She's never mentioned anyone," he said, "and the only message she's sent that I know of has been to her mum to tell her not to worry. The best thing is to ask her yourself but keep a lid on your hormones until we're clear of the city. We'll all need to concentrate in there."

"Okay, okay, but can you check things out for me? You know – I can save myself another embarrassing rejection. If I don't ask, then we're all still friends, and she'll not laugh at me for asking, which has happened. Geeks have feelings, too."

"Brian, not now," said Alf. "Maybe when we've blown the lid of this whole affair. Now get dressed."

He went into Elsbeth's tent to find her awake, dressed, and smiling.

"I heard Brian," she whispered. "You guys should learn about keeping your voices down." She giggled, "Geeks have feelings too. No, I don't have a boyfriend, and you're right; we'll get clear, then think about dating."

Alf returned to his tent to pick up his backpack and send a prepared message to Sergeant Pullen on his hard-working tracking unit, telling her where they were going and why and to start telling all and sundry about the abandoned city. Then he noticed a message the sergeant sent before she went to bed the previous night, asking if the next of kin notification was still his mother as it had been in his auxiliary's file. The file on his career as a rebel mentioned a fiancée. His father had died during the rebellion when an Imperial missile hit his building.

Thinking it was an odd question, Alf replied, "Still mum, but if I don't make it out, tell my boss at the workshop. Talk later, I hope."

He dropped the device in his pocket and walked over to the equipment stacks at the pit's edge to find Elsbeth and Brian confronting a smirking Chris.

"What's the problem," he said, walking right up to the thug.

"No one goes in, Mr Charles' orders," sneered Chris. "We're waiting on another consultant. He goes in first."

Alf dropped his pack on Chris's foot. "Tell Hatch and Mr Charles you passed the message on."

Chris was wearing a shoulder holster over a sweater – the desert was cold at night – but Alf was standing far too close for the thug to have any hope of drawing it. However, he was almost as big as Alf and had only to yell to get help.

"Turn around and go back to your tents, you fucks," he snarled, then filled his lungs, meaning to yell.

Alf hit Chris in the stomach with his left, the air in the thug's lungs coming out in a soundless gasp, then savagely punched his opponent twice on the side of the jaw with his right, grabbing the thug before he fell to the ground. He clamped one hand over the still conscious Chris's mouth, pushing the jaw up so the thug could not bite.

"Brian, the masking tape in that container quick," whispered Alf. "He's too big to hold for long. Elsbeth, grab what we need."

With Brian's help, Chris' mouth was taped shut, his wrists and ankles bound. Alf grabbed the thug's pistol and shoulder holster and found a spare magazine in a pocket. He looked around. Only Chris had been on guard duty at the pit. The guard at the gate was out of sight and the other thugs seemingly slept on. He threw the securely bound Chris over the edge of the pit, a drop of less than two metres – the thug landed with a distinct thud and a muffled curse – then sorted out what they were taking.

When they got into the pit, Alf dragged Chris by the back of the sweater and tee shirt to the city entrance, then picked him up when they stepped inside. Once through the main airlock and in the city proper, Alf threw the thug to one side in the corridor and walked on without a backward glance.

"Will he be alright?" asked Elsbeth.

"Unfortunately, yes," said Alf. "I didn't damage his jaw seriously, and I don't think anything else is broken – much. His mood will not be the best, however, when they find him and set him free. I wouldn't try to strike up a friendly conversation with him if you happened to meet, you know, bid Chris a cheery good morning or remark on the fine weather, that sort of thing."

"No problem there," said Elsbeth. "You acted so fast I could barely follow what you did. You've been trained for that sort of thing?"

"Soldier and kickboxing," was all Alf said.

"Don't think we'll be going out that way to have conversations with any of them once they find that guy," said Brian.

"True," said Alf, "but if they weren't going to let us back into the city, then maybe they're just waiting on the word to have loose ends – us – disposed of. I think there was some guy before us who didn't prove of any use, so Thumper offed him. We're safer in the city – if we can find a way out, and all I've got with me to dig is the camping shovel."

When she got to the police station that morning, Ellen Pullen found herself humming. She was happy! Why was this so? Alf had messaged her that he and his two colleagues were fleeing into the city, which should be a cause for concern. The air in the city was still bad and they would not have much time to find a way out. However, they could still come up closer to the entrance and wait there for the rescue effort she hoped to be able to organise, because she was about to send out the investigation file to everyone she could think of. Edited to remove references to ongoing investigations, the file would be sent to the commissioner, his deputies, the heads of the various specialist squads, various colleagues – even her ex-husband – and the offices of all the senior politicians. The time for sneaking around was over. Sure, she would take some flak for releasing the file generally. However, as it did not mention any wrongdoing being investigated, she was technically not breaching any regulations.

There was also the point that she had double-checked Alf's relationship status by asking about his next of kin and had received a reply that she found satisfactory. Maybe when he returned, and he had come clean about his identity and submitted to court judgment – with even a sliver of luck, he would just draw a fine or community work orders – she would then be free to date him rather than arrest him. She told herself it was all madness; she had spoken to him directly only a handful of times, but she had a dossier on his career, which she had checked (she never had a dossier on her ex-husband). Alf had good prospects, and she was only talking about dating. Every time she went over this argument, she tried pushing the issue to one side for later reference. However, she found her thoughts always wandered back to the ex-rebel.

She sat at her desk, called up the edited file she had been working on last night, and added the list of mail recipients. Her finger was poised to tap the send panel when Inspector

Barastoc asked her to come to his office rather abruptly, she thought. Well, she would find out what he wanted first.

Barastoc's office had windows that allowed him to see what was happening in the detective's room but could be turned opaque at the touch of a button, which he did for the first time that Ellen could remember.

"Close the door, sit down," he said in the same abrupt tone.

Ellen did so, then noticed the satellite photo printout with the markings she had made on his desk.

"You've been making inquiries without checking with me first," said Barastoc.

"Just chasing up some leads between cases," said Ellen.

"Off the books – there is no official file on this."

"Well, off the books, sure," said Ellen, trying to keep calm although her pulse was racing. "Is there a problem?"

"You should keep me informed about any investigations. What is this about?"

"You mean this picture I thought was in my desk drawer? It's a camouflaged site in the desert."

"The site of this crashed craft."

"That may be, sir. I'm looking at the disappearance of one Jubilee Egret, the case you assigned to myself and senior constable Pye." Now aware that her conversation may later be subject to legal scrutiny, Ellen reverted to the formal language of police reports. "I now suspect Egret might have been lured to the site with the promise of a reward for opening locks."

"Locks? How do you know this?"

"His specialty is electronic locks, sir. When I interviewed his sister, she passed on a remark he had made about the gig or job being in the desert. You had us looking for people who might be recruited to go to an unspecified crash site, you remember."

"I remember. How did you find this site?"

"I used AI assistance to make a search, sir," said Ellen. That was the best cover story she could think of at the time. "Egret's sister said that she thought it was beyond the marshlands, and it's amazing what you can do with AI assistance."

"Then how did you know that the injured guy you interviewed in hospital fell over in the back of a van?"

"You're referring to my interview with Bianchi, sir?" said Ellen. "If you recall, the interview yielded nothing useful, and I didn't say anything about a van in the police report."

"I heard this from other sources."

"Other sources, sir? Bianchi has strong links to the crime boss Charles."

"What are you implying?" said Barastoc sharply.

"I'm not implying anything, sir. I was curious about the other source you mentioned, given the circumstances."

"Did you say anything about a van?"

"I don't recall off-hand, sir," said Ellen carefully. "I would have to look at my interview files. If I did, it would just be a guess."

"A guess about a van?" said Barastoc. "Then there is the problem of not informing me about the search warrants."

"That was an oversight on my part, sir," said Ellen, "for which I apologised. Those warrants yielded a lot of material for the squads at central, if you recall."

"Oh yes, I remember. The serious crime squad is now tearing apart the life of that guy who was shot..."

"Junot Romero, sir, a person previously known to us."

"... Yes, a known thug." The inspector opened the right-hand drawer of his desk, which Ellen thought was odd. "See, sergeant, I don't think you're being entirely straight with me."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, sir," said Ellen.

"I want you to hand over any investigation files concerning that crash site to me at once."

"I can do that, sir." The inspector was on the list of people who would receive the file.

"And not show it to anyone else."

"That may be more difficult, sir," she said.

"Difficult, how?"

The time for caution had passed. It had to be open defiance. "Too many people now know about the secret of the crash site."

"The secret of a crashed spaceship?"

"It's not a spaceship at all, sir. It's a gigantic, underground city built by an alien civilisation previously unknown to us. Mr Charles put about the crashed ship story as a reason to recruit skilled people to open the sealed doors to the city and loot it – specifically take the weapons in an armoury they found."

Barastoc digested this for a moment, rocking in his chair. "Shit!" he said eventually.

"The find is just too big, too empire shattering to conceal," said Ellen.

Barastoc reached into the open desk drawer, pulled out his service pistol, and pointed it at Ellen.

"We can try," he said.

The consultants found Sill waiting for them by the fountain, but Alf insisted they keep moving.

"Shade," he said to the android, waving as the droid had done. Whether he got the word right or not, Sill seemed to understand, following the humans to the android workshop, where there were a few small chairs and a table. Elsbeth put her books and notes on the table and got down to the serious business of communicating.

She had marked various pages with torn-up bits of napkin and had written out the alphabets of both The Engineer's Language and Spacer on the back of a romance paperback she had brought with her. The linguist would tap out words on Alf's little device which, thanks to the downloaded app, could give the equivalent in Spacer. After some fumbling with the alphabet, she would find the word in the Spacer side and Sill could look at the definition in his language. He would respond by pointing at a word in The Engineer's side of the dictionary. Elsbeth could then use the image recognition software in the device to check out the Spacer definition of the word in English. As all words had to be dragged through three languages using low-grade auto-translate software hooked to an image-recognition system on a tiny tracking device not designed for such work, it was slow going with plenty of scope for misunderstanding.

Another complication, which Elsbeth told them about later, was that they did not know whether The Engineer's language was high context or low context.

"English is low context – the words have the same meaning, mostly, no matter who's speaking and in what circumstances, although there are complications like irony and sarcasm," she said. "The classic high context language, however, is Japanese, and the prime example often given is a part of the Emperor of Japan's speech during a radio broadcast announcing Japan's surrender at the end of World War Two on Earth. With the navy and air force destroyed, cities bombed to ashes, and enemy armies on his country's doorstep, the emperor said that 'the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage.' It

sounds strange to us, but any Japanese of the time who heard their revered God-Emperor even hint that things were bad knew that Japan had lost the war."

Alf and Brian listened to the linguist's efforts with Sill while they explored the workshop's lockers.

"Exit city," said Elsbeth. She could not speak Spacer and still knew little of Sill's language, so she just said the words in English while she pointed at what she hoped were their near equivalents in the dictionary. "Not there." She pointed in the general direction of the entrance they had used.

Sill pointed at a word in the dictionary. "Blocked, stopped, barred," read Elsbeth.

"Where?" She pointed at the word in Spacer. "Open, good," she pointed at Brian and Alf.

Sill pointed at another word. "Buried, covered over, hidden," read Elsbeth.

"Try, um... have to."

"Why?"

"Trouble." Elsbeth pointed at the entrance they had used. "Creatures kill us." She thumped her chest.

Sill looked surprised and pointed at more words. "Why kill?"

"Bad people."

That seemed to puzzle the creature, but he pointed at more words. "You leave, come back?"

"You," Elsbeth pointed at Sill, "shade." She gestured to indicate the group, then looked for words she had found: "Come with us."

Sill looked genuinely surprised, then pointed at two words in the dictionary.

"Leave city?" read Elsbeth.

"Yes," she nodded. "With us."

The creatures stood up and then pointed at another word.

"Speedy, fast," said Elsbeth after some more fumbling.

"Guess he's gotten sick of being cooped up here," said Alf.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ellen stared at the pistol Barastoc pointed at her for a moment before recovering herself.

"You wouldn't dare!" she said. "We're in the middle of a police station."

"And I'm an inspector," said Barastoc. "As it happens, the chief inspector is off at a meeting, so I'm the senior officer. But it's not just the police. You have no idea how deep this goes."

"All I see is one bent policeman holding a pistol," sneered Ellen.

"There are others, including your ex. Then there's the Proconsul's office, the auxiliaries, the senate. The list goes on."

"And what do you conspirators hope to do, apart from shoot me for revealing an archaeological find?"

"Shoot you before you can reveal an archaeological find, you mean?"

"Too late for that," said Ellen, acutely conscious that she had yet to send the file but had told Samantha everything. "The file's gone to everyone I can think of, including you. Should be in your messages soon."

Barastoc looked down at his digital assistant to see if any such message arrived. Ellen took that moment to stand up.

The inspector's eyes snapped back.

"Sit down, Ellen!"

Standing to the left of the doorway, Ellen took one step back, turned the handle on the door, and flung it open.

"I'm warning you," said Barastoc.

"Everyone!" she yelled. "Inspector Barastoc has an important announcement to make."

As it happened, one of the male detectives was passing the door – a beefy, well-meaning young detective constable who had unsuccessfully asked Ellen out for drinks – and poked his head in, catching a glimpse of Barastoc's pistol as he hurriedly hid the weapon.

"Eh, boss," said the constable, puzzled.

Ellen pushed past him, then shoved the constable into the door to block Barastoc's view as others arrived to hear the 'announcement.' She dived into her desk and sent the file with its covering note. Waiting for the file to work through its long list of contacts, Ellen unlocked the drawer with her police weapon just as she heard Barastoc speaking her name and saw two of her fellow officers look in her direction. Time to go.

"Ellen, what's going on?" whispered Samatha from the next desk.

"Barastoc just pulled a gun on me to stop that file from going out." She gestured at the screen.

"What?"

"Grab your stuff and walk out through the front door now. Go and see that media contact we talked about. I'll explain more by phone. Move."

Ellen thought Barastoc might try to bar her from leaving the building but would not immediately do the same for Samantha. The senior constable could walk out. But Ellen thought that she might have to dodge out the back entrance. She made for the corridor.

After a few questions about how Sill remained powered, the alien android led them down more corridors to another room stacked with metal boxes. Sill opened one box on the floor in front of the others to show that it was packed with foil-covered packages, each about the size and shape of a gold bar. Alf carefully unwrapped the foil of one to find that it contained a substance of the same color and consistency as mud cake. Sill mimed eating the material.

"Must be a concentrated energy cake like a protein bar for us," said Alf. "He would have a system that digests it and generates power from the material like our digestive system. How about that? He's a walking bio-battery. Oxygen is also a big part of our energy system, but Sill doesn't breathe, so this must be powerful stuff. Can you ask him how many of these cakes he eats a day or a week, or whatever?"

After Elsbeth laboriously asked this question, Sill pointed at one cake, then at the word for days, and then at three.

"Three days. Concentrated stuff. Hold on. One box has about thirty cakes, so that's around three months; four boxes to a year of our time." In fact, the year for the planet they were on was a little shorter than that of Earth, and the days were half an hour longer, but details could wait.

"How many boxes has he gone through?" asked Brian.

"We can tell how many boxes were here originally from dust lines on the floor," said Alf. "Maybe here, he pointed at a spot on the floor, "and stacked up as high as that back row?" Some pantomime with Sill later, they worked out that he had eaten his way through nine hundred and seventy-two boxes or two hundred and forty-three years' worth of energy cake, give or take.

"Poor guy," said Elsbeth.

"He's AI," said Alf. "Being alone in the dark for so long wouldn't bother him as much as anything bio, but it wouldn't be much fun. No wonder he wants to leave. Everyone, grab a few cakes to carry. Elsbeth, tell Sill to eat some now."

Sill ate by grabbing chunks of the cake, pushing them into his mouth, and swallowing. Then he surprised his human companions by going to one corner of the room they had not inspected and turning a wheel. Water came out, splashing into a small stone trough.

"Where does that come from?" asked Brian.

"We're some way down," said Alf, "but still inside a hill. It must be a naturally occurring spring they've piped through here. From the mountains, maybe? Any reservoir would've run out long ago."

Sill took a plastic cup from the floor beside the basin and swallowed two cups of water. Then he picked up a small device they had also not seen before, plugged it into the two tubes they had previously noticed in his abdomen, and worked a lever on the device several times. The result was a sticky goo with an unpleasant smell pumped into a small, transparent chamber on the device. Sill emptied the goo into the stone basin, washed it out thoroughly, then allowed Alf to look at it.

"A way of handling the discharge from the bio digestion battery," he said. "Elsbeth, we'll want to take this with us."

Elsbeth found the word she thought meant 'take' in the dictionary and pointed at the device. Sill nodded, then gestured at two small, metal contacts embedded in his shoulder beside his neck. The humans had not noticed them before.

"I think they're recharging points," said Brian, inspecting them with his big flashlight.

"A back-up battery recharge system," said Alf. "When we run out of cake, we can hook him up to a power point. I've said it before, but I'll say it again: these guys really knew about engineering."

As they packed up and used the stone basin to dispose of their bodily wastes – the males going into the next room to give Elsbeth privacy, they spent a few minutes working out why Sill had been left behind.

"Sent ship," said Elsbeth as the android pointed at words. "Start sleep couch. Woke up. No crew. All gone."

"He was assigned to a ship and put in stasis," said Alf, "but they must've reassigned the crew, decided not to use the ship, and he was overlooked. He must have woken up when the power went off. But this also means that the ship must still be here. Ask him."

"Ship here?" said Elsbeth, pointing at words.

Sill nodded and pointed further along what Alf thought might be the long axis of the city.

"Field trip, guys," said Alf. "I'm not wandering around this city without seeing this ship. There must be an exit nearby, too."

"Alien ship sounds good," said Brian.

Ellen skirted around the vehicles in the police station's basement garage, keeping out of sight of the garage's single security camera. Her vehicle, an electric three-wheeler with a canopy – earlier generations on earth would have thought of it as an undecorated Asian Tuk-tuk – was also in the garage, but she did not take it. The vehicle was too easy for Barastoc to trace.

Instead, keeping to the walls, she made for the exit, barred only by a boom gate. It would be easy for a person to slip out, and that's what she would do, trying not to make too much sound without obviously seeming to sneak. When she got right up close to the sentry box, on the blind side of its single occupant, she heard the constable say on the intercom, in puzzlement, "You want me to stop Sergeant Pullen? Guys, what's going on?"

"Dunno," came the response. "Inspector Barastoc wants her stopped."

"Must be some sort of drill," said the constable, whom Ellen knew as Wayne, an officer serving out the last few years of his career in an undemanding job. She was going to slip out the exit without speaking to him when he turned to admit a patrol car and glimpsed Ellen out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, hi, sergeant," he said. "I've been told to stop you."

"Really?" said Ellen, feigning astonishment while moving around the sentry box and flipping open the door. Her gun was in her hand.

The sentry's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Sorry, Wayne, but it's a drill. The inspector's testing security. You know how it is." She took the constable's pistol and used the muzzle to push the button that opened the boom gate. "Come with me for a few moments." She did not want the constable pushing any alarms or calling the front desk until she was clear, and she certainly did not want to shoot him.

"I'm not supposed to leave the gate," said Wayne as Ellen pulled him out.

"It's just for a few moments," said Ellen. "We'll just walk around the back of the shops here." They walked clear of the station and around the back of Marshland's shopping centre. The area was not big enough for a full, multi-level shopping mall, but it had a host of shops lining two sides of a pedestrian mall with parking at the back that served much the same function as a full centre without the high rents. Despite all the advances in ordering online and automated delivery, people still liked to shop and have lunch out. The police station was at one end of the mall, and an elevated monorail station with an automated taxi line was at the other. Ellen kept talking as they walked.

"How are Wilma and the kids and the grandkids now? One on the way, I believe."

"They're all fine," said Wayne, in spite of himself. "My Vivien is due in about two months."

"Wilma must be excited?"

"Well, yeah, our spare bedroom is looking like a baby goods store."

Ellen stopped at the back of a coffee shop, where she knew she could walk through to the mall.

"Wayne, sorry, but I'm going to drop your gun into this street drain."

"What?"

"You can just lift the grate to get it back. I'm afraid I wasn't honest with you. This isn't a security drill. Barastoc pulled a gun on me in his office."

"Say, what? For star's sake, why?"

"Because he's in league with Mr Charles and wanted to stop me sending out a file about an underground city in the desert dug by a previously unknown alien civilisation – that's why."

Wayne took a moment to digest this as Ellen dropped his pistol into the drain. "Is there anyone still in this city?" he said eventually.

"Abandoned long ago. I hope you'll read all about it soon, and I'll buy you lunch to make up for this."

Wayne looked down at the grate to see where his weapon had gone, and when he looked up, Ellen had disappeared.

Down in the city, the trio of humans and Sill climbed several floors to what Alf thought of as the city's public areas. The one notable incident of the journey was that while Elsbeth was using the tracking device, she found Sergeant Pullen's query about his former fiancée and next of kin.

"You were engaged?" she said.

"A while back now. She died during the rebellion."

"That's a shame, but it sounds like your sergeant is checking your relationship status."

"She's not my sergeant, and she still calls me slime."

Thanks to the entrance having been open for several days, by that time, the air was better in the upper floors, and the longer they could stay off the air tanks they had brought with them, the longer they would last. To also conserve battery power, they were only using the light on Brian's helmet. But when they emerged on the main processional way, Alf abruptly pushed the button of Brian's helmet to switch the light off and pulled both Elsbeth and Brian behind one of the statues. Elsbeth pulled Sill behind her.

"Shhh! Light," he whispered.

The others also saw a faint glimmer in the distance and huddled closer behind the statue. Elsbeth put her finger in front of her mouth – a gesture Sill had previously been told meant to make no sound.

The glimmer grew into a pool of light around three humans. Besides Hutch, there was another thug called Bar, short for Barret, whom Alf suspected of being a total animal. A short, squat, round faced, unshaven man with lank hair, Bar had mostly been guarding the desert entrance to the camp up to that point. The third man, older than the others and gaunt-faced – he looked like a minor character in one of the old-style Westerns from Earth – had not been seen in the camp before, but Alf thought he looked familiar.

"Still say we should have offed all three," Bar could be heard saying as the group approached. "Well, off the two guys, then do the girl before offing her."

Alf sensed Elsbeth stiffening with indignation and put a warning hand on her arm.

"For star's sake, keep your voice down, Bar," said Hutch. "Alf handled Chris without breaking a sweat, and now he has Chris's gun. He could be anywhere down here."

"Mr Charles does not want any of that group killed yet," said the older man. "The ships down here are of prime importance. They will be needed for those."

The newcomers turned off the processional way at the main access door for the generators, within metres of the consultants and Sill.

"Then can we off them?" grumbled Bar.

"Mr Charles has to authorise any killings," said the older man. "The police have been asking about that other man."

The group went through the access door and the consultants breathed a sigh of relief. Alf could probably have shot all three, but he had no reason to do so and was aware he had to answer to a police sergeant.

"Do the girl," muttered Elsbeth fiercely. "Really!"

"At least now we know what all this trouble is about," said Alf. "Somehow, they know that there are still spaceships in this city. I thought it might be about weapons – and it may still be partly about that - but ships make more sense if you can make them work after more than two centuries sitting on the ground."

"That's where we come in, I guess," said Brian. "Who was the older dude?"

"I've seen him somewhere before," said Alf, "but not for years. It'll come for me. For now, let's find these ships. Lead on, Sill."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ellen knew her only hope was to keep moving. Creaghville was not a major Imperial settlement, but it still had lots of ways for the police to track suspects, of which she was all too keenly aware. For one thing, she still had her personal assistant, which could be tracked once Barastoc had obtained a warrant. But he would have to think of a reason for a warrant and apply to a judge, which would take time. There were security cameras on the pedestrian mall, however, and no warrant was required for those. Ellen walked as quickly as she could

down the side of the mall, where she knew she would be difficult to spot on the cameras to the transit station.

Once at the station, she swiped her card to open the first automated hire taxi, punched in an address in Creaghville's CBD that she happened to remember, set up the payment, tapped start, then backed out and shut the door. The taxi went off, its basic AI unaware, or uninterested in the fact, that there was no paying customer in the back. After that deception, she went around the back of the shops, where she knew there were few security cameras, and went into a print shop, flashing a badge to excuse opening the back door. There, she connected her personal assistant to a printer to print a few pages of her file. Despite all the advances in technology and communications, there was much to be said for the communications value of shoving a few pages under someone's nose. After that, she would walk a few more shops along and borrow the Tuk-tuk of a shop owner who owed her a huge favour.

Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen would keep moving.

Sill led the humans past the assembly hall and along a processional way on the other side, the blackness and utter silence of that vast space relieved only by the light from Brian's helmet and the sound of their feet on the tiled surface. Occasionally, a statue of one of the Engineers would loom out of the darkness, sometimes startling them. Eventually, Sill turned off the way to open a door.

"Okay, let's mark the turnoff," said Alf. "It's between a statue of an Engineer in an aviator's hat and goggles and flying costume, I guess, and ... umm, a statue of a Sill in a ball gown?"

"Looks to be," said Elsbeth. "First time I've seen any of these statues wearing what looks to us like woman's clothes."

"Not just female characteristics, at least to our eyes," said Alf. "Look how much bigger she is. She's taller, and her body is much wider in relation to her height than the other statues."

"Might be a queen bee or, in this case, a queen lizard-chimp thing," said Elsbeth.

"Maybe," said Alf. "We'll note the point and hand it over to the scholars. No doubt the books in the library will tell us more, eventually."

They went deep into the city, losing track of the number of levels they descended in what Alf, in particular, found to be the cramped Sill stairwells, putting their breathing masks back on at the first level. They turned into a corridor that went on forever until it abruptly ended in an open door – a door kept open by what looked like a Sill fire extinguisher placed against it.

"First time we've seen that," said Brian. "But then it's got a security lock. That's the first time we've seen a door with a security lock we haven't had to force."

Sill must have guessed what they were talking about as he stepped through the door onto a metal walkway that seemed to go out into space and pointed to a small metal box fixed to one railing. After checking that the walkway was securely fastened to the roof of the chamber, Alf ventured out to find that the box contained a button covered by a transparent case. Sill mimed the door being closed and then pushing the button.

"It had a failsafe on this side in case the door was locked," said Alf. "But he put that fire extinguisher there in case the door closed, and the button did not work. Considering the trouble he had getting into the workshop, it's not surprising."

"Must've come here often," said Brian. "What is this place?"

Alf switched on one of the flashlights they carried and played it out over the chamber onto what seemed like a curved metal wall. After playing the light over this wall, it occurred to Alf that it was the hull of a large spaceship on landing struts. They could see the cockpit

windows at one end in an otherwise smooth outline that bore a distinct resemblance to the airplanes of Earth without the wings.

"Straight aerodynamic configuration," Alf told the others through the speaker on his breathing mask. "Looks like an orbital lifter. Another craft on the other side looks like it's meant to go interstellar, and there's another craft further on. Looks like a big place. Sill, lead on."

"Sill, avo shade," said Elsbeth.

The android looked surprised, said, "Sith, shade," and led them on.

"You learning to speak the language?" said Alf.

"Couple of words I learned last night, guessing at the sound of the letters," said Elsbeth. "I can also tell him to come to me, but that's about it."

"It's a good start," said Alf.

Behind her face mask, Elsbeth beamed.

Sill led them down a long, rickety metal framework staircase to the bottom of the vast chamber, then to a ship beyond the one the humans had first seen. It was a big craft, as they later found out; one of the biggest in the vast, crowded hanger. The craft resembled an old-fashioned oversized transport plane of old Earth and, like the other craft in the hanger, had its loading ramp down.

Inside, the ship did not have the same 'packed-up, swept-clean' feel of the main parts of the city. Personal items such as books and cups had been left on tables in the crew recreational area, clothes had been left on bunks, and a locker had been hanging open for more than two centuries. Alf found a navigational star chart on the table beside what Alf thought was the lead pilot's station. He took it. Otherwise, apart from the need for a good dusting, the craft looked as if it was ready to take off.

"No wonder Mr Charles and Co wanted to get into the city," said Alf. "Somehow, they must have known about the ships, probably through the same avenue that an Engineer-Spacer dictionary ended up in that library. The ships seem like an advance on human tech. Just one would be worth a fortune even if it couldn't be restarted, and we've seen, what, two craft on this side of the walkway plus another on the other side, and there might be more."

"But how would they get the craft out or sell the technology?" asked Brian. "This is still Imperial territory and far from the major settlements."

"Good question," said Alf. "Anyway, this archaeological find has moved up several notches from massive to gargantuan. Guys, let's poke around a little more outside – see if there's a mechanics workshop nearby or whatever – then it's seriously time to look for an exit we can use."

They visited the stasis couch where Sill had been put to sleep awaiting the ship's departure – a departure that had never happened. There were six other stasis couches for the crew who had been reassigned at the last minute.

"Poor guy," said Elsbeth.

Having satisfied Sill by looking at the stasis couch the exploration party left the ship, walking down the ramp.

"Alf, look at this," said Brian.

Alf turned to see Brian pointing at a control panel on the ramp, which long vanished hanger technicians had connected by a cable to the city's control systems. Neither Alf nor Brian had glanced at the panel light when entering the ship. There had been no need. But Brian had spotted a change in the eternal blackness and silence of the city. A red light had started blinking.

Ellen drove into Creaghville's central business district without incident and left the borrowed car in a parking station. She hoped she was a step or so ahead of Barastoc and that

she only had to keep ahead long enough to drop her information bomb. Samantha was already on her way to meeting with an online blogger she knew. Creaghville did not have the active news sector of Earth, just a couple of streaming services that also dealt with local news and a few bloggers who posted items of varying worth, but they just needed one of those to post the discovery, and the rest would follow. With any luck, the Imperial Archive Service would pick it up and, after checking, send the item all through the Empire.

That left the problem of communicating with the government. Creaghville was large enough to have its own senate, which handled most matters, but officially it was still an Imperial colony. That meant a proconsul oversaw the Imperial apparatus, including the police and the auxiliary garrison - a single company thought to be in a poor state of military preparedness. The present Proconsul, Her Excellency Sara Whychute, had been in the job three months and, from what Ellen had seen from news feeds, was still struggling to exert her authority over an administration used to going its own way, which seemed to include a tolerance of corruption. The Proconsul had repeatedly declared that she was not having that. Ellen thought she could at least get a hearing with Her Excellency.

However, Ellen also knew that she could not call Her Excellency on the phone. Assistants would take the call, say they would review the material, and bring it to the Proconsul's notice if they thought it worthy of her attention. Her information would be referred to one of the government departments for evaluation, where it would sit in someone's e-in-tray for a time. In any case, she had already sent the file to a host of government officials and senators. A direct approach was needed.

Ellen switched off her digital assistant, left it in her borrowed electric Tuk-tuk, and walked to the Imperial Administration building. This was easily the most imposing building in the CBD, but that wasn't saying much as it topped out at only twenty stories – a height that would barely rate a mention on Earth. However, it was modern and had all the security features, including a guard who fretted over the fact that Ellen did not have an appointment with the functionary she had named in the Proconsul's office (the one she had elected to send the file to), but she flashed her badge and – after checking in her weapon and going through scanners was allowed to get to the elevators with access to the Proconsul's office.

After what seemed a long trip up, the elevator doors opened just as emergency sirens started blaring. "Lockdown. This is not a drill," a computer-generated voice declared. "Lockdown. This is not a drill."

Ellen hurriedly stepped through the elevator doors in case they closed as part of the security procedure. The receptionist, who seemed to be more of a security guard, was on the phone but looked up when Ellen came out, shouted, "She's here," and drew his pistol. Another guard, standing by a pillar, also drew his weapon and shouted, "On the ground, now!"

Ellen raised her hands. In the distance of the open plan office, she thought she could see a group of people ushering someone in the group's centre away from the action.

"I'm no danger," shouted Ellen, holding her arms up high. "I'm a police sergeant come to tell Her Excellency about an abandoned buried Alien city in the desert and about police corruption."

The small group moved her way despite various officials urging the person at the centre to move the other way while Ellen yelled her message twice more, ignoring commands to get down on the ground. Eventually, the group stopped, and a diminutive, white-haired lady stepped out to look at Ellen.

"What did you say?" said Her Excellency Sara Whychute.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Brian cleaned the dust off around the flashing red light, a pinprick in the darkness.

"There's some words above the light," he said. "Can Sill tell us anything?"

Elsbeth went through the drill of pointing at the first word on top of the light and looking at Sill, who found it in the Engineer-Spacer part of the dictionary. Elsbeth then read the results through the device's image recognition system and Spacer app. There were plenty of choices for each word.

"Whole, matrix, array, collective, system," she read for the first word. The next word was "reface, revisit, refresh, reboot. My guess is system reboot."

"What the f...," said Brian.

"Oh... ho... now I see," said Alf. "The guys we saw in the upper chambers were on their way to start the city systems by pushing that button I told you about. They must have done it, the idiots, and it worked."

"Would it be so bad if the lights came on down here?" asked Brian.

"It's not the lights that worry me; it's the security systems controlling those security droids we saw. The city system will think of us as intruders."

"Oh...," said Brian. Then, "Oh!"

Alf stepped off the ramp and looked around. He thought he saw red dots in the distance. Then, on the walkway far above them, an amber light started flashing.

"Guys, I think we should start moving," said Alf. "And find a way out."

"Sill still doesn't know of any way out," said Elsbeth.

"This area must have doors so these ships can leave," said Alf. "There might be a side door we can unblock. Ask Sill if it's this way."

After some messing around with the dictionary, the party turned parallel to the walkway and started walking. Alf thought he could see more red lights in the distance and another flashing amber light directly ahead. This proved to be above two gigantic doors towering above them in the gloom, which they reached after a lengthy trek. When the city was operational, the two doors could open out, or so Alf guessed. They looked for small access doors and found a hatch on the right of one door with a large locking wheel, which Alf and Brian could not move. Elsbeth found a small screen nearby, which lit up with some words when the hatch wheel was touched.

"Security protocol," translated Elsbeth with Sill's help. "Hatches locked ... system recovery."

"Oh, great!" muttered Brian. "Now the systems work."

"Let's go back up into the city," said Alf after a moment's thought. "I don't want to be caught down here in the open when the place goes fully operational."

They could still see little in the gloom but could see where the walls were due to the flashing red lights, and Sill knew the way, light or dark. By the time they got to the walkway, larger lights had come on in the distance, and they could just make out the ceiling above them. Once they were back through the door that Sill had propped open, they heard a reoccurring buzzing sound, which made Sill notably skittish.

Elsbeth cupped her ear, then waved her hand at where the sound seemed to come from. Sill pointed at the dictionary.

"Alarm," said the linguistic student.

Then they heard two words in the language of The Builders."

The dictionary was put to work again. "Intruder... alert," Elsbeth said.

"Intruders – that's us," said Alf. "We'd better move away from the door propped open – bound to be a red flag for the security system. Which way is the opposite end to where we came in?"

After the direction had been sorted out, with much pointing at the dictionary, Alf opened the far door of the chamber to come face to face with a security droid.

"Your ex-husband was taking bribes from organised crime figures?" said the pro-counsel. Ellen and Her Excellency Sara Whychute had moved to a conference table in the Proconsul's office. The alert had been canceled over the strong protests of two advisors, and tea had been served.

"He still is, as far as I know," said Ellen. "I made some noise but was promoted and moved out to The Marshes on the condition that I shut up, basically. No one was interested in what I had to say. The media also wouldn't take an off the record briefing. I had to go on the record."

"And you would have been a marked woman," said Her Excellency.

"It was made very clear to me, ma'am."

Whychute grunted. "I was brought in to clean up the endemic corruption here, and that's the first honest answer I've received in three months. You're talking now, I might point out."

"When my inspector pulled a gun on me, I figured the deal was off," said Ellen, "and my only option was to find you."

"Pulled a gun? Oh my, you have had an interesting day. Never mind your inspector. I have reserve power over the police. I'm going to invoke it and second you to my office with the rank of inspector. Put together a list of people untainted by this corruption to form a unit and then work out some way of tackling the problem with the least disruption. You report directly to me; you do not return to your station with its gun-happy Inspector."

"Yes, ma'am, thank you, ma'am," said Ellen. The promotion would make her the youngest inspector in the history of the Creaghville police by a substantial margin, that is, if she lived long enough to do the paperwork.

"We'll keep it all confidential for now," said Whychute. "Assemble your team, present me with a plan, and then we'll announce."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, tell me about this underground city."

Alf reacted a split second faster than the droid by dropping his shoulder and charging into the machine. Larger and heavier than the droid, an oversized version of Sill, and moving a lot faster, Alf knocked the creature into another behind it and smashed both against the corridor wall. A third droid, standing to one side, staggered and then brought its weapon around – a type of assault rifle that Alf had previously seen in racks in the security trooper rooms – only for the soldier to grab the weapon and yank the droid on to the others, before letting the whole mess drop to the floor. The third droid fired, but its bullets whistled harmlessly up the corridor.

While his opponents struggled to free their weapons, Alf twisted the third droid's weapon around to fire point blank at the first two droids, shredding the head of one and the chest of the other. They stopped fighting, but the soldier could not shake the grip of the third droid on its weapon.

"Brian, Elspeth," panted Alf. "Get that heavy unit that Sill used to prop that door open. We won't be going back into the hanger."

He pinned the droid to the ground then stood up, feet on the rifle which was on the creature's rib cage, and stayed there, the droid glaring at him, unable to move, as Elsbeth and Brian carted in the unit. It looked like the sort of gas cylinder people on Earth might have used on outdoor gas fires way back and might have been a fire extinguisher. Alf did not care. The device was heavy and sturdy. He took it from the two scholars and rammed it down several times as hard as he could on his opponent's skull, and the fight was over.

Brian and Elsbeth looked at open-mouthed.

"I can't get over how fast you can move," said Brian. "Or how strong you are."

"I used to work out," said Alf. "At the moment, I'm glad I can move fast."

He noticed that the tone of the warning had changed and that the sound had become urgent. Sill tugged at Elsbeth's sleeve, then pointed at the dictionary.

"Major ... alert," she translated. "Level eight."

"I'm guessing we're on level eight. Guys, we need to roll. Here..." He ripped the assault rifles from the bodies of their opponents, looked at them briefly, and handed one each to Elsbeth and Brian, who looked askance at them. "Okay, weapons technology doesn't change much; these things have a trigger and a barrel. You press the trigger, and bullets come out of the barrel. I think this is the safety. Let's see."

He fired a short burst that shattered a window overlooking the hangar. "Now, Elsbeth, fire at the other window, but just touch the trigger. Fire from the hip." He demonstrated.

"Difficult to miss at this range."

Elsbeth duly shattered her window, but Brian held the trigger too long.

"Whoa, Brian I said just touch it! You've shot off half your mag."

"Mag?" asked Elsbeth.

"Magazine, with the bullets – this part. I'll have to work out how to get the mags on and off later. These guys had spare mags. We'll grab those and go. For the moment, don't shoot at anything unless you're real close and not when I'm not in the way."

He looked out into the corridor, this time more cautiously, and led them in the opposite direction to the way they had come, the city's warning announcement still ringing in their ears. Alf thought their chances of getting out of the city were now slimmer. For the first time he was worried.

In the governor's office in Creaghville, the Proconsul inspected the pictures collected by Alf, Brian, and Elsbeth, pausing at a picture of Sill standing by Elsbeth.

"So that's what they look like?" she said.

"The creature is synthetic, but he's been made in the image of the city builders," said Ellen, "and the engineering is so good for now they've decided to call the race "The Engineers."

"Of the three now inside the city, you've only met Alf, this genetically altered former captain in the Forgotten Legion."

"And sergeant in the auxiliaries with a commendation, ma'am."

The proconsul looked curiously at Ellen, thinking that the police sergeant had been quick to point to the positive aspects of the ex-rebel's record. She had also noted that, from the photos, the ex-rebel looked "presentable," as women of her generation used to say. "Does he represent any sort of risk?"

Ellen shrugged. "He's a long way from his home system and says his rebelling days are done. He's got an offer to train as a spaceship engineer – he's already done the basic degree – and wants to take it."

The proconsul raised an eyebrow. "Really! We could certainly use people like him to maintain the skills of the spaceship servicing people. I was told we need sex workers and engineers to service the passing trade. I don't think our court system needs to be too harsh with him, but I will want to speak with him."

"A directive from you would make legal problems a lot easier, ma'am."

"Yes, it would," said the Proconsul, again looking curiously at Ellen. "There would be good money in serving the spaceship trade, I imagine, whether he's an engineer or a sex worker if he can get out of the city."

All Alf could think of was to keep his group moving. They trotted along the corridor, Sill staying close to Elsbeth, their progress made easier by the occasional light – Alf initially thought it must be the emergency lighting system, but he could not see any other lighting panels. Then he thought they were probably in a little-used access corridor that was not worth lighting properly. They switched off their helmet lamps and kept going. At the end of the corridor was a door without any security locks. Alf pushed the door ajar to peak out, then hurriedly drew back.

"Another three 'droid team bearing down on our left," he said. "Dunno if they're aiming for this door, but it's a fair bet they are."

"What do we do?" said Brian.

"In these close quarters, even assault rifles can be difficult to use. Pistols are better, or small automatics. When the door opens, we rush. Go in low and hard and pin them. You two take on one droid. They're not very strong. Don't give them a chance to use their weapons. Just pin them and wait for me. Got it, team."

"Got it," they said, although without much enthusiasm.

"And be wary, there's a railing with what seems to be a big drop on the other side."

Then the door opened. They rushed. One droid managed to fire, but its bullets went into the wall to ricochet over their heads. Alf kicked that one so that it sailed over the railings. It vanished from sight, still firing. At the same time, he grappled with the second droid, trying to get it to drop its weapon. Bracing the creature against the railing, he dislocated its shoulder, much as he had dislocated Sill's, ripped off two of the tendons, then ripped off the arm holding the rifle before throwing the creature over the railing. That left the third droid, which Brian and Elsbeth had successfully pinned to the ground. That droid also refused to let go of its assault rifle. Rather than rip off the arm, however, Alf took the magazine out of the rifle, having worked out how to release it, took the creature's spare magazine, and then slung it bodily over the railing.

After that droid dropped from sight, Alf risked peeking over the railing. He could not see the droids or even the bottom of the chamber they were in, but he could see a light in the distance, which must be on the chamber wall, and off to the right, he could hear what might have been a waterfall.

Sill said something and pointed at a word in the dictionary. "Gardens seems the best match," said Elsbeth after a moment.

"Gardens down here?" said Brian.

Sill pointed at more words. "Mushrooms – colorful, maybe," said Elsbeth.

"Okay, colorful mushrooms, good to know," said Alf, but we're way too exposed here. We have to move somewhere."

"Do you feel that?" said Brian, unexpectedly.

"Feel what?" said Alf.

"A breeze. It's very slight, but the air is moving, and oxygen levels are going up."

Alf checked his gauge. So they were.

"There was only the one entrance open before," said Brian, through the speaker on his mask, "but a city this size must have heaps of ventilation shafts, and the AI would have some means of opening them as part of waking the place up."

"Shafts humans might be able to escape through," said Alf. "Let's go and find one of these shafts."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Her Excellency Sara Whychute had examined Ellen's case file from beginning to end, had pronounced herself satisfied, and called in her principal assistant – a middle-aged man called Kensa who was devoted to the pro-consul.

"Summon the police commissioner and Major Darius to this office as a matter of urgency," she said. "I don't care what they're doing; they are to come here at once."

The assistant 'Yes, ma'am,' and left.

"I'll get Major Darius's auxiliaries to take over the exit we know about. Time they did something in any case. All they've done since I've been here is get into fights in the Marshland red light area."

"Which my station has to sort out, ma'am," said Ellen.

Her excellency grunted. "You don't have to be here, though. In fact, I'd prefer it if you weren't, as I'd have to explain what's going to happen with you, and I'm a firm believer in one difficult conversation at a time. I'll draft a statement saying that my office is aware of the discovery of structures of an unknown origin in the desert to the North of the capital city and has sent a detachment of auxiliaries to guard the site pending further investigation. As for you, lie low for a couple of days – a hotel, perhaps."

"Wouldn't mean much in Creaghtville, ma'am. All accommodation sites are required to report their guests, and I'd be more vulnerable in a hotel room than I would be at home, where I have a decent security system. I'll go there."

"My assistant will give you numbers to call if any of your colleagues try to arrest you or anything like that," said Whychute, "and we'll set up an Imperial protection order on you, now that I think of it. Off you go, compile lists and plans of attack. We'll talk later."

"Yes, ma'am."

The fugitives in the city ducked into another corridor to find out what Sill knew about the ventilation shafts, which was not much. His mind held a comprehensive map of the city, but the map was light on details of the city's engineering. Sill had not needed such information for his role as a butler and carer. Then Brian suggested that they simply set their faces to the breeze and keep their eyes on the oxygen levels, which was not only a reasonable idea, it was the only plan they had. It meant going out onto the walkway overlooking the mushroom park again, but there did not seem to be any other pursuit. They trotted past lights that started blinking and doors with keylocks that started glowing until they abruptly ran out of the walkway.

They backtracked to an access corridor without doors, which took them to a room with wrap-around windows, couches, and tables. Probably designed for leisurely observation of the mushroom gardens in the darkness below, Alf thought. They took another open corridor, which seemed to have a breeze. This ended in a broad walkway with a desk to one side that past generations might have categorised as an airport gate lounge desk and portraits on the wall instead of the statues which the builders seemed to like so much. Alf glanced into the walkway and then hurriedly drew back.

"Two more droids off to the right, moving quietly," he whispered to the others. "Move well back. If they come this way, I'll ambush them. Come up if things go badly for me."

The other three duly moved back while Alf crouched behind the desk. The two shapes hesitated when they came to the corridor entrance – the thought crossed Alf's mind that droids would not hesitate – then turned to pass by Alf's position. He charged.

In the split second between emerging from the desk and contact Alf realised who the newcomers were, and he remembered where he had seen the older man before. He knocked the one nearest him into the corridor wall, saying, "Guys, cover that one," but slammed the second one into the wall, face up, pistol under the newcomer's chin. He had seen the man's grim, drawn face in the upper chambers.

"Now I remember where I've seen you, Dr Percival, you piece of shit."

"How do you know ... my name?" gurgled the doctor.

"I was on the wrong side on Martus Prime like you, doc. I remember you from the clinic. Percival looked down, saw that his feet were not touching the ground, and gurgled, "You've been altered."

"I lost good friends in that program of yours, doc, and now I'm about to repay the favour."

"Not my ... program," said the doctor.

"Save your excuses for the other side, doc."

Alf was within an ace of pulling the trigger and sending Dr Percival off to account for himself when someone tugged on his arm. He turned his head to see Elsbeth looking sorrowfully at him. Beyond her, Brian was holding a gun on Hutch, who was on the ground holding his head, and Sill, both looking at him open-mouthed.

"You're scaring us," she said.

Alf thought for a moment, then stepped away, letting Percival crash to the ground, massaging that part of the underside of his jaw that his breathing mask let him reach.

"In consideration for the feelings of my colleagues, Dr Percival," said Alf, "I'm going to let you live – for a time. Just don't draw attention to yourself or wander away, especially if it means I can catch you out of sight of my colleagues." Still rubbing his jaw, Percival opted to remain quiet. "Hutch, you up?"

"Yeah, guess," said Hutch groggily from the floor, adjusting his mask. "No thanks to you."

"Just be real grateful I want information. We saw you guys in the upper chambers. What happened to the other one with you – Bar, wasn't it?"

"Those droid things got him two levels up and closer to the entrance."

"How about the other guys at the entrance?"

"We heard gunfire, but there was no way we were getting through."

"Huh! So how come you wound up here?"

"Dodging the droids, and where is here?"

"We're not too sure ourselves. We have a guide." Alf gestured at Sill. "But he's not much help on the engineering side."

"Where the fuck did that come from," said Hutch, picking himself up from the floor and looking at Sill opened eyed. He had not previously noticed the droid in the gloom. Percival, still holding his jaw, also glared at Sill.

"That's Sill. He's some sort of servitor droid who got left behind by accident when the creatures who built this place – we call them 'The Engineers' – evacuated more than two centuries ago."

"Two centuries!" exclaimed Percival.

"More than two hundred and forty, doc, as near as we can tell, and you haven't been given permission to speak. Shut up, or we'll leave you somewhere the nasty droids can find you."

"Is he violent – I mean, like the other droids?" asked Hutch. "Do we have to worry about him?"

"No problem at all so far, and you are to leave him alone. If you want to mess with Sill, you'll have to go through Elsbeth."

"Damn straight," said Elsbeth, folding her arms. "And I heard your boy chat about me in the upper chamber. You wanted to do the girl before offing her."

Sill looked from one human to another, wondering what was going on. Hutch, taken aback, searched his memory.

"Oh right, that was Bar. He was like that."

"Total animal," said Alf. "No great loss to humanity." He picked up a shoulder bag that Hutch had been carrying and dropped during the attack. "What have we here." He rummaged through the bag. "Grenades?" He pulled out one and held it up for the others to see. "You've got four in here, and they're Imperial issue. I see you've also got a rifle, but like the other weapons, you guys have been waving around topside, it's commercially available or easily found on the black market, but not these things. The only place they could have come from around here is the auxiliary arsenal. What in all the galaxy were you guys planning?"

Hutch shrugged. "We were just told to escort Dr Percival down to push that button."

"The one that kicked off the power systems and started the mess we're in?"

"Well, yeah. It worked like you said it would. We told Dr Percival you thought the security droids might wake up, but he didn't think it likely."

"Didn't seem credible," said Percival.

Alf closed the distance with Percival in one stride, picked him up, one handed, by the collar, and slammed him against the wall again.

"It's not the first time you've been completely wrong, is it, doc? I read the advice you gave the rebellion leaders on Martus Prime about genetic altering. You said the risks were acceptable. But three quarters of those in the program died. Three quarters, doc? Was that acceptable?"

"I was just advising on known risks," gurgled the doctor, conscious that one of his creations was glaring at him through a rebreather face mask. He tried struggling, but he might as well have wrestled with a cargo loader. "There were factors we didn't know about."

Sill got behind Elsbeth. Hutch looked on, interested. If the good doctor met a sad fate that was no loss to him, but he was intrigued that the man he knew as Alf had been altered. He thought that explained a lot.

"You were told the security droids might wake up, doc," said Alf. "But you still went ahead and pushed that button."

"I was told to do it... who knew they'd wake up so quickly... thought it might take hours, even days."

"But why the fuck's sake did you want to wake the city? Why not leave it be for the archaeologists?"

"Weapons and ships, I was told – need city to start ship reactors."

"You would. You need a humongous load of power to start a fusion reactor. Okay, so why did Mr Charles tell you he needed ships that have been standing in their hangers for more than two centuries? How did he know they'd even work?"

"Not him."

"Not Charles? Then who?"

"The one he reports to – Mr Acheron."

Alf abruptly dropped Percival, who pushed himself back against the wall in a vain attempt to put more distance between himself and the altered human. Alf crouched down in front of him.

"Describe this, Mr Acheron."

"I never met him," gasped Percival. "Just get instructions over the phone through intermediaries, including Charles."

"Did anyone else escape the rebellion with you?"

"One of the other altered individuals came with me. I don't know of anyone else."

"Which altered individual?"

"I knew him as Benji."

"Oh great, Benji – just what I don't need."

"Who is this Benji?" asked Hutch.

"Same deal as me – altered – but he's bigger and a whole lot nastier. He had a bad habit of executing Imperial prisoners by crushing their skulls. Doc, I thought I'd left the rebellion far behind me. How come Creaghville has become a rallying point for rebel slime? Why couldn't they make a nuisance of themselves somewhere else?"

"I was just told to come here - there was alien technology that could prove useful."

"Guns and star ships – rebuild strength, maybe. Well, we've taken our inquiries about as far as they can go at this point, especially with the city security system getting stronger by the minute. Brian, give Hutch his rifle back. Hutch, you cause problems, and I'll drop you in a heartbeat. Once we're out of the city, we go our own ways, more or less."

"Gotit," said Hutch.

"Doc, the same warning applies. If I find you by yourself, then there are lots of places to lose a body around here."

Percival stood up to stand behind Sill, who was standing behind Elsbeth.

"Let's roll people," said Alf.

"How are we getting out of here?" asked Hutch.

"That's a good question," said Alf. "I wish I knew the answer."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After checking the whisper of an airflow, Alf's group, now expanded to five humans and one android, turned right at the corridor intersection with Hutch, complaining that they had just come that way.

"You're welcome to try going back the way we just came," said Alf, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "But we didn't see any way out."

After a few minutes, they came to a side door without any security lock, opened it, and decided that the breeze was a little stronger in that side passage. Alf noted that the areas they passed through had no security cameras he could see, and even the security alert now sounded faint, as if there were no functioning loudspeakers in the area. Then they came to a door with a security lock, and several words stenciled on the door, which Alf thought they should translate. After the usual messing around with Sill, the book, and the image reader, the sign was tentatively translated as 'Engineering spaces. Authorised personnel only'. Unusually, the door also had a vent near ground level, and Alf thought he felt a distinct breeze coming from it.

"You can get through the lock," said Hutch. "I've seen you guys do it."

"Brian and I have got it down to an art now," said Alf. "But we have to break the lock to do it, and the AI now running this city is going to work out we must be here and be sore with us for messing with the infrastructure. What other options are there? Let's walk on a little way first."

They walked on, passing one other door with a security lock but without any writing stenciled on it before the corridor came to a dead end, and they returned to the first door.

"Can't you guys hack it?" asked Hutch.

"The short answer is no," said Alf. "The long answer is that Brian here would need a few years to study the city AI's operating system and architecture to try it; even then the AI may be too smart."

"Advanced systems with decent security are impossible to hack," said Brian.

"That means we gotta break the lock," said Alf. "Okay, Brian, grab the jump leads. Hutch, you get ready to kick the door the moment you hear a click."

Alf dug a screwdriver into the top of the lock, between the casing and door, and ripped it off. Somewhere, a horn started blaring.

"That's done it," he muttered. He ripped out the metal circuitry behind the casing. Brian connected two leads; the door clicked, and Hutch kicked it open. Beyond was a platform with a guard rail overlooking a large space filled with pipes. Somewhere, a fan was turning over slowly, with a muted 'whump, whump, whump' like a distant helicopter idling. Alf guessed that in a city without any population as yet, the ventilation system was low on the list of power priorities. However, the fan had to be drawing air from somewhere.

"Look at the gauges," said Brian. "We're almost normal now. No need for masks."

"Good to know," said Alf as they all took their masks off, letting them dangle around their necks. The horn was still blaring. "Guys, let's take the stairs over there and see if we can't track down the air source. Hutch, see if you can find something heavy to put against the door to stop our droid friends from joining us, then catch up."

"Gotit," said Hutch.

Alf's group got down to the floor and followed the sound of the blades turning over, quickly losing sight of the platform they had been on in the maze of pipes. Hutch rejoined them, shouting to find out where they were in the maze.

"I managed to find a heavy crate for the door," he told Alf, "But there's a second door further along the platform and just nothing to block it."

"Can't be helped," said Alf, "The Engineers didn't leave much stuff lying around."

They stopped in front of a pipe big enough to fit a good-sized helicopter of the type used on distant earth. The pipe also had a handy inspection hatch.

"Well, it's big enough," said Alf, who flipped open the hatch and put his head in to find a set of blades, a very large version of a ceiling fan, just above human head height, being turned by a central shaft. He got right into the pipe with Brian to inspect a ladder recessed into the pipe wall. It seemed to go right up the shaft, but any human using the ladder would be cut in two by the blades. He looked hard at the connection between the blades and the shaft by the flashlight and thought for a moment. "Looks like we've found a use for one of those grenades," he told Brian. "Make it two."

When he re-emerged, Alf could hear distant pounding.

"Think the droids are at the door," said Hutch.

"There seems to be a way up. The door just has to hold a few more minutes."

Alf took two grenades and the roll of tape from Hutch's shoulder bag.

"Here's my knife," he told Brian. "I'll stop the blades as best I can with the butt of my rifle. You tap these grenades around the central shaft making sure the pins – that's those rings there – are close together and taped so they can be pulled out together. Then, extend the tape in a trail to the hatch where I'll be. You get out and pull the tape. I'll be right behind you."

"With two grenades going off?"

"There's a three second delay on those things, as I found out the hard way. Should be just enough time for me to get out if you're not in the way."

"If you say so," said Brian.

Alf smashed his rifle butt against a blade and then held it, straining against the machinery's massive torque, as Brian taped the grenades.

"Better hurry," said Alf, gasping.

"Almost there."

Brian let out a tape trail, pinching the tape in half so it would not stick where it wasn't supposed to, then stood by the door.

"Get out, pull the tape," gasped Alf, "then slam and latch the door behind me."

Brian got out and declared, "Pulling now".

Alf dived through the hatch, dropping his rifle inside the cylinder, and Brian latched the hatch shut a split second before the grenades went off with a 'whump' that almost broke the hatch.

While Alf and Brian had been blowing up the air duct system, the droids had also been busy. When Alf got up, ears ringing, he was amazed to see Elsbeth kneeling behind a pipe, taking aimed shots with her rifle at some distant target as if she had been doing it all her life. Sill was cowering behind her.

"Droids got through," said Hutch from behind another pipe. "Just three so far, we think. Good to leave soon."

"Another minute."

Alf opened the hatch to find the three rotors still whirling around but badly bent out of shape. He crawled in, retrieved his rifle then used the butt to smash the rotors as they passed. One broke off entirely and the other two further bent out of shape, leaving plenty of room for humans to crawl up the access pipe ladder.

"Time to go, guys," said Alf poking his head out again. "Brian, you're first. Start climbing fast. See what's above us. Elsbeth, stop firing at the droids and get in the pipe with Sill. See if he'll follow you up. Doc, you're next. Hold us up, and I'll happily kick you off the ladder. Hutch, you and I are rear guard. Brian slung his rifle over his shoulder and started climbing, quickly disappearing into the darkness. Elspeth stepped into the pipe, leading Sill by the hand, crouching down to avoid the mangled blades. She got onto the ladder and, after a moment's hesitation, Sill followed. Percival crept in, not looking at Alf, and started climbing, soon disappearing into the darkness. Then came Hutch, who helped Alf tape the hatch closed from the inside. The masking tape would not hold the droids for long once they figured out what was holding the hatch shut, but they hoped it would baffle their artificial minds. Why wouldn't the hatch just open? To make matters more interesting, Alf and Hutch rigged one of the grenades with masking tape so that opening the hatch pulled its pin, and the explosive device would drop outside the pipe.

Leaving Hutch to balance the grenade on the lip of the hatch, Alf stepped onto the ladder, hoping to catch up to Percival and find an excuse to throw him off. After a couple of minutes climbing, the blackness enveloped him, but then his eyes adjusted to pick up the faint glows of the atmospheric gauges carried by his comrades above him. He checked his own. Plenty of oxygen, hopefully from the surface. Alf switched off his gauge, then became aware, in the darkness above him, of a faint 'Whump! Whump! Whump!' Another set of blades? He kept climbing.

Back at the Creaghville suburb of Marshland, Ellen made the driver of the Proconsul's car stop at the corner of her street so she could check out the area. All seemed quiet. The few cars she could see in the street looked familiar. Then she made the man wait while she checked out her house and tiny backyard, gun in hand. Nothing. A few minutes after she had told the driver to go and locked the door, her personal assistant cheeped. It was Inspector Barastoc in a bad mood.

"You have to come in!" he said without preamble.

"So, you can pull a gun on me again? No way. You might see that there is an Imperial Protection order on me."

"I can see that. What did you tell the Proconsul?"

"That's for Her Excellency to reveal. In the meantime, I'm sticking here."

"At home, I see. I'm still your superior officer, and I order you to return to the station."

"Seriously? After sticking a gun in my face? You can always try that one with the police disciplinary board. What do you think would get them more excited: a sergeant who disobeys an order or an inspector who points his service pistol at subordinates?"

"We can go there and take you."

"Really? I still have my gun and plenty of ammunition. Are you going to ignore the protection order, shoot it out with me, and later claim I was dangerous? Too many people know the truth now. Time to think of your defence."

Barastoc's voice rose a few decibels. "I don't need your advice."

"Just pointing out the obvious, inspector. Leave it with you and take care." Ellen hung up, then thought to check for messages from the party in the Alien city. Nothing since the message Alf had sent just before they went in. Ellen was worried.

After what seemed an age of climbing, with the sound of blades getting louder above him, Alf came to a small platform where his party had gathered. He stayed on the ladder as there was no room on the platform, the main and only feature of which was a hatch on which something was pounding.

"Blades above us," said Brian before Alf could ask why they'd stopped. "Looked out the hatch just in time to see a heap of droids coming along the gantry outside. This hatch can be locked on this side. They don't seem too happy."

"Did you get a chance to see how far there is to go?"

"Sorry, Alf. I had no time for sightseeing. But we must be well above the camp we were sleeping in."

Alf thought that was right and that Brian was proving to be just as cool in a crisis as Elsbeth. One less thing for him to worry about.

"Give us the spare rifle," he said to Brian, "and take the tape from Hutch when he comes up. See if you can tape up the hatch to delay our Android friends."

Just as Alf took the spare weapon, Hutch came into view, and an explosion echoed through the pipe, making Elsbeth and Brian slap their hands over their ears. The droids at the base of the pipe had triggered the grenade trap.

"Didn't delay them as long as we hoped," said Hutch.

"We gotta keep moving," said Alf. "Hutch, follow me up, and I'll see what I can do about the blades above us. The rest of you follow fast. Brian, you're last. Be quick about the taping job."

A few metres up, Alf found another set of three blades like the ones at the base of the shaft but not whirling as fast, as near as he could tell. He got as close as he dared, then jammed the butt of the spare assault rifle against a blade, bracing the barrel against the side of the ladder well, where a strut kept the ladder in place. As the gun was braced against the ladder well, Alf did not have to spend much strength fighting the blades, but he had to lay his body across the weapon to keep it in place while shuffling to one side so that the others could squeeze past.

"Hutch, get by me. Guys, fast! You'll have to squeeze by me."

Alf had to leave his helmet light on so the others could see enough to squeeze past. Percival crept by without looking at Alf. Elsbeth paused for a moment to ask if Alf would be able to follow only to be told to keep moving, and Sill stopped, unsure of what he was to do. Alf hauled Sill up by one arm, with Brian pushing, his head on the creature's behind, until the android got the idea and kept moving.

Then Alf had to extricate himself from the fan without being cut by the blades. He wiggled up so that his legs held the rifle in place, then his feet. Then he pulled his legs up, letting the weapon fall away. The blades started circling again. He switched off his helmet light and kept climbing. The next time he looked down, he saw a glimmer of light about where the platform had been. The security droids had managed to open the hatch. Well, the blades were now between him and them.

After a few more minutes of climbing, he was at the top – a circular platform with a guard rail and a single door, but the others were just standing around.

"Air vents," said Brian, pointing up, "but we can't see a way out."

"You said not to turn on lights," said Hutch.

"We might have to. What's through that door?"

"An engine room – the engine turning the shaft, I guess," said Elsbeth. "I couldn't see any way out."

"Okay, but the air must be coming from somewhere. Guys, where are you feeling the best breeze?"

"Here," said Elsbeth after a few moments.

"Hutch, get ready to return fire."

Alf flashed his helmet light on for a split second to see a large air vent above him just as the shaft stopped turning. He dragged Elsbeth away a moment before a shot from below ripped through the space where she had been. Good shooting. Hutch returned fire, the sound echoing through the pipe.

"Got him!" said Hutch.

"Hutch, move!" said Alf. "Never fire and stay put. Change position."

"So, what do we do now?" asked Elsbeth as she crouched on the walkway.

Alf rummaged in his backpack to bring out the small hiker's spade he had taken from the equipment bin at the base camp.

"I'll knock out the grill – I hope it's not fastened in some way – then I'll hand you the spade and boost you into the hole. I couldn't see anything, but the air has to be coming from somewhere. Look for daylight."

"Okay, I guess...."

Alf moved back under the vent, then pushed it with the spade. It wasn't fastened. He shoved it so that the grill turned and fell into his hands. He threw it over the side, hoping it might hit a droid. Then he grabbed Elsbeth and boosted her into the opening. Her jeans and sneakers were visible for a few seconds, then vanished. He took up his weapon and fired, more to keep the droids' heads down than with any hope of hitting one.

"Hutch, Brian, just a shot now and then when you think you have a good chance of a hit."

"I can see a way out," said Elsbeth, who returned to the vent opening. "But it's covered by a grill, and I can't move it."

"I'll come up," said Alf.

As he lifted himself through, he saw that Sill was standing on the walkway, looking up at the hatch, obviously wondering where Elsbeth had got to. He extended his arm, and the creature grabbed it, allowing himself to be lifted into the vent, which was not a vent. The area was, in fact, surprisingly roomy, being more like the roof space of a suburban home, albeit a circular one. A few paces from the opening, Elsbeth, her helmet light on but turned down, knelt by a large, screen-covered hatch. Quite a breeze was blowing through it.

Gunfire echoed through the shaft.

"We need to move," Hutch yelled. "They're coming in force."

"Elsbeth, tell Hutch to hold on and see if you can help Brian through. He should be able to jump. Then get Hutch through. If Percival wants to tag along, it's up to him."

The screen proved to be held in place by rivets which, like everything else in the city, had been built to last. Alf worked the camp spade underneath the screen and heaved, causing the rivets to give a little but otherwise hold firm.

"Brian, you there? We need that electrical screwdriver of yours."

The computer expert was there in a moment, inserting the tip of his screwdriver under the rivet on the other side, also making some ground but not nearly enough. Alf was aware of Hutch, now up in the circular space, firing through the vent, along with Elsbeth. Sill was looking on in what might be alarm.

"Brian, give me the screwdriver."

Alf put the screwdriver tip under the rivet head and heaved with all his considerable strength. With a shriek of protest, it gave way. Alf did the same with several more rivets, then used the spade to lever off the whole frame, finally pulling it off and throwing it to one side.

"I can't see anything down there," said Brian, looking into the opening, headlamp on full. "I can see the shaft we came up in, but I'm not sure where the ground is."

"Need to move, people," said Hutch. He and Elsbeth were backing away from the vent.

Then Percival had the bad judgment to peer over the edge of the vent opening. Alf grabbed him around the torso, pinning his arms, and threw him feet first through the vent. The scientist had time to exclaim, "Hey, what?" before vanishing from sight. He hit the ground with a distinct thud and an "Ouch!"

"Okay, I can see him," said Alf. "It's a cone with steep sides, mostly dirt. The air must be coming in near the top."

"Thanks very much!" said Percival indignantly from far below.

"Just be grateful I didn't fling you in headfirst, doc," said Alf. "Now, Brian, I can lower you down some of the way and swing you so that you land further up the cone. Just land on your feet and roll. Then, get up and find an exit. If necessary, expand it with this." He handed Brian the camp shovel.

"Gotit," said Brian.

The computer expert landed much further up the cone than Percival recovered quickly and started clambering up the side.

"Elsbeth, here. You're next, and Sill will go if you go."

The linguist landed more heavily than Brian but still recovered well to scramble up the side of the cone, and Sill acted as if he had been thrown into pits all his life. That left Hutch, who fired a full burst at the hatch they had been defending, then grabbed Alf's arm to be swung through the hole onto the side of the cone. Alf flung the last grenade at the entrance hatch, then followed the others – swinging, one-handed, on the side of the hatch before letting himself drop.

He landed poorly, almost twisting an ankle and falling a few metres down the side of cone before getting up again to scramble towards his comrades, who were right up against the edge of the circular structure they had been in, where it met the cone. There, Brian was using the spade to enlarge a hole. Through the hole, they could see the night sky! In a few moments, they had all wiggled through – Elspeth pulling Sill – and were out in the open.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The one most affected by the escape was Sill. After Alf wiggled out of the hole enlarged by Brian, he found the android looking up at the stars that glittered overhead, repeating the same word as if in a trance – "Barto."

"What's he saying?" Alf asked of Elsbeth.

"I think he means 'far'," she said.

"After being underground for the better part of two and a half centuries, I guess a change in perspective would stun the poor guy. Probably better we came out at night. The sun might have fried him. You got that sheet to throw over him we talked about?"

Elsbeth nodded.

"Okay, lead him by the hand when we go, and we gotta go now. I don't think the droids will follow us out here, but no sense in tempting fate."

"Where are we?" said Brian.

They were close to the summit of the long, large hill they now knew concealed a whole city. Alf also knew that the camp they had been using was elsewhere on the hill, but he was momentarily at a loss about just where that camp might be until he spotted two moving lights.

"There, see those lights in the distance?" He told the others, pointing. "That's an automated ore truck on the main northern road – the only road around here. You can see the glow from the lights of Creaghville in the distance that way, so the camp is this way. We might be able to grab a vehicle there. If not, the main road is not all that far."

They moved off, Sill still occasionally saying "Barto" to Elsbeth and pointing to the sky. Traveling outside the city was a lot easier than traveling in it, and they relaxed somewhat. Elsbeth produced a bar of chocolate and gave everyone a row of cubes. Alf handed around a water bottle. The access road came into view, and then the camp entrance, which seemed very quiet.

"No one in the guard post at the entrance," said Hutch.

They crept closer. Eventually, Alf told the others to wait out of sight, and he and Hutch went on to peep around the side of the camp excavation.

"Two bodies," whispered Hutch. "I can't see any droids."

"I think I can see one standing on the ramp on that pit so that it can see into the camp."

Hutch peered into the gloom. "You're right, but it hasn't seen us yet."

"Just as well. Let's see if we can sneak into a vehicle."

Keeping their heads down and crawling, they got to the sentry box on the other side of the gate undetected, and they saw more of the aftermath of what must have been the battle of the excavation. A panel van, engine still running, had stopped half facing them, its windshield mostly shot away, and the driver thrown back on the seat, his torso a mess. Another body was partially concealed by the vehicle. Both men had been gunned down while trying to escape.

"How many more of your guys?" asked Alf.

Hutch thought for a moment. "Another four somewhere, but it's not looking good. We can reach the other van."

"I'll do that; you go and get the others. When I see them by the road, I'll start."

"You don't know the password."

"Yes, I do. That's the van you used to take Junot to the hospital. Remember I stood beside you while you entered the password into the keypad?"

"Bastard."

"Just planning an escape from a place where thugs wanted to shoot me. Get the others."

Alf waited until he could see his group standing by the side of the access road but still out of sight of the droid sentry in the access pit. He crept up to the van, opening the door as quietly as he could, thankful the cabin light did not come on. The first thing he noticed was that the cabin had been rifled. The door pockets and what was still called the glove box, generations after the original reason for the name had been forgotten, emptied, and the contents scattered around the cabin. Alf didn't think the droids would have any interest in searching the van but then thought it was a mystery for another time and was just about to start the vehicle when he heard a noise in the back – a scrape of boot on the floor.

In an instant, he was holding his gun, the pistol he had taken off Chris when they left the camp. There was nothing between the two front seats and the van's rear, where Alf found one of Hutch's thugs reaching for his weapon.

"You!" said the thug.

"Yep," said Alf, pointing his pistol at the thug. "Take the pistol out, slowly, and push it over here. Any others like you in the camp?"

"Nah! Just me left alive up here." He was an ill-favoured youth with lank hair, a pimply face, and a pointed chin, there to make up the numbers. Alf had been told his name once but couldn't remember it. "Dunno about the ones who went into the city."

"I've got Hutch waiting on the access road outside along with others," said Alf, picking up the thug's gun. "We're going to blow town; you want to come?"

"No problem, but I couldn't find the password," said the youth. He was the one who had searched the van, looking for a way to get it started.

"I got it," said Alf. "Stand by the right-side door to let the others in."

Alf started the van and shot out of the camp. The droid sentry fired once, clipping the van just above the back door but otherwise doing little damage. Then, the city systems must have decided that as the vehicle was outside the city and departing at speed, it was of no further interest. They stopped to pick up the others - the youth squawking with alarm on seeing Sill.

"He's no danger, Mil," said Hutch. "All in. Let's go, Alf."

After that, it was a straight milk run into Creaghville with Sill standing behind the seats staring out at the desert scenery illuminated by headlights, such as it was, now and then exclaiming "Barto" and then "Silda."

"Silda means change, I think," said Elsbeth after getting Sill to point to the word in the dictionary. "I wish I had time to study the grammar section of the book."

"You can talk to this guy?" said Mil, short for Miloje.

"Limited communication," said Elsbeth. "Holding conversations is well down the track."

Then they started seeing houses, the occasional side road, and a single refuelling station. As it was well after hours, the houses were dark, and the refuelling point deserted, but the sight of them made Alf think about what would happen when the sun rose and the good citizens of Creaghville, going about their business, caught sight of Sill.

"Elsbeth, you'd better break out that cover of yours," he said. "We don't want people overreacting to the sight of Sill before we get somewhere safe."

This involved further consultation with the dictionary and, initially, a difficult time in getting Sill to accept a spare sheet from the camp as a covering until he understood what it was for and that his face would not be covered. Elsbeth produced a couple of safety pins which she had found at the camp, and when the sheet had been fastened, Sill might have been a youth on his way to a toga party, provided no one looked at the face. So dressed, he happily stood behind the passenger seat, Elsbeth by his side, taking in the sights. When they got into Creaghville proper, and the system's sun started to edge over the horizon, making them all realize how tired they were, Brian produced a pair of sunglasses for Sill to wear. This also took some persuasion from Elsbeth through the dictionary, but as the sun got brighter, Sill understood the need for them and put the eyewear on. As his ears were shaped differently from that of humans, the sunglasses tilted forward. But overall, unless people looked closely, the sunglasses reinforced the impression that Sill was an eccentric member of a youth cult partying on.

Then Alf pulled into a large car park, almost empty apart from a couple of ground cars at one end, walked around to the back, opened the doors, and rapped his pistol on the van floor. "Come on guys, up and at 'em." Hutch, Mil, and Percival had fallen asleep and had to be shaken by Brian before they realised that they were being ordered out.

"It's Mr Charles' van," protested Hutch.

"You can pick it up when I've finished with it, which will be later this morning. I'll send you a text of its location. For now, there's a transit system station just over there. Go and grab some sleep at home."

"Where are we going?" asked Elsbeth.

"I'm dropping you and Brian at the university to see that lecturer-supervisor of yours. You can show him Sill, the dictionary, and the other stuff we took, including the alien assault rifles, which stay here incidentally, fellas. You don't need me to speak to your lecturer, and he must have a lab where he can stash Sill until we can contact the proconsul."

"Are you going to see that police sergeant of yours?" asked Elsbeth.

"Police sergeant!" exclaimed Hutch.

"Yeah, Hutch, the police have been following the whole saga thanks to the stuff we've been sending them and not the corrupt ones."

"A sergeant who also looks good in a bathrobe," said Elsbeth.

"Shut up, Elsbeth!" snapped Alf, making Elsbeth start. "Guys, move. I dunno if you did anything illegal at the camp and don't wanna know. The police will be interested in the fate of the guy before us who Thumper offed, not to mention the body count at the camp itself. Doc, you wanna get lost, and don't let me catch you by yourself. Now move."

Percival grunted, then he and the thugs were gone.

"Where is this university of yours," asked Alf of Elsbeth as he climbed back into the driver's seat.

At Creaghville's Imperial administration building, Her Excellency Sara Whychute was becoming increasingly unhappy with the answers she was getting from both the police commissioner, a portly gentleman called Dan Dubinsky, and a white-haired Major Caspian Darius, who commanded the only military force on the planet, the Imperial auxiliaries. After batting the issue around the previous day, she had convened an early morning meeting, hoping to get the two men to comply with her orders voluntarily. The major was too old for his rank, having been demoted two grades by a court martial before being sent to the remote post of Creaghville, where it was hoped he would do little harm until he reached retirement age. He had the red, blotched nose and watery eyes of a heavy drinker, and the proconsul had already found cause to complain about his behaviour to her superiors.

As had happened many times during the three months Whychute had been in office; the two men were finding reasons for not doing anything and denying that problems existed.

"I'm sorry, I just cannot countenance the creation of another special police unit for corruption and organised crime," said Dubinski. "We already have squads working hard in those areas."

"I don't require your authorisation or even approval," retorted Whychute. "I will nominate the police personnel to be seconded to this new group, and they will report directly to me from office space in this building. You will cooperate in setting up this group, or I will know the reason why."

"But ma'am, we're overstretched as it is," said Dubinski, with the air of an adult patiently explaining a problem to a child. "Another group acting at cross purposes to existing investigations is bad practice, and we're making progress in combating corruption."

"You've been beating confessions out of low-level thugs and cops who then all claim that they acted alone," retorted Whychute. "Let's disband the existing unit and have the new unit under my direct control take another look at those cases, shall we, and see if they'll take witness protection in exchange for testimony."

Dubinsky blanched. He knew that tactic might be effective. But before he could respond, Whychute moved on.

"And you, major, what is your reason for refusing to send your soldiers to this site we've been discussing in the desert? Clearly, there have been problems there. I order you to send a detachment to the site."

Major Darius barred his teeth in a very nasty grin. "I saw the last report you sent on me, ma'am. You said some things I didn't like."

"Considering you have a habit of turning up to meetings drunk, can you blame me? And how did you happen to see a copy of that report?"

"I have sources," said Darius, still grinning nastily. "My people will be needed here to restore government stability after you've been removed from office."

"What!" shrieked Whychute, leaping to her feet.

Major Darius produced a standard-issue service pistol, which he pointed at the proconsul. "Sit down, Whychute!" he snarled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When her front door chime sounded, Sergeant Ellen Pullen first checked the visitor was who she expected – the man she knew as Alf but was really Jake Langston – but still opened the door, gun in hand.

"Pleased to see me, I see," said Alf/Jake, eying the pistol. The safety was off.

"Get in quick," she said, looking up and down the street before closing the door.

"Were you followed?"

"Not that I saw, but that wouldn't make much difference. Elsbeth asked, in front of Mr Charles's thugs, whether I was going to see my police sergeant."

"YOUR police sergeant?"

"Hey, she saw that comment I made about you in a dressing gown and has been bugging me about you. I didn't think to tell her not to mention you in front of the thugs."

"And what's her interest in this?" Ellen knew who Brian and Elsbeth were from the reports she had been getting.

"Elsbeth's just curious. She may date Brian, who has expressed interest, although she has her hands full taking care of Sill."

"Humph!"

"You know, I think the general atmosphere would be more congenial if you didn't have a gun in your hand with the safety off."

"Oh, very well," Ellen said with a show of reluctance, putting the pistol in its designated sideboard drawer. "This time, I will offer coffee."

"Great, coffee, and you might not shoot me?"

"I'm not making promises."

Once the police-issue pistol had been put away, Alf thought that Sergeant Pullen became almost human, even smiling slightly at a couple of incidents in the underground city Alf related over coffee. She became more serious when Alf told her what Percival had revealed – that there was someone that Mr Charles reported to, a Mr Acheron.

"An even bigger crime boss," said Ellen. "I've never heard of this guy. Any thoughts on who he might be?"

"During the rebellion, the big boss for the military was a guy called General Styx. In Greek mythology, the river Styx is the boundary of Hades, the Greek underworld, but it is not the only river. There are several others, including Acheron, the river of pain."

"Charming," said Ellen. "You think these references to Greek mythology indicate a link between the rebellion and this Mr Acheron?"

Alf shrugged. "Until I get a look at this guy or there is a thorough police investigation led by a charming sergeant ..."

"Ha!"

"You didn't call me slime or scum just for complimenting you."

"Slime," she said and smiled brightly, making Alf's heart skip a beat. "You never said what happened to your fiancée back on Martus Prime."

"She didn't make it, and I was really sore over that for a while."

"You would have been. Sorry that she didn't make it. Am I allowed to ask exactly how? Was she also in the army?"

"Genevieve was a transport pilot for the legions, but let's not get into it now. It's almost lunchtime, and we could order some food – I'll buy."

"Hmmm!"

"Then we could watch something on your entertainment unit."

Ellen sat back and crossed her arms.

"This sounds almost like an at-home date, Mr Langston."

"I always think that it's important to avoid labels or categories. We both have to eat; we're here together and have time to kill. You can call me slime later, even interrogate me. Tie me up and whip me."

She laughed. "That might excite you. I guess we both have to eat. Later, I'll think about throwing you in jail."

Proconsul Sara Whychute did not so much yell as scream her response to having a gun waved in her face.

"This is treason, Major! You won't get away with a demotion for this. You'll be sobering up in the Imperial military prison for life."

"I've no intention of being caught, Whychute. Now sit down, or I'll shoot you down."

Ignoring the command, the proconsul turned to the commissioner. "Are you going to allow this? Call your people in."

"Proconsul, the military has control here. I allowed the Major to replace his people with mine as part of what I thought would be an exercise. Cas, this is not what we agreed. This is a military takeover."

The proconsul thought that Dubinski remained surprisingly calm.

"What did you agree with, Major Darius?" she asked sharply.

"Just that something would change, perhaps that the local senate would remove you from office legally with a suspension motion."

"What justification would you possibly have for my suspension," snapped Whychute. "Every attempt at reform by me has been blocked by you or the civil service."

The commissioner thought about that for a moment. "Then the senate can claim lack of progress as the pretext."

"Pretext?" spluttered Whychute. "After three months? The administration will cancel the suspension the moment they hear of it. They won't even refer it to the Senate."

"But they will, madam," said Dubinski. "We've looked at the law, and only the Imperial Senate has the power to override a suspension by the local Senate, and only after an investigation. By the time the procedures have been followed, we plan to be long gone with the members of our families who will come with us."

"Your mistress," you mean, retorted Whychute.

"My children are adults; my wife and I have grown ... apart," said Dubinski calmly.

"Ha!" said Whychute.

"Enough of this," snapped Major Darius. "You can argue with the real driving force behind this incident." He raised his voice. "Come in, general."

The door opened, and in walked a tall, slender man with an armed thug trailing behind him. Once handsome with high cheekbones and a firm jaw, the white-haired newcomer had aged well, moving with the ease of someone much younger. With a carefully cut dark suit, pale blue tie with white, diagonal stripes with a red thread on top of the stripes, he might have been a retired senior businessman, except that when his dark, expressionless eyes fixed on the proconsul, she felt a thrill of fear.

"Your excellency," said Major Darious, electing to be formal. "This is General Styx, also known as Mr Acheron, who you may know as the leader of the rebellion on Martus Prime."

Ellen and Alf sat together on her couch, a bowl of popcorn between them, while they watched a popular romcom, only for Alf to drift off to sleep, much to Ellen's chagrin.

"Hey!" she said, shaking him. "If my company and this film are so boring, we can watch something else."

"It's not that," he said, blinking and yawning. "I didn't sleep at all last night while putting in a lot of effort escaping from the city."

"Ha!" she said. "Well, I guess you can nap on the couch. Come on."

She stood up, just as he also stood up, so that they were close together, facing each other.

"You know what would help me sleep," he said softly after a moment.

"What, Mr Langston?" She did not move away.

Alf strode forward, wrapped his arms around Ellen, and kissed her. After a muffled, indignant "Umm!" Ellen found herself kissing him back, hands on Alf's back.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Proconsul," said General Styx. "I only wish it could have been under better circumstances."

"You mean when your stooges are not staging military coups," retorted Whychute.

"A sad necessity," said the General. "But the expedition into that alien city did not go as I hoped. I had to revise my schedule."

"You were behind that venture? I was looking at the material that came out of it. You may have done Creaghville a service, and a military coup is not going to change much. The Imperium will be paying a lot more attention to this place."

"That may be true. I did not authorise those releases, but they are out there and have gone off-world, so I'm told," said the General. "I had planned to spend years here building strength and acquiring alien technology. As it is, we'll have to requisition ships in your name, fill them with liberated supplies and weapons, and be well away before the Imperial Navy gets here. In the meantime, I've decided to make an example of the thief Alfonso and that meddlesome police sergeant you've chosen to favour. I've sent my best men, with the exception of Gullo here, to make sure they suffer before dying. Gullo, a square block of a thug with a shaven head and a total lack of expression on his round face, offered no comment."

Whychute almost opened her mouth to say that Alf might be a lot harder to make an example of than they thought but then remembered that there was no mention in the public parts of the report that Alf had also been in the rebellion and that he had been altered.

General Styx mistook the momentary struggle on the proconsul's face as concern for the pair and smiled. He enjoyed inflicting pain.

Ellen permitted herself a few minutes of snuggling up against Alf's body; one arm wrapped around her as she preferred, before nudging him. The soldier had fallen asleep again.

"Hey, wake up," she said. "We need to talk."

"Say, what, are we breaking up already?"

"It's not that," she said. "What we just did, twice, shouldn't have happened. You're still part of the investigation. But if we don't say anything and you clean up your act – go to the courts here, plead guilty to illegal entry and making false declarations to the tax office..."

"But I paid all taxes."

"I think that means they won't care much that it was under a false name. With any luck, you'll get a fine. Same for the illegal entry, as the trouble is getting people to come here, not throwing them in jail when they arrive, and you have a skill set they want."

"No problem," said Alf. "Can you recommend a lawyer? Maybe, also, the proconsul can put in a word for me?"

"I know a lawyer. I'll see what I can do with the proconsul."

"Say, are you expecting anyone," said Alf, sitting up in bed and then jumping out, naked, to put his underpants on.

"No, no one," said Ellen flinging off the bedclothes to stand up also naked. "Unless it's someone from the proconsul's office."

"I can hear four guys."

Someone pounded on the door.

"Get dressed quick. I parked around the side street. They won't know I'm here."

Ellen pulled on her panties and a bra, picking them up from the floor, with Alf fastening the clip at the back.

"Just a moment, I'm changing," she called in her best suburban, not-a-care-in-the-world voice. She grabbed shorts and a tee shirt.

"Go for your pistol before going near that door," whispered Alf. "If not, lead them in here."

Ellen got to the bedroom door while hopping into her shorts and opened the door to the main room before the men outside lost patience and smashed the front door open. As the door was meant to be proof of anything short of a ram the police use in raids, Ellen stood in the corridor doorway in shock for a split second before fleeing back to the bedroom.

"Get ready," she whispered to Alf, who had picked up an old-fashioned wooden lamp stand that Ellen had bought at a sale. It was as tall as her, with a round base and a shade at the top. Alf reversed it so that the base was uppermost, and it was ready to go as a club.

Inspector Barastoc was first through the bedroom door, which swung inwards, concealing Alf, shouting, "You're under arrest."

"Pig's arse," said Ellen, swinging the smaller lamp by her side of the bed, knocking the gun which the inspector had drawn out of his hand. She then tried to ram the lamp's base in the inspector's face, but he stepped back, grabbing it.

Just as Ellen and Barastoc started a tug of war over the lamp, Alf stepped from behind the door swinging. The thug closest to him – Alf thought he was one of those at the gym – collapsed. The second had time to turn before getting the edge of the lamp base on the side of the head and also collapsing in a heap. That left the third and by far the largest of the thugs, and the reason the group had been able to kick in the door with ease.

"Benji," said Alf.

The thug turned, and his eyes widened in recognition.

"You," he said. Then he grinned. "This is turning out better than I expected."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

General Styx was in a good mood. His plans had gone awry, but he could still inflict pain on people, which always put him in a good move. He found it amusing to increase the proconsul's suffering by explaining his plans for her after she had consented to sit down.

"There is no need for any of the good citizens of Creaghville to realise that the Imperial representative is being detained or that the government is under our control. Our supplies will be obtained through government fund transfers. The ships will be requisitioned by Imperial warrants. Attempts to contact you will be blocked; Imperial bulletins will be issued regularly but be so bland and boring that the media will shelve them. By the time

anyone realises something is wrong, we will be at the spaceport with any portable wealth we can lay our hands on. Unfortunately, digital transfers of funds won't be of any use where we're going, but gold and jewelry still have some value, even in this day and age.

"Do you seriously expect to get away with this?"

"I've every expectation of doing so, Proconsul," said Styx, smiling. "Part of my rationale for choosing this undistinguished backwater is that the Imperial Navy has no units here at all or anywhere close; the military is very small, and the place is comfortingly corrupt. You were brought in to start cleaning it up, as I understand."

"That was part of my brief."

"Then there was the underground Alien city, which I found out about through my extensive network of contacts, both human and with our rival space-faring civilisations. Alien technology would have been a useful extra card to play."

"Your plans came undone there," said Whyhute. "The security systems in the city have expelled your people."

"You're remarkably well informed, Your Excellency," said Styx, eying the proconsul. "How did you come by that information?"

"The Empire is well informed about a lot of things," she said.

I could always beat the names out of you, but there's no need. I can guess who your informants might be, and, as I said, they are to be eliminated."

"I haven't seen you since the surrender," said Benji as Ellen and Barastoc wrestled on the bed

"You know scum always rises to the top, Benji," said Alf.

He jabbed the lamp base at the altered human, who easily stepped out of the way but then swung it at Barastoc's head, connecting with the edge. The inspector yelled and staggered away from Ellen, holding his head in agony. The sergeant used that respite to go for the inspector's gun, as Alf hoped she would, but Benji kicked it under the bed and backhanded Ellen with a swipe of his meaty hand. He didn't want the gun for himself. He liked his kills up close and personal, and he and Alf had history.

He charged.

Alf threw the lamp at his feet. Benji vaulted it with ease and came on, hands outstretched, planning to crush Alf's skull against the wall. He liked to crush skulls. Alf dodged to his right, stomped on the back of his opponent's knee joint, making him stagger, struck him on the side of the head, and stepped out of reach. Out of the corner of his eye Alf saw Ellen, still woozy from the backhander, make for the door.

Benji shook his head and came at Alf again, seemingly unfazed. The soldier dodged, then almost tripped over the lamp stand he had dropped. Alf rolled, which proved the slight pause Benji needed to close the gap. He was bigger, stronger, and faster than Alf. The soldier did what he could to even the odds by whipping the lamp dropped by Ellen into his opponent's face, but Benji blocked most of the blow with another swipe of his massive hand. Alf put both arms up to block Benji's attempt to grab his skull, then found his opponent's skull was open, so he slapped both hands on it and tried pushing his thumbs through Benji's eyes. The big man roared in pain and anger, pulled away, and smashed his fist into the side of Alf's face, easily overcoming the soldier's attempt at blocking.

Alf dropped onto the bed, and Benji fell on top of him, grasping the soldier's windpipe in both huge hands. Alf tried to push Benji off or punch at his Adam's apple, with all his efforts seeming feeble against the man's gigantic strength. His vision was starting to go dark when he heard, "Police! Stop, or I shoot."

Benji was too intent on his work to hear or acknowledge the warning until there was a deafening crack, and his back arched. He yelled and whipped around, the pressure easing on Alf.

"Hands where I can see them!" snapped Ellen, holding her nine-millimetre service pistol in approved fashion. She had gone into the main room to retrieve it from its drawer. This time, Alf was glad to note that the safety was off.

"On the floor. Do it!"

"Like hell!" snarled Benji and lunged at her, meaning to smash his head into her face. Ellen got off a shot and then jerked away, avoiding the full force of Benji's lunge but still getting enough of it to fall heavily. Alf was there in a moment, ready to bury the base of the standing lamp into Benji's skull but found his opponent limp. He checked the man's pulse. Benji was gone. Ellen's second shot had penetrated below the throat but above the bullet-proof vest which had blocked the first shot at such a steep angle that it had reached the heart. He was dead before he hit the ground.

"Thank stars for that," said Alf, helping Ellen to her feet.

"Ow!" she said, holding the side of her face where Benji's skull had hit her.

"You'll have one hell of a bruise," said Alf examining her face, "but nothing permanent, which is a small price to pay for getting rid of Benji. Of course, I had him where I wanted, but thanks for the assistance."

"Yeah, right!" she said, smiling. "But now I face a boatload of paperwork and inquiries."

"You'll never get to an inquiry, Ellen," said Barastoc, who had recovered to sit on the bed while still holding the side of his head. "The people I'm with now have the pro-consul under their control, and the commissioner and that major in charge of the auxiliaries have been squared."

"Major Darius?" said Alf. "Isn't he supposed to be a drunk?"

Barastoc shrugged. "He's our drunk. More Police and soldiers will come after you, and they won't try to do the police thing and arrest you as I did. If you'd have come with me, you might have lived, Ellen."

"With Benji around, I don't think so," said Alf.

"You knew him from the rebellion?" said the inspector.

"Yep. He got his jollies back then by crashing the skulls of Imperial prisoners. He and I had words when I refused to hand over my prisoners. I dunno how he got away, but Ellen here will be commended for shooting the man."

"If the Imperium ever finds out about it," said Barastoc. "Like I said, you guys are facing a short life."

"Not necessarily," said Alf.

General Styx leafed through messages passed on from the proconsul's secretariat. Whychute was senior enough to be above mere digital communication, at least when it came to matters of state. Aides would review the many messages she received, print out those they thought she should look at, and put them on her desk. The procedure had many advantages, but it also meant anyone in her office could read the messages. They did not need a password. He chuckled.

"We may yet reap some benefits from that alien city," Styx said. "I see here that a professor at the university has requested a meeting with himself, two students, and interesting artifacts from the city in the desert. My, my, I'm intrigued. I'll put 'make an appointment this morning soonest' on this. Commissioner, you must have some material with Her Excellency's signature or initials for something like this."

"That may be good enough for arranging an appointment," Whychute said, "but you'll need something more for those decrees that your minions are preparing."

"That does not trouble me, proconsul. Your two adult children are developing careers and families on other worlds out of my reach, as is your husband on his archaeological dig. But there are members of staff here who are innocent and who you know and care about. I could always get them in and start shooting pieces off them."

"You bastard!" exclaimed Whychute.

Styx grinned broadly. "Madam, it's part of the process that I enjoy."

Alf parked the van illegally in an alley close to government house. If the vehicle was towed away, Mr Charles could get it out of the police impound by paying the fine. After Ellen had reassured a neighbour who said she thought she had heard shots, Alf and Ellen had loaded Barastoc and the two thugs into the van. Benji was left where he had fallen, with Alf pointing out that he was unlikely to turn zombie. Barastoc and the others were then dropped at a hospital, minus their wallets, where their skulls could be checked for fractures. Barastoc was sure to start yelling that he was a police officer, but without identification, the hospital would begin treatment and call the nearest police station, which would eventually send someone. That would all take time, and the inspector did not know where they were going, nor was he likely to guess that they were heading for government house.

Ellen dropped the ice pack she had been holding to her face into a street bin as Alf went over their options. Ellen had called the number she had been given as part of the Imperial protection order, only to be told by Whychute's executive assistant that the pro-consul was "observing a military exercise she had requested" and was unavailable. From that, Alf guessed that the military exercise involved a takeover of the Imperial office by soldiers under Major Darius.

"They won't need all that many to replace the usual security guards who will probably still be around somewhere," he told Ellen as they walked towards government house. They could see two soldiers, assault rifles at the ready, in front of the entrance, and an APC parked in the street. "And they won't know that Darius has turned traitor. Mostly, they'll be school leavers looking for adventure, following orders, and hoping for a transfer to somewhere more interesting. In the meantime, a security alert at government house kills time."

"But they'll just wave us away," said Ellen.

"Show your police ID. Insist on speaking to whoever is in charge. That should at least make them hesitate; make them listen. I'll see what I can about disarming them."

When the soldiers realised that Ellen and Alf were intent on walking to the front doors of government house they tried to wave them away, as Ellen thought they might.

"Security exercise guys," said one, genially enough, when the newcomers were close enough. "No one comes in or out of government house."

"I'm a police sergeant," said Ellen, waving her ID, "and I must speak to the proconsul about a treasonous plot uncovered in both the police force and the auxiliaries."

"We are auxiliaries," said the second soldier, taken aback. "We haven't been involved in treason, and who is this guy?"

Alf swung around behind them and, before either young soldier could react, had jammed pistols into their back.

"I'm the one who's telling you Major Darius has turned traitor and called this security exercise as a means of detaining the proconsul."

"What?" said the second soldier. "The major a traitor? I thought he was just a drunk."

"He's that too, but don't you guys worry about it; hand your weapons to the police sergeant here and, yes, she really is a police sergeant... your pistols as well. Now swing around so that any observers in the entrance can't see what I'm doing and head for the APC."

"The sarge is going to be pissed over this," said the first soldier.

"It's either this or commit treason. As it is, you don't worry about it. I'll lock you in the APC, take the main driver key, flick the disable switch, and leave you there. Later, you can claim you had no idea what was really happening."

Another soldier, older and distinctly grumpier than the two youthful entrance guards, came out of the entrance.

"What are you two doing?" he asked. "And what is that civilian doing with your weapons?"

"Sergeant, I don't want to mess up your guys or you," said Alf, pointing one of his pistols at the newcomer.

"Is this part of the exercise?" said the sergeant, eyeing the pistol.

"No, because there is no exercise. Major Darius has turned traitor and is using this exercise as a cover for detaining the proconsul."

The sergeant thought about that for a moment, then said, "Shit! How do I know you're not just using that story to get to the proconsul and assassinate her?"

"Fair point," said Alf. The sergeant – actually a sergeant major - was near retirement and had the grey hair and weather-beaten face that went with long service. He could be a useful ally. "What about this? The police sergeant here and, yes, she's a real police sergeant." Ellen held up her identification to prove the point, "will give your guys back their weapons provided they remain in front of me, as do you. She will stand behind me. Remember that she is a real police sergeant, and taking her out is not a good idea. This is all supposed to be an exercise, remember. No one should get hurt."

"Can I take a closer look at that identification, ma'am," said the sergeant, who duly inspected Ellen's badge and grunted. "You give my guys back their weapons, then what?"

"We all walk through the security you've got inside. You tell anyone else in there to back off. We get into the lift and go right to the top – that's where the office is, right, Sergeant Pullen."

"Yes, Mr Langston."

"We call out the proconsul, and she can tell you directly what's happening. You can stand in front of her, if you like, or yell into the office, but you must be able to see her and see who's with her."

The sergeant shrugged. "At least it's a more interesting exercise than usual."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

After they had all crowded into the lift, Ellen standing at the rear, they had time for small talk.

"You move like a soldier," said the sergeant.

"If you mean me," said Alf, "I was a soldier on Martus Prime."

"The rebellion?" said the sergeant, half turning. "You were in the legions?"

"No, other side."

"What?" The sergeant turned around entirely. "You were a rebel?"

"I was a captain in the Forgotten Legion."

The sergeant's eyes widened. "And I'm leading you to the proconsul?"

"As it happens, Proconsul Whychute knows all about me, including my brief stint as a sergeant in the auxiliaries. Sergeant Pullen retrieved my record from the Imperial archives and showed it to Her Excellency."

"Langston here doesn't want to continue the fight," said Ellen from the back. "The people you'll find with her are former rebels who want to escape the Imperium."

"I'm an engineer. I want to fix spaceships," said Alf. "You go in and sight the Proconsul but be wary. Have your pistol out."

"I'm always wary," said the sergeant, turning to face the front, "especially of officers."

The doors opened, and the first thing Alf saw was Brian and Elsbeth and another figure wrapped in a sheet, which he knew must be Sill. They were sitting on a settee in a plush anteroom with the patterned wallpaper and thick carpet expected in the offices of the planet's Imperial representative. There was another man with them, a tall, portly, balding gentleman whom Alf supposed was the academic his two companions had gone to meet. Brian and Elsbeth leaped to their feet when they saw Alf and started talking.

"Guys, quiet," said Alf. "Just for now, we need to speak to the Proconsul. Where is her office?"

Then he saw a worried-looking individual, Her Excellency's loyal assistant Kensa, sitting behind a reception desk.

"Sergeant Pullen," he said, spotting Ellen in the group. "You should be at home."

"We were very concerned about the proconsul," said Ellen. "Is she in? Is she safe?"

"She is in there," said the assistant, gesturing at the door helpfully labelled 'Proconsul', "With the police commissioner, Major Darius and two other gentlemen. One old and nasty and the other young and cold, with a pistol in a shoulder holster. I tried to stop them as there was no appointment, but the young one pulled his pistol on me, then wrecked my phone here and took my mobile." He leant over the desk to whisper. "I'm worried."

"Major Darius has declared a military exercise involving the auxiliaries taking over government house," said the sergeant. "Has she said that she approved this?"

The assistant shook his head. "Her Excellency never said anything to me before it started. The Major and the Commissioner are there by appointment, but the other two just arrived, as I said, and I haven't been allowed to speak to her."

"Okay," said the sergeant to Alf. "This doesn't sound good for Major Darius. How do you want to play this?"

"The only one to worry about is the young one with the gun." He spoke to the assistant. "Can you call him to the door and say there's an urgent message for the proconsul?"

The assistant nodded, opened the door, and called. Alf was aware of voices murmuring in the office beyond. The thug who General Styx had called Gull came to the door. As Alf had hoped, the man was not expecting any trouble. His weapon was in its shoulder holster. He pushed past the assistant and hit Gull squarely on the side of the jaw. He staggered back. Alf hit him again in the stomach, making the thug grunt and again on the jaw, before grabbing the man's pistol with a flick of the securing strap, withdrawing it, and using it to rap his opponent hard on the side of the face. Gull went down. All the other occupants of the room stood up.

"Major Darius is committing treason!" screamed Whychute. "I order him arrested, and Commissioner Dubinski is in it with him. Sergeant Pullen, arrest him."

"Commissioner, it's over," Ellen said.

The man's body sagged.

"Major Darius, don't give me cause to shoot you, sir," said the auxiliary sergeant, pointing his gun at the Major. The Major's mouth dropped open.

That left General Styx.

"We meet again, sir," said Alf, pointing his pistol at the general.

"I know you," said the general.

"Captain Langston, tenth independent combat command, Forgotten Legion, sir."

"So you were," said Styx, smiling despite everything else. "You were one of the best and altered, as I recall. You took over the tenth from Major Pasha."

"Because the Major was killed in action, sir."

"That's right," said the general, eyes gleaming as Alf advanced on him. "Remember all those that died fighting the Imperium; are they all going to die in vain."

"I remember that I lost good men covering your escape," said Alf, jamming his pistol under the general's chin and forcing him against the wall. "I remember also the alteration program."

"Which you got through, gaining real abilities," said the general, speaking with difficulty.

"Which killed a lot of friends, including my fiancée."

"Oh," said the general.

"I was just told she was shot down, but later, I found her name in a list of those on the program and was shown pictures of her final days. Not pretty at all, general. I would love to pull the trigger on you and give the Proconsul the problem of replacing the wallpaper."

"I don't want to have to replace the wallpaper, Captain Langston," said Whychute mildly. "I've just finished redecorating."

"Are you going to make me arrest you," said Ellen as she led the commissioner past Alf and the general.

Alf stepped to one side and threw General Styx on the floor.

"On the other hand, you could spend the rest of your miserable life in jail, being dragged out now and then to answer questions." He looked at Ellen. "You and Elsbeth never let me have any fun."

Once the disgraced senior officials had been taken away for processing and formal arraignment, Elsbeth, Brian, and Elsbeth's supervisor, Professor Albright, were brought in to be presented to Proconsul.

"You must be Alf's Police Sergeant," said Elsbeth to Ellen, who had remained behind at the Proconsul's request.

"I'm not his police sergeant," said Ellen, "but I'm certainly the police sergeant he had contact with. I hoped he behaved himself in the city."

"We wouldn't have lasted ten minutes without him."

"Maybe not five," said Brian.

"One time he wanted to shoot someone in cold blood," said Elsbeth cheerfully, "but didn't when I said he was scaring us."

"Well, that's a relief," said Ellen.

"Who is this?" asked Whychute, pointing to Sill's wrapped-up figure.

Alf stripped the sheet and sunglasses from Sill, who looked around in astonishment.

"Behold, Your Excellency," he said. "A servant droid made in the image of the builders of the city we were in. The poor guy was left behind when the city was evacuated, two hundred and forty years ago, give or take."

"Oh my," said Whychute. "I was aware of some of the history, but the reality is overwhelming."

Elsbeth pointed to some words in the dictionary she had previously marked. "I told him boss, big boss," she said, "at least I hope that's what I said."

Sill clasped his hands in front of his chest and bowed, keeping his head down for a time before straightening up and stepping back.

"That's an extension of previous behaviour indicating, I think, polite greeting," said Elsbeth. "We think his society is like a hive with a single dominant female."

"Well, I'm glad someone recognises my awesomeness," said the Proconsul. "Tell him that he is most welcome among us, and I hope we can cooperate and bring mutual understanding between ourselves and his masters, whoever they may be."

"Your excellency, the most I do for now is find welcome in the dictionaries. The rest will have to wait."

"Oh well then, just tell him welcome and be happy," said the Proconsul, smiling.

EPILOGUE

The next day, Whychute met again with Ellen Pullen.

"Looks like I'll have to throw you in straight away, Inspector Pullen," she said. "I've directed that your promotion be effective immediately. Pull in everyone connected with this conspiracy on my warrants and then start offering deals to the undeserving few to testify against the undeserving many. With the entire criminal apparatus under lock and key, there won't be anyone to threaten witnesses. Tongues should wag freely."

"I was hoping to let some of my former colleagues just crawl away," said Pullen, in exchange for information of who and where, and maybe testimony against the big bosses."

The Proconsul shrugged. "Your ex-husband will be among those allowed to crawl?"

"I guess, Your Excellency," said Ellen, "but it will help keep the police on side."

"Let me review the discretionary cases before you make deals."

"Of course, Your Excellency."

"You are, now, one of the few local police I trust, and I expect you to consult with Major Langston about an investigation into the auxiliaries."

"Major Langston, ma'am?"

"I've promoted him and put him in charge of the auxiliaries. His career in spaceship engineering will have to wait until the local military has been put in order and he's figured out how to shoot our way back into the city with minimal casualties. There is no one else with anything like his experience and record in the colony and no real hope of getting anyone in less than three months. Never mind that he fought against the Imperium. He was a sergeant in the auxiliaries and has shown loyalty in helping get me out of a military coup. Major Darius proved to be such a fool that after his performance I expect even the Legion hierarchy will make only token protests about my appointing a former rebel to command an auxiliary garrison. But what I really want to know is how General Styx got hold of my report on the man to show it to him."

"Yes, ma'am. In fact, I'll have to form several squads to look at the different issues. Here is my recommendation for the head of one of those squads."

Ellen handed Whychute a folder which she flicked open. "Senior Constable Samatha Pye. I see she has led successful investigations into... fraud and dognapping?"

"Yes, ma'am, Poppy was missing."

The Proconsul shrugged and accepted the appointment, including promoting Samantha to sergeant, then waved through two other recommendations of experienced officers who Ellen knew were not corrupt.

"I also want you to keep an eye on the research faculty I'm setting up with Sill as the star and the main object of research. Elsbeth will learn Sill's language and Brian will learn more about computer systems of The Engineers with the odds and ends they picked up in there."

"That all sounds good, ma'am," said Ellen.

"There is also the question of where you stand in relation to Major Langston?"

"Ma'am?"

"You seem to have some control over him, and I'm not that old or blind; what's happening between you two?"

"Well, ma'am ..."

The Proconsul sighed. "Fill out a notification of relationship form, put a date for the start of intimacy that will cause the least trouble."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And the section on psychic intimacy, you are to leave alone."

"Psychic intimacy, Ma'am?"

"Yes, there is a section in the form on that. I served on the committee that revised the form. This included some total nut jobs that the Imperial administration wished on us. Those of us who remained sane kept their peculiar ideas to that one section, but I still wake up screaming over my time on that committee. Honestly, the Imperial asylums should be expanded. As I said, fill out that form, lodge it with my assistant, who will know what to do with it, and never mention the matter to me again."

"Yes, ma'am," Ellen said, smiling.