

Chapter Three – Towards Zero

‘Roomy, isn’t it?’ said the younger blue-eyed man, who had given his name as ‘Harri’, his voice echoing in the gloom above the grumble of the wheels of the empty freight transport,.

‘You’d like a drink?’ Bercol asked, offering his flask; both accepted. The older man, Doctre sipped his critically; Harri sank the capful in one swallow, then retched.

‘Tastes like gun-oil!’

‘You don’t like it?’

Doctre raised an eyebrow. ‘Oh, I don’t know; it’s quite an impertinent little admixture of ethanol, oxidised glucose, a tincture of Alkane Silicone and Vitamin E. I’m sure you’re getting the very best that your Elite will spare you, Mister Bercol, and we’re glad of it, aren’t we, Harri?’

‘Very much so, Doctre’, the other man answered. ‘I had a flask, but I expect that Captain Tane is emptying it for me. Sadist’.

‘Ronson said you are scientists’.

‘I am’, Doctre’s voice echoed in the tunnel, ‘Harri is just a medic’.

‘Thanks’, muttered Harri.

‘May I know what the work is that you’re doing for the President?’

An intake of breath. ‘We’re studying the future of the Kaled People’.

‘Yes’ Bercol said, ‘About time’

‘That’s exactly what it’s about’.

‘I’m meeting the President tomorrow’, Bercol offered, ‘We can sleep on this transport, then we can go up to my apartment for breakfast’.

‘Doctre, Harri, this is Mari, my wife, and Joel, Rai and Qia’. He tried to reassure Mari, ‘These are men that I met in the Bunker, and we’re on our way to President Mogran, but I offered them breakfast’.

Mari still eyed the men uncertainly, ‘Do you drink ky?’ Harri seemed delighted:

‘Chai? I should say so. Nothing better, eh Doctre?’

Qia was looking up at Doctre very critically, ‘What are you wearing?’ she asked, ‘What’s that thing round your neck?’

‘This?’ he answered, ‘It’s my scarf’.

‘Why is it all different colours?’

Solemnly, Doctre replied, ‘It’s a reminder that we are all different; each species has a right to existence, each ideology a right to expression...’

Qia changed the subject, 'How did you get here?'

'Ah', Doctre's eyes widened, 'We came through a huge cave full of hungry giant clams'.

'What are clams?'

'They're creatures with a huge mouth and really very little else'.

'Like Rai', said Qia.

Rai suddenly turned on Bercol, 'What did you get me from the Bunker?'

Bercol flushed, 'In this home we say 'please', Rai'.

'But what did you get me?'

Joel shoved him, 'He didn't get you anything, shut up'.

'Rai,' Bercol began, 'I did...' and then he remembered that the picture must still be in Kravos's desk, and changed tack, 'but until you can behave yourself...'

Rai cast him a furious look and stamped out of the room. Mari was glaring fiercely at Doctre, 'I'll thank you not to talk to my children!'

'I'm sorry, but she spoke to me, and it's only common courtesy to reply...'

'All that idiotic stuff – you'll have given my daughter nightmares. Ven, will you just get these men out of here? I have to get the children ready'.

'We'd better go', Bercol mumbled, and he opened the door, ushering the men onto the landing.

Doctre said, 'No tea, Harri'.

Bercol pressed the lift button, 'I'm sorry. Mari is very protective of Qia'.

'Well, naturally', said Doctre, seeming almost affectedly unabashed, 'She's a very bright little girl, and I'm sure you're very proud, in fact, I'd go as far as to guess that she's something of a rarity – hmmm?'

The lift door opened, Bercol asked, 'What do you mean?'

Inside the lift, Doctre replied, 'Well, we were in the Bunker for – what? – two days? And in all that time, not a female Kaled to be seen, not even to wash the test tubes or make the ky; now that's either the mark of a society that's patriarchal to the point of paranoia, or one that's gene pool has stagnated to such an extent that little girls are significantly less usual than little boys – in fact I'd say that your female birth rate has been in steady decline for centuries!'

Now Father had made another and it was called 'Brother', it was just like One in every way, except that Brother was new. Except for that no-one could distinguish them.

They drilled so beautifully together, making Father very proud of them; as One moved forward, so did Brother, and One moved left, Brother copied; when Father ordered 'Turn' they did it exactly together.

And they stood, at last, before him, happy in his approval.

One said, 'We await your commands'. And they waited.

And Father said, 'Excellent. Excellent'.

Another said, 'Brilliant, perfect. A brilliant creation'. One looked at it; and the sensation of hate came again – like with those before that had hated and wished to harm it; not as strong, but just as real – the creature it looked at was *wrong*, deeply wrong – not like those it knew to be friends, which loved it.

It wanted to tell Father, but he was speaking; 'A brilliant creation, yes, but perfect, no, not yet. I want improvements made to the optical systems and the sensory circuits. Their instincts must be as accurate as a scientific instrument. You will begin at once; dismantle the viewer circuit'.

Another (but a friend) stepped forward, and One's sight was gone, but just before sleep came One heard the wrong other say very quietly 'Does he know the prisoners have escaped?'

Kavell stood next to Ronson at the edge of the laboratory, 'Does he know the prisoners have escaped?'

The old man replied flatly, 'I don't know what you mean; the prisoners are in their cell'.

Kavell didn't move, and he kept his tone level, 'Don't worry, I won't betray you; you're not the only one concerned about the morality of the work we are doing here', he paused slightly, 'Now answer me; does he know they've gone?'

If Ronson was beginning to trust, it was well-concealed behind stubborn annoyance, 'The prisoners are in the detention room for further interrogation'.

'Well I have news for you', Kavell told him smoothly, 'They've reached the city and made contact with the leaders and the names you gave them.'

He was sure Ronson was starting to squirm. 'How do you know?'

Obvious, and blunt, not the qualities of a natural conspirator; a wise man might have asked '*Why* do you know?' Kavell replied, 'There is some advantage in being in charge of the communications system', and he smiled, 'All we can hope for now is that they convince the leaders that the Chairman's work here must be ended'.

Ronson set his jaw, 'They must', he muttered, 'They must'.

Then Kavell felt uncomfortable, and he looked round to see Nyder glaring at them both from the far side of the lab, but suddenly the far door opened and the security commander turned to the newcomer.

Kravos marched into the laboratory, 'Excuse me Sir', and Nyder turned towards him. 'Yes?'

'A call for you, Sir; Channel Seven'.

Nyder said, 'Follow me', and as he marched out of the door, he added, 'I'll take it in my office'.

Kravos considered himself a singularly fortunate man; few people were given the opportunity to serve their nation so fully, still fewer were so graciously rewarded, and of course, very few were returned from the brink of mortality.

He had only the vaguest recollections of the explosion itself, in fact the whole patrol was a blur from the moment that the unit had formed up; after that the next moment of clarity was waking up in hospital, staring into the most beautiful face he had ever seen.

Her name was Ana, and she had been at his side through every step of his recovery; the ongoing burns treatments, the skin grafts, and eventually the interminable courses of physio to get him out of the wheelchair, and back on his feet.

It was only to be expected that he had fallen in love with her, and she with him, though she would not at first accept his submission of matching for fear that he might fall in battle, making her a widow, so the offer of the Youth League post had been ideal; she had accepted him on the very day he signed the contract, and they had matched thirty days later. It had been the most wonderful day of his life.

Perhaps it was because the life of a fighting soldier was denied him that he had given himself so wholeheartedly to the Youth League. Ana was unable to bear children, so Youth League had become a vast extended family for them both; Kravos made a point of visiting every single Local Section as often as he could, though if he'd been able to visit just one every evening, it would have taken nearly two years to visit them all.

And he had done good work; during his own childhood there had been a growing movement of dissent which, in spite of Covert Enforcement, had been calling for embassies to be made to the Thals, even for an armistice to be offered, and the solution had not been more and harsher public beatings, nor intensifying the vilification of the enemy, rather a simple demonstration that patriotism was fun.

Kravos had found children to be far easier to inspire than soldiers - cynical old sweats or truculent recruits - a good story, an engaging game, a wise word of advice, sometimes even a crumb of comfort, and cubs would want to follow him to the jaws of Hell.

When one paused to look, Kaled culture was something to be admired in itself, rich in great artists, architects, and composers, besides martial heroes, and an identity to be thoroughly proud of and well worth fighting for. Kravos had taken trouble to invent new games, drills and craft activities that would help train Kaled pride, and he had even gone as far as penning a series of scripts, so that the cubs could perform the stories of Chel and Renor, Arrian at the Bridge, and Crown Prince Sarkoff. They'd been a joy to watch.

It was such a pity that he'd become so ill that he could no longer do the job, but nothing lasted forever, and he was getting too old anyway to work with children. It would be good to get a bit of leave and see Ana again.

Nyder's office was extremely ordinary, with a metal desk and plastic chairs; the only decorations were two pictures, one a painting of an ancient scene of swains and sweethearts reaping the fields that were now fields of mud filled with corpses, the other an ink drawing of six impossibly muscular and handsome Kaleds serving a gun at the First Battle of Arles; apparently it was Nyder's own work.

Nyder sat behind his desk, unlocked the drawer, and took out the intercom receiver, 'Speak'.

He listened for a while, his face utterly impassive, then abruptly, 'Very well. Carry on'. He replaced the receiver, and locked it in the drawer.

He looked at Kravos, 'The situation is very serious; Councillor Mogran has called a secret meeting of our more fervent critics, and apparently the principal speakers will be the two prisoners, formerly in Ronson's charge'. His gaze never wavered. 'Who is Duty Officer?'

Kravos replied levelly, 'Captain Tane'.

'Check the cells', Nyder said, 'If the prisoners are absent, arrest Tane, and report back to me', he paused, 'The Chairman will need to know as soon as possible. In the meantime', he smiled coldly, 'I shall attend to Ven Bercol'.

As a result of a call to the President, explaining the situation, Bercol had taken his charges, not to the First Office, but to the army headquarters, housed in a complex of re-enforced concrete deep in the foundations of The Dome.

While the journey itself was unusually quick, progress through the complex was ponderous, with the prisoners being re-scanned and searched and passes prepared and issued and checked at every bulkhead between the outer gatehouse and the war room, while the dissidents (Doctre especially) grew increasingly truculent; being required by Mogran to explain himself by intercom in advance made him worse.

At last Bercol found himself looking around a large square room with a big model of the battlefield in the middle; the main features were the two domes at opposite ends of the model. He recognised some of the landscape from what he had seen from the First Office and other observation decks. 'This is all new to me; I've not been here before'.

'We have', said Doctre, darkly.

'Look out', Harri muttered. 'General Ravon'.

Bercol had never got used to just how young Ravon looked; the general's official record gave his age as just under forty, but to see him close up he looked about twenty eight, and while clearly energetic, hardly appeared up to the job. There were countless older and wiser men in the service, but Ravon was hailed as a saviour.

He came to a halt in front of them. 'Bercol; you succeed in returning my guests where the army fails. Congratulations'.

Bercol forced a smile. 'General, I had no idea you had enjoyed the pleasure'.

'Indeed' Ravon replied, 'Though I had no idea, of course that either of these gentleman worked for the President; it's most fortunate that Commander Nyder arrived when he did, as I was intending to hang them'.

'Timing is often the secret', pronounced Doctre, enigmatically.

Ravon smiled tightly, but at that moment, President Mogran, flanked by Arco, First Secretary of State, and Kayn, Director of Strategy, strode into the room, calling the assembly to order; 'My fellow councillors, I have asked you to assemble here and not in our House of Congress as our meeting is of the most secret nature'. He glanced at the general, 'There are no listening devices here, are there Ravon?'

It might have been a joke, but Ravon didn't seem to appreciate it. 'Not that I know of, Mogran'.

Mogran turned to the dissidents, 'Doctre, will you please tell the councillors what you have told me?'

Bercol felt a deferential hand on his arm; it was the sergeant that kept the door, 'If you wouldn't mind coming with me, sir; it's a closed session, and you aren't on my list'.

'Of course', Bercol allowed himself to be led away, but regretfully, since he was to miss whatever fantastic nonsense the madman might deliver: Bercol had found Harri pleasant enough, but Doctre was one man with an ego for twenty; even now his address to the assembled cabinet ran, '...what I will tell you relates to events in the future, not only on this planet, but also on others, whose existence you don't even know of, but my knowledge is scientific fact...'

The sergeant closed the office door, shutting off the sound. 'I didn't think to see that pair again – that tall one, I near put a bullet in myself, but for standing orders. Is it just me, or do the pair of them smell funny?'

'Very strange all over', said Bercol, sitting down. 'But tell me – I thought that Brigade Leader Kröhn's people had swept the whole Dome for Thal surveillance devices twenty days ago'.

'That's right, sir', the sergeant affirmed, settling himself behind his desk, 'The Elite developed some new detectors; not much gets past those, sir'.

‘But...’ Bercol said, ‘If they’re so infallible...’

The sergeant looked up with obvious patience. ‘They’re not going to detect any devices The Elite have planted *themselves*, are they sir?’

When Kravos returned to Nyder’s office, he found only Gharman, sitting at the desk, and looking up in surprise from the pamphlet he’d been reading. ‘Kravos; I thought you’d have been longer. Nyder suggested that I might wait’.

Kravos sat down. ‘He’s told you then?’

‘About Mogran?’ Gharman smiled grimly, ‘Yes, but it’s not much of a surprise, is it? We do important work, and important things are expensive – besides, Mogran’s not a soldier, barely a politician; he’s a civil functionary. He’s never had the stomach for strong action so he hates those of us that have. Various factions and reformers have been trying to shut this bunker down for half a century’. He shrugged, ‘I presume the prisoners *have* gone. You’ve checked?’

‘I’ve just been to the Detention Level’, Kravos said wryly, ‘Found their cell empty and locked Tane in it’.

Gharman chuckled. At the sound of a footfall outside the door, Kravos was on his feet and clicking to attention; Nyder marched into the room, looking angry and scared.

‘I think we can all imagine how the Chairman received *that* piece of news; he wants the facts about this meeting – what was said, and who said it – ‘

‘He is not in charge here’, purred Gharman.

‘He will make his own enquiries if we do not make them for him!’ Nyder replied hotly, ‘Kravos; what did Tane have to say?’

‘That they were signed out by Senior Researcher Ronson, sir. Do you want Ronson arrested?’

Nyder glanced up, ‘No, leave him alone, and Tane-’

‘I think I can guarantee, sir, that Captain Tane acted with the best intentions’.

‘Have him shot’.

The sergeant jumped to attention as the compact and bespectacled Brigade Leader Kröhn, head of Covert Enforcement, marched in; ‘The meeting seems to be over, Bercol; we’d better get you back to work. Will you step this way, please?’

Bercol followed him out, and looked around the war room; in the far corner, the two dissidents were exchanging small talk with the general, no less, and he heard Ravon compliment Doctre on his address, but then Kröhn was leading him to another office on the far side of the room, where another man stood waiting. Kröhn introduced him as Escon; he was slim and high cheek-boned, but otherwise utterly forgettable.

‘This is Ven Bercol’ he told Escon, ‘You’re to look after him until further notice’. He looked back to Bercol, ‘General Ravon’s orders; in the light of what’s been said, he wants you to have a bodyguard until the climate improves’.

From the room outside came a brief exchange of angry words between the dissidents and Mogran; Bercol raised a quizzical eyebrow.

'You're to be congratulated' Kröhn said dryly, 'For bringing our beloved leader the means to spare us all the expense of the Elite. Those two idiots are idealists of course, and reacting to the news of delay with all the scepticism of their kind, but the reality is that all work at the Bunker is to be shut down, so in the meantime, you have a bodyguard'.

'If that's the decision, then of course...'

'Quite, now I've also had to quash an order for your arrest'.

'What?' Bercol exclaimed, 'On what charge?'

'Spying for the Thals. Your younger son reported you to his Instructor for talking to *Thal agents* – that pair I presume!'

'That is who he must have meant, but anyone can see they're not Thals, and Rai would never...'

'I can assure you he did', Kröhn replied, 'but it's nothing to worry about now'.

Bercol opened the door; with an exchange of thanks and handshakes, President Mogran was bidding farewell to the dissidents. He heard Harri say to Doctre, 'I think it's high time we looked for Sara, don't you?'

Mogran came up, 'Very good work, Ven; not at all what I imagined when I sent you into that place, but just what the situation needed', he leaned closer, 'I hope you realise I know that man is raving mad – we all know it - but he's supplied the reason we need to shut the Elite down, and make sure it stays shut down. Well done! I'm assembling a small team, and I'm on my way down there to deliver the happy news', and he marched off, chuckling grimly.

Ravon was now talking to the dissidents and, predictably, his voice was growing louder, '...what they don't know is that however powerful their rocket, it cannot penetrate our protective dome; only a matter of months ago The Elite had it coated with a new substance, which has the strength of thirty foot thick reinforced concrete!'

Kröhn raised his eyebrows. 'If you don't mind', said Bercol, 'I'll bid them farewell'.

As he crossed the war room, General Ravon stepped away from the two men, 'I'll get you a map to show the way to the rocket silo area', and headed for a distant desk.

Harri looked at the relief model of the battlefield, 'Well Doctre, looks like we have to cross the Wastelands again'.

'Yes', said the other 'And that's where our troubles really begin'.

'Where are you going?' Bercol asked.

'The Thal Dome', Doctre replied. 'A friend of ours is held prisoner there'.

Bercol gulped, 'You're insane!'

Doctre shrugged sombrely, 'Goodbye, Bercol'.

As they walked away, Bercol turned to Escon, who had followed him, 'Do you think they'll make it?'

'Of course they won't', Escon seemed genuinely surprised. 'They'll be shot'.

Three hours later, in Nyder's office, Gharman concluded a call, and lowered the handset. 'President Mogran and company are leaving, at last'.

Kravos smiled, 'Shall I have the rooms they used fumigated, sir?'

Gharman shuddered, 'Arco and Kayn are the two that I find truly repulsive'.

Nyder marched in, but now far more composed. 'The Chairman welcomes the enquiry, supports the people's right to know; Mogran even called him 'Patriotic'.

Gharman smiled grimly, 'Morgan wouldn't know patriotism if it kicked him on the behind'.

Nyder continued, 'He has stipulated that all work here will be suspended until the inspection is completed...'

'If it ever is', Gharman stood up. 'I'm going to my office to draft a letter of protest; not that it will do any good'. He left the room, shutting the door behind him, leaving Nyder smiling grimly.

'Kravos, how many of the mature creatures are already installed in the Mark Three machines?'

'Six, I think, sir...'

'Twenty are required'.

Kravos turned to the door, 'I'll arrange it at once, sir'.

'Wait' Nyder snapped, 'Their actions are to be limited by a computer programme; they are not to be activated until it's loaded. Tell Dainer to arrange things'.

'I'm sure he's very capable, sir'.

'Now', Nyder turned his attention to Kravos, 'There are papers that I must fetch, and in the meantime, I want you to organise an escort for me from Bay Six – you'll need this', he produced a pass from his tunic pocket, 'In my brief absence I need you to attend to matters here; for a short time, I need to leave the Bunker'.

'May I know where are you going, sir?'

'On a journey'.

Ven Bercol, now accompanied by his bodyguard, returned at last to the Media Ministry, and handed his briefcase over to the young man at the front desk. 'It's the footage from the Bunker, Igin; just needs tidying up and transmitting – there should be enough for a week there, but don't screen anything if I've not seen it'. He opened the door to his office, 'This is Escon, by the way; he's my new research assistant'.

Inside the office he sat at his desk, and Escon took a chair without invitation. 'Sir, could you tell me what a 'research assistant' does, exactly?'

Bercol grimaced. 'The job description is quite wide – keeping me alive will suffice. Is anyone trying to kill me, incidentally?'

Escon shrugged. 'We were followed here; there's a man watching the building'.

'Who?' Bercol looked out of the window, a woman in blue tights and pink boots was dawdling past, but nothing else of obvious interest. 'No white-haired people there'.

'I don't imagine the Thals know who you are, sir; they're not conspicuously bright. I'd expect it to be the Elite that want you dead?'

'And they've not even seen the vis-cast yet.'

Escon smiled grimly, 'Well, with any luck they'll all be under arrest on a variety of charges from Squander to Treason before very long, and then you can make whatever vis-casts you like about them, and the more the better'. He put his head on one side, 'I'll be re-assigned by then, but in the meantime I can assist with your research, if you'd like'.

'You're welcome', said Bercol. 'I wish I'd had you with me when I was in the Bunker; for a man in such an enclosed space, I felt very exposed'.

Escon made a sideways smile. 'And the whole place was set up to solve The Decay – which can't be done'.

'That's very strange', Bercol said, 'Someone told me the same thing just yesterday'.

'That Thal barrage has blighted us for a thousand years – it's still with us - and it's not just that every identifiable female is forced to produce more and more cubs; there are other effects'.

Bercol leaned forward; 'You mean the Mutos; they are interesting. President Mogran is right, once the war is over they have to be re-habilitated in some way, we should pity them, not hate them...' but his words trailed off; Escon was looking at him with something very like contempt.

'I'm not a Muto', he said. 'You can see I'm not a Muto'.

'What?'

'But I'm still not a norm', said Escon, dangerously calm, 'I have to take drugs for my condition, and obey rules that most norms have never heard of; they won't let me match – I can't be a father. Sir, if you want to make a vis-cast about the crimes that can be laid at the door of the Bunker, then there are atrocities that neither the people nor even you have ever heard of'. He leaned back in his chair, 'It's not a magical mystery of science, it's actually terribly simple, and it's been all around you all your life'.

Escon's communicator beeped and he took the call. 'Yes... Acknowledged... Confirmed... Will copy. Thanks'.

Bercol asked, 'What was that?'

Pocketing the comlink, Escon met his eye and answered, 'You're under arrest'.

'What?'

'Charged with Making a Minor Known to an Inappropriate Adult, apparently', Escon shrugged, 'Your eldest told his Youth League leader.

'But Joel would never do that!' Bercol shouted before he thought, and added, 'And those men did no harm – I was there all the time – with my wife!'

'Yes, but she protested', Escon pointed out, 'That counts in the boy's favour'.

'This is insane – I must see my family!'

'But you can't, sir', Escon explained, 'Not until you've been cleared by a Family Inspector'.

'That could take days!'

Escon shook his head, 'Two hours each, at the outside – since you're innocent – I can jump you through the queue'.

'Very well – if I must – let's get on with it'.

'Hold hard a moment, sir', Escon forestalled him, 'Your family are quite safe, but due process must be carried out, so they'll be retained until the guard change at the end of work period whatever happens'.

'What do you want, Escon?'

'Same as you do, sir; I want an answer to The Decay. We can look together'. Escon smiled reasonably, 'You will be back with your family in time to send the boy to bed without supper, providing we work together. You're not going to be tiresome, are you sir?'

To open Bay Six, Kravos had to first obtain the key, and this was kept by the Provost at the guardhouse.

'Palm print and signature, if you please, Colonel', he said smartly, with the air of an NCO that knows he will remain in his job practically forever, and is of considerably more consequence than young sub-colonels. Kravos complied, but withheld any answer but to hold out his hand for the key.

'Not without escort, Colonel, if you please', replied the Provost. 'Standing orders, sir'. He pressed the intercom button on his desk. 'Galt and Prell, get yourselves out here'.

Kravos raised an eyebrow, 'Don't Standing Orders consider two men somewhat excessive?'

'By your leave, Colonel; they're not for you: You are relied upon to account for yourself, sir, rather the two men are, respectively, to guard the key and guard the door'. He looked round as the two marched into the office and saluted.

'Right, you lovely pair; escort Colonel Kravos to Bay Six, and once said bulkhead is unlocked, remain on guard until either said bulkhead is locked again, or until relieved, understand?'

'Sir!' they both snapped.

They were a big, brawny duo, and Kravos barely glanced at them as he ordered, 'Follow me', and held out his hand for the key which, this time, was forthcoming.

Bay Six had its own designated lift at the far end of the ancillary depot, and only once inside did Kravos address the escort again, 'Have you been down here before?'

One trooper shook his head, 'No sir. To be truthful, I've often been past the lift door but not thought of where it might go, Sir. He addressed his colleague, 'Same for you, Prell?'

Prell nodded, 'I don't ask questions in the regular way of things, sir'.

Kravos thought, 'Who does?', but said, 'And I've no answers, but that this is one of the old sections; part of the old refinery, before we moved in'.

The first guard replied, 'Very interesting, sir', though plainly not interested at all: Enquiring minds were not valued in Elite Guards; quite the reverse, generally.

The lift stopped. Kravos inserted the key, and unlocked the door, which led to a small room, whose only function was to contain another door that also needed to be unlocked; beyond lay an echoing corridor.

‘Doesn’t smell so good, sir’, said Prell.

Kravos led them on. ‘It’s just stale air, soldier. I doubt even Maintenance visit here’.

‘Not above once in the decade, sir’, said Galt. ‘Would you know what all this was for, sir?’

The corridor was dirty and badly lit; a stained concrete tube that had been bolted together in sections. ‘The Bunker was extended from an old Thæseum refinery’, Kravos replied. ‘I’d say this were the access tunnel to the mine’.

Galt asked doubtfully, ‘You sure about that, sir?’

‘I’m guessing’, said Kravos, ‘But the mine was worked out in the first century of the war, and Thæseum is safe enough in its raw state – mind you – I’d keep the doors closed’.

They had reached the doors. Kravos unlocked them – the process trapped the key in the lock – ‘You wait here’, he told the men, ‘Security Commander Nyder will be down directly’. And he marched back up the corridor, finding an old bulletin on the way, which he perused in the lift; by its date it was two decades older than he was.

Something about the two soldiers was bothering him, and as he left the lift, he considered returning to his office and checking the computer, but since Nyder was leaving him in charge, he didn’t want to waste a journey (his office was on the far side of the Bunker), so he traversed the depot, making for the Main Laboratory instead.

Within, the perceptible level of restrained fear was even higher than usual, and every terminal was occupied. A head raised, ‘May I help you, Colonel Kravos?’

The man had a bald crown and thin black hair, and heavily framed spectacles. ‘Parlim, isn’t it?’

‘Good of you to remember, sir’, murmured Parlim, tamely. ‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘I just need the computer’, Kravos replied, ‘Nothing very important, and I can understand that all of you must be busy’.

‘I’ve just finished; use mine’, Parlim pulled up a seat and Kravos took it, and looked at the screen.

‘What have you been doing?’

‘Good of you to take an interest’, fawned Parlim, ‘I’ve been preparing a presentation for the tribunal; it’s all the development we did on the Cæcal bonded polycarbide’. Kravos quickly realised that he was looking nonplussed, because Parlim added, ‘The coating we developed for the Dome’. He touched a control and a series of equations and molecular diagrams began to swim across the screen.

‘Of course, it’s probably old news for them’, he said, rather pettishly, ‘but it is at least something The Elite has done in order to keep them all alive’.

‘It’s an ingenious discovery’, Kravos observed.

‘To a genius, I can assure you it’s childishly simple’, Parlim smiled shyly, ‘Almost as simple as the stuff that corrodes it’.

Kravos sat bolt upright. ‘I was told that nothing could corrode it!’

'I think that was the thrust of the propaganda when it was deployed on The Dome', Parlim replied, 'But the solvent was developed more or less simultaneously; a simple chemical formula, bombard the Dome with that stuff and the coating degenerates, the structure becomes brittle, and the Thals' rocket penetrates very easily'. He raised his eyebrows, 'What's the matter?'

'You're not going to show *that* to the tribunal?'

Parlim smiled, 'I'm not even allowed to show it to you, Colonel'.

'Why develop the stuff in the first place?'

'That is a question', said Parlim, 'that could be applied very widely. Let's consider your ventricular stimulator, for instance'.

Kravos said cautiously, 'I do not see its relevance...'

'Perhaps you don't, but I think you can bet', said Parlim, 'That while that little piece of ingenuity was being developed, someone was also working out a means to switch it off – in case you proved ungrateful, perhaps'. He smiled again, like a fat lizard, 'What was it you wanted to check, Colonel?'

Kravos stood up, 'I've remembered now, but thank you for a most enlightening talk.'

'Not at all'.

'I mustn't keep you', Kravos made for the door; sometimes scientists made his flesh creep, but he'd not lied about having remembered: He'd heard that Galt and Prell had been court-martialled for insubordination and sentenced to hang, but since they were both alive and well the sentences had obviously been quashed – or had just been rumour.

So that was all right.

There was no guard on the door of the Central Archive, and that was unusual, but not unknown; Bercol said as much, feeling that he was making conversation to bury his anxiety. Escon was typically laconic.

'The military seem to be winning in their war of attrition against Dome Security; we might even beat the Thals at this rate'.

They were crossing the concrete flagged foyer, heading for the main staircase. 'Let's get this done', Bercol said tersely, 'I want to get back to my family'.

'Of course you do. And as soon as you can, you will'.

'Right', Bercol mounted the stairs, 'Let's see where this all started; there are records. If we are lucky we can trace the origin of The Decay to the very barrage'.

'And then you will tell the people?'

'Yes, of course', Bercol rounded the first landing, 'It's my job to tell the truth. I am a camera'.

'Truth is the first casualty of war'.

Inside, he sat down at a computer terminal and gestured to Escon to join him. He entered his security clearance number and waited.

'It is there, what we're looking for?' Escon asked. 'I mean, sir; it will still be on the mainframe, not transferred to disk?'

'It's taking its time, but it will be', Bercol replied. 'They're not generally available, but they remain on the systems here; we didn't come for the exercise'.

The screen lit up, displaying the data retrieval box. Bercol entered 'Genetic Weapons Bombardment', and set a parameter for the first century of the war. Escon sucked through his teeth.

'It'll take time'.

Bercol shrugged and hit the 'Action' key; the screen went blank. 'Now we wait'.

The screen flashed; 'Estimated time to run query; 12 hours, 32 minutes'.

Bercol stood up; 'Forget this, I want to see my family'.

Escon put his hand in his pocket and withdrew a slim plastic case, which he opened and withdrew a skart cable. 'Plug this thing in, sir'.

'What is it?'

'Something I probably shouldn't have... Definitely shouldn't have, now I think about it. Never mind. Let's expedite things a little shall we?'

'But what is it?'

Escon smiled grimly. 'It's a data seeker; smart technology that the Elite think they've kept to themselves. It fell into my pocket a little while ago. Sir, you really don't *need* such details, do you?'

Bercol shook his head irritably; 'Just get on with it'.

Escon plugged the cable into a vacant socket and typed the query into the data seeker before hitting the action key. 'Go get it', he murmured.

'How long?' Bercol asked.

'A few minutes, if we're lucky'.

'I suppose you know the penalty for using restricted technology'.

Escon smiled wryly, 'Five years with hard labour is what I believe the man I confiscated it from is serving'.

Bercol winced, but at that moment the data seeker beeped; Escon peered at it. 'Nothing, it says'.

'Nothing?'

Escon typed in another query. 'Just cross checking, sir. Should be a bit quicker'. He hit action.

'Do you think the barrage was ever fired?'

Escon looked at him sideways. 'The way things are looking, sir, I'd be surprised – but I'd expect a false record – I'd have placed one'.

'I'm sure you would'.

The seeker beeped again, and Escon read the findings. 'Seems that back then the Thals were throwing all kinds of vexation at us; hi-ex, frag, gas, plague, necrosis – but genetic stuff? Not a thing – and if they didn't try to use it, I'd say they didn't have it'.

'That's absurd; we've had genetic science since the start of the war'.

'We needed it', said Escon, 'We weren't very resilient to rad and chemical, and we couldn't keep sending our biological refuse out to scavenge, so...'

'What are you suggesting?'

'I'm just pursuing a little pet theory, sir. No more than that'.

'Really?' Bercol stood up. 'You seem rather too well informed, Escon'.

'We've all got our interests, haven't we, sir?' Escon grinned insolently, 'I volunteered for this job, sir; and I have good reason for finding out what lies were told at the start of the war'.

From outside came the sound of a distant explosion, then another and another... The Thals had begun a barrage.

'There's nothing more to be found here', said Escon. 'We must go to the Children's Hospital. All of us were sent there when we were little'.

'I wasn't', said Bercol.

'You're not one of us'.

'The Mark Three Units are ready', said Gharman, sinking into his comfortable chair, 'All twenty, ready and programmed; Dainer has done very well'. He poured two glasses of spirit, and pushed one across his desk to Kravos, but he looked unhappy.

'What's wrong?' Kravos asked.

Then his communicator beeped, and he took the call; it was Nyder.

'We are returned and safe; coming up in the lift from Bay Six'.

'I'm pleased to hear it, sir', Kravos replied. 'May I know if your journey was successful?'

'You may not. I want a progress report on the preparations for the tribunal'.

'Half an hour ahead of schedule, sir'.

'Excellent, and I do not believe that the tribunes are on their way yet', and with that, the call was over.

Gharman raised his eyes wryly, 'You annoyed him; he dislikes being questioned'.

Kravos gulped, 'I merely enquired-'

‘Best not to’, Gharman shrugged, ‘It can be unwise to let your intelligence obscure your duty; you’re an old school soldier, which makes him feel comfortable, but you’d never have made such a success of the Youth League without some empathy and imagination, and they make him uneasy; he doesn’t understand them’. Gharman smiled wearily, ‘We’re soldiers, we all compromise our finer feelings in the name of expediency; on the other hand, we are both sitting in a warm room that is practically bomb-proof, wearing nice clean uniforms, and we have full stomachs, but we’re not heroes - they are all on the front line’.

‘Or on production lines in the Dome’, Kravos glanced at the monitor on the wall, ‘That bombardment’s still going on. I know that there’s nothing they’ve got which can break through, but the noise – it starts to drive you out of your mind after a while’. He sipped the spirit. ‘I’m not going to pretend that I’d rather have transferred back to my old regiment; we’re protecting men doing vital work – the whole future of the Kaled people – the future of our race is in our hands’.

The door opened and Nyder marched in; Kravos jumped up and saluted, but Nyder’s attention was all for the monitor. ‘How long has that bombardment been going on?’

‘Nearly an hour and a half’, Gharman replied mildly. ‘Just routine, presumably’.

‘Naturally’, Nyder snapped, ‘But there was a seismic disturbance underground during our return journey; this would seem to explain it’.

‘Were you hurt, sir?’ Kravos asked.

‘We were unharmed’, Nyder replied curtly, ‘Our escort both died in a rockfall’.

The Children’s Hospital was close to the wall of the Dome, but its clock could still be heard striking thirteen above the din of the bombing. A patrol of the Kaled Youth League marched past, looking smart and keen, watched by a tired cabaret dancer in her pink boots, awaiting a transport. Bercol and his bodyguard had walked fifteen blocks from the Archive. ‘Are we still being followed?’ he asked.

‘Yes’.

‘Thought we’d lost him; wouldn’t make a very good bodyguard, would I?’

‘Plenty of things I can’t do that I don’t allow to worry me’.

Bercol looked at the crumbling façade, ‘You said they used to send you here’.

‘It was a long time ago’, Escon replied, ‘I was very young. Shall we go inside?’

The automatic door was not working, and was opened by a hand crank, operated by an ancient orderly. ‘You’ll be the media people?’

Escon had called ahead. ‘Yes’, said Bercol. ‘Ven Bercol and escort’.

‘Clinician’s waiting for you, sir; fifth floor, Room Sixty Seven. No lift I’m afraid’.

Clinician Marne proved to be an old army medic with thin grey hair and a missing arm; he greeted them with a tired smile. ‘I’m pleased to say that I think you’re in luck, sir’.

‘Good’, said Bercol, ‘How’s that?’

The clinician led them into Room Sixty Seven; it was a long, high-ceilinged room, filled with metal racks of data cases. 'I think it's all here; it came three decades ago, when the university library was finally broken up. I'd be very surprised if the whole lot wasn't scheduled for destruction, but the man that disobeyed the order is probably just as dead as the man that gave it, however, we've not been able to read a word until recently'.

'Why?' Escon demanded.

'It's all microfilm', said the old man, 'And it's taken some time to obtain the use of a working reader, but we have one now, and I've been doing a little reading myself'. He led them to the bench, 'The thing is, you see, when this war is over, our children are going to have be taught the history of it, just so their forefathers' sacrifice is never forgotten'.

'Is there anything here about the history of the Elite, for instance?' Bercol asked.

The Clinician nodded, 'That's some of the stuff I think they might have wanted burned; do you know what caused what we call mutoes?'

'Thal chemical weapons?' said Escon ironically.

'No, thousand year old records show that Thæseum miners suffering from radiation sickness were given genetic medication, which had the most horrendous side-effects – these were the first mutations – they were not caused by anything that the Thals could have had. That's the article about it', he nodded to a reader screen, 'There's much more. Call me if you want help', and he padded away.

Escon sat down, staring into the screen, 'This could take time...'

Bercol turned away and stared at the endless rows of shelves. Escon snapped suddenly, 'Any files nearby headed 'Diorets Cilobana'?'

'No, what is that?'

'Nine centuries ago – the Instruction Centres were ordered to dose all female students over a twenty year period with a new vitamin supplement, but it says here that fifty per cent of them received an active ingredient called *Diorets Cilobana*'.

'And what does that do?'

'It's a genetic agent that makes women stronger, more aggressive, less fertile', Escon gave a short laugh, 'They needed more soldiers, and wanted to see if they could make females attain the grade'.

'Not a successful plan then?'

'No', Escon laughed mirthlessly, 'Not particularly successful; they poisoned our people like sewage poured into the water table', he rounded in his seat, flushed with fury. 'I cannot discuss the curse I was born with – our language does not even have the words to describe *me*'.

'All right', Bercol held up his hands, 'Please! If I can find some way to tell the truth about the wicked wrongs done, I will, but please don't blame me; I didn't do it. Look, once I've got back to my family...'

'Don't you dare whine about your family to me!' Escon snarled, 'My family were *ashamed* of me, and I was brought here to be changed into *something* that might be of use; I had courses of hormones, and as I got older, surgery to make me look more *normal*. Do you start to understand why I volunteered for this job? I want *revenge*!'

'On who?' Bercol shouted, 'It was a thousand years ago! Take a hold of yourself, man! Whoever was responsible, he is long dead!'

'You're wrong', Escon stood up, a triumphant smile twisting his face, 'You're wrong – he's not dead'.

'But you are'. There was a sudden bang, and Escon's face burst, showering Bercol with warm, sticky blood. Beyond the falling corpse, Bercol saw the gunman on the gallery beyond, but at once a roar like the anger of the ancients burst overhead, and the floor slid away, sending Escon's body sliding and sprawling against a toppling bookcase, the shadow of the gunman disintegrated in a storm of flying glass, and then a fireball like the breath of Hell burst through the room, and Ven Bercol knew no more.