

Chapter Two – The Woman with Pink Boots

Bercol never got to see his son's first Youth League muster; he found the apartment in darkness, and slept on the couch, where he was woken five hours later by an intercom message calling him to the First Office to meet the president.

Since Mogran's election, he had moved the First Office from its vault in the foundations to an observation platform high on the wall of the Dome, commanding a panoramic view of the battlefield; it was said that he had vowed to end the war one way or another within one term, though his ever completing that was in some doubt, since he was way too liberal for the Elites liking, and it was privately known that he would have reduced his own position to that of Speaker of the Senate of the Kaled Republic had he less sense than nerve; in the event, he merely eschewed his title, it was 'Councillor' rather than 'President' Mogran with him. A small cadre of analysts were still trying to work out just how this short and rather tubby man, with a drooping moustache, had ever won an election.

'Did you like the viscast, Councillor?'

Mogran smiled, 'Good solid stuff. That's what to give 'em. Straight as a line'. He eyed Bercol keenly, his head on one side. 'D'you know what I was doing while you were on your way home last night?'

'Sleeping, Councillor?'

'That would have been a welcome change, no; I was waiting for news from those whose professional wisdom governs the prosecution of this war, concerning the security alert in the Western Quarter that was keeping twenty thousand people from their generous contribution to the war effort'.

'Ah, I was stuck in that on my way home'.

'And d'you know why? I'll tell you; General Ravon – the Boy Wonder – had lost two prisoners in his own HQ, and along with Security Commander Nyder, spent one third of a work period catching them again. It finally transpired that they'd ascended Platform Lift Seven - a surface patrol picked them up'.

Bercol laughed, but asked, 'Why is it that you tell me this, Councillor?'

Mogran replied, 'What are the people saying about the Elite?'

'Naturally, the people know that the Elite are working for the good of...'

Mogran shook his head, 'What are they saying?'

An unsafe subject. 'Some of the labour grades seem to think that the Elite are expensive and that they could do more for the war effort'.

'Do they?'

'I really don't take it at all seriously, Councillor'.

'The money that they cost, I take it extremely seriously!' Mogran raised his eyebrows. 'Bercol, I want you to make a viscast about the work done at the Bunker; the public wants to know that it's getting its money's worth, so the public must be told-'

'What the Elite is doing?'

'Certainly not! Just that it's getting its money's worth'. Mogran reached for the intercom on his desk. 'You'll go down at once, and you won't be back for a couple of days, so you may wish to call your wife. In the meantime, I'll arrange you a pass'.

Bercol waited. He could see no obvious means of escape, but the Elite were just about the very last people that he wanted to visit.

Sub Lieutenant Cleck had slept from the moment that he lay down in the corner of the enemy truck; after several hours of deep, exhausted slumber, he was roused by a boot in his chest.

‘I said get moving – or you can go straight in the boiler’.

He raised his head, blinking in the morning light. In front of him, rising a hundred metres was the looming bulk of the enemy dome, a grey concrete bulge rising out of the surrounding grey rock, and much closer, a tunnel, three metres wide leading down below the dome; around its square black portal, a compound of barbed wire mesh, stretched between metal poles, where prisoners were being shoved and cursed into line.

‘Move, you black bastard!’

The nearest soldier grabbed him by the tunic and hauled him out of the truck, throwing him bodily into the compound; he felt strong hands pulling him up from the ground but, looking down, saw the thick heavy scales on their backs, and tore himself away from the creature.

‘Get off me, filth!’

‘Into line, Blacky’. Another guard swaggered up, shoving with the butt of his carbine, and Cleck stumbled backwards towards the rear rank; it seemed the safest place to be.

He found himself between a scrawny and disgusting creature wrapped in rags, with a pointed, hooked nose, and no chin at all – it looked like a featherless crow – and a burly officer of the Seventeenth Lazars, his uniform torn and patched, and a gash across his forehead dripping red. Ragged, stinking refuse made up the rest of the group; there were no other soldiers.

‘Silence!’ A Whitehead guard was standing on a pallet, covering them with his carbine. ‘Welcome to your new home in the United Councils’ Colony Collective. You are now part of our just and equal society, and our journey to bring Right, Dignity and Justice to our beautiful planet; our cause shall be your cause; our society, your society. Today you will begin a new life as labourers doing vital work to build the golden vision of our glorious pioneers. All we require is your industry; do what you are asked, work hard and diligently and you will be looked after; you have no anxieties any more – we will take your decisions. Now, you must be hungry after your journey; we will take you inside and give you each a meal. On the command-’ he took a breath –

‘Do what you like with the Mutoes!’ shouted the man next to Cleck. ‘As service personnel, we are prisoners of war!’

At once there was a flash of movement, and a sentry with a cudgel knocked the man to the ground. The guard on the pallet continued unperturbed; ‘We will address his objections; the rest, on the command, right *turn!*’ And they turned, the Mutoes shambling, shuffling.

‘Leading from the front file: March on!’

File by file, becoming one long line, they marched into the tunnel, Cleck second from the end. As he fell under the shadow of the lintel, he heard a single shot from the compound.

They marched into the darkness, to the shouts of guards, hectoring the cripples to go faster, every so often one was pulled out of the line, and made to march alongside at their own pace, quickly they fell behind, and there were more shots

The tunnel stretched ahead, dank and echoing with the din of machinery overhead, and the stale reek of disinfectant and the pervading odour of filth. The Muto in front of him walked on misshapen legs - the thighs too short, and the feet elongated – it looked horrible, and he wished that one of the guards would get rid of it, but it didn’t happen.

When the tunnel finally ended, the march had claimed perhaps eight that had stood in the compound, and the remainder stood staring around the massive metal-walled silo, its roof invisible way above in the dark and the dust, and in the middle, surrounded by the scaffolding holding it erect, an immense war rocket.

And that was all the time allowed to marvel; a little truck stood by the launch pad, driven by a man in a radiation suit, with a ragged, exhausted line of stumbling men and mutoes taking a black cylinder each from the cargo, and hulking it to the rocket. Strapped to the scaffolding was a rad-counter, already at danger.

The guard shouted, 'Join on the end of the line'.

The Bunker lay five clicks from the Dome, and was reached by rail transport that ran underground most of the way; Bercol's pass was scrutinised before he was allowed to board, and checked at a stop to take on cargo; then the journey was halted in the pitch black because of a mortar attack on the surface; a whole work period had elapsed by the time they arrived.

It was only his third time outside the Dome; the previous trip had been two years ago, when he had been allowed to accompany a forward patrol – they had come under fire, and Bercol had only narrowly escaped, but his first excursion had been to the Bunker, covering the visit of a Maidens' Brigade patrol, won as a special prize for salvaging, and it had frightened him far more than the battlefield. He still wasn't sure why.

The bunker was built against the foot of a hill and protected to the front by a pair of embrasures, topped with razor wire, and from the back by spirals of more wire hung on iron stakes, the hillside seeded with mines. There was a dilapidated corrugated iron roof to shelter the rail terminus, a wooden hut for the passengers to wait, and a striped sentry box. It all seemed very ordinary; the station sign said 'Nation'.

The sentry checked his pass, but forestalled him, 'Best wait, sir. Security's busy'. Four guards were marching two prisoners to the blockhouse doors, under the direction of an ascetic officer in small spectacles; his instructions to the guard captain were perfectly audible, and Bercol recognised him with no pleasure at all. 'Tane, I want these two screened, and passed to Ronson for full interrogation'.

There was a mumble of conversation and a screamed 'What?' followed by 'Let me inform you; you have no rights whatsoever here – I have full authority to torture and kill anyone that does not comply absolutely with my orders! That is your first and last warning!' A pause. 'Step into the security scan'.

An officer came marching out of the blockhouse and up to the sentry box. 'Would you come with me?'

Bercol jumped up, 'Major Kravos!'

'Ah, not any more', Kravos tapped his collar, 'Sub-Colonel as of this morning. You'll excuse me if I just scan you over...' Obediently Bercol spread his legs and arms as Kravos traced a hand-held unit over them.

'I trust congratulations are appropriate – that it is a happy promotion, I mean'.

Kravos pocketed the detector, 'Thankfully, yes. I'm Commander Nyder's ADC now; a new project is at a critical stage, so as Security Commander he needs an extra pair of hands'.

'I understand. Who is it that's in charge here, nowadays?'

Kravos smiled. 'General Gharman is in overall charge, but the scientists are given their head to follow their own work, and they are each responsible to their own government departments, so there's no centralised leadership. Please come this way'. He led the way inside the embrasures toward the doors.

Bercol followed. 'Actually, Colonel, there is something you might be able to do for me'.

'As long as it doesn't involve talking to a camera' came the reply, 'I've done enough of that for a lifetime'.

'No cameras', Bercol confirmed.

.....

Kravos still looked sceptical, 'Well?'

'My boy's just joined Youth League; would you sign him a picture?'

Kravos laughed, 'I've some in my desk, but this is strictly off the record!'

Inside the blockhouse, the guards were pulling a metal band from the wrist of one of the prisoners, and hitting him to make him give it up. 'Just this way', Kravos murmured firmly, leading Bercol through the inner door. Bercol hurried to keep up.

'How do you enjoy working for Commander Nyder?'

'Oh, he said he'd met you. He sends his compliments'.

'We met, ah, formally'.

Kravos smiled, 'He's a dedicated old-school officer, but I think that's something to be admired'.

'I understand he's something of an art connoisseur'. (Bercol was sure he'd read that somewhere)

'Yes' (Kravos seemed a little surprised) 'And he's an authority on classical music; I'll try to make sure you get to interview him if you like'. But they had reached a door; 'This is the lift down to the guest suite. Once you've got a room, we can talk about your itinerary'.

Cleck sat exhausted in the holding area adjoining the silo. They said there'd be food after the next shift. He could not even look at the thing sobbing next to him; it wasn't the difference that repelled him, it was the similarity – it could – should have been like him. The worst thing was that it was almost impossible to distinguish between mutants of his own people – caused a thousand years ago by the enemy's chemical weapons – and Whiteheads disfigured by work in their explosive factories; once cast into the Wasteland, they were all called 'Muto', and all one.

The door from the rocket silo slid open and two newcomers were shoved inside, one huge Muto, swathed in sacking and rags, and a working girl; she wore tight high-heeled boots, they were pink.

She shouted, 'All right – don't push!'

'We were lucky', growled the Muto, 'They usually kill on sight'.

'Then why the change?' she asked, 'Why bring us here?'

'Perhaps they need slave labour for some project'.

=====

Cleck glanced at them as they slumped down. 'The Muto is right; the work they're making us do kills – with the same efficiency as a bullet between the eyes'.

'What work?' she asked.

She was a pretty girl, slim, but strong-looking; her dark hair worn loose and reaching her collar. 'The Thals have built a rocket', Cleck told her, 'They've used up all their manpower and resources, they think it's going to bring them victory in one blow, and if they can make the launch successfully, they don't see how they're going to fail; our race, our entire people will be wiped out in seconds'.

The stupid Muto mumbled something about being glad to work on anything that would end the war; Cleck replied angrily.

'You won't be when you hear what it is. The nosecone of the rocket is being packed with Distrionic Explosive – we have to put it in position. To reduce weight, they're using no protective shielding; every load we carry exposes us to Distrionic Toxaemia, after a few hours exposure, we'll be dead', Cleck rubbed his forehead. 'Then they take the bodies to a refinery, and boil them for the fat, what there is of it, and they burn what's left for heat. The remaining ash is mixed into concrete', he raised his eyes, 'Still proud Muto?'

The woman said. 'He is called 'Severin'. *He* has a name, like you. What is it anyway?'

'Del', he swallowed, 'Del Cleck. Sub-Lieutenant in the Fifth Lights. You?'

'Sara', she paused, 'Sara Jainsmeth'.

It was not a family name that he recognised, but in the circumstances that barely counted; 'How do you come to be in here?'

She shrugged, 'Same as you. Severin and I were captured together. He saved my life'.

'But why were you out there in the first place?'

'I was with two friends. We got separated'.

Cleck could hardly contain his anger. 'But I've never heard anything so stupid! Don't you understand why it's forbidden for women to leave The Dome?'

'Very easily!' she replied fiercely, 'Because of the horrible, stupid mess that men have made of this planet!'

Cleck recoiled; it wasn't her disgraceful outburst, but something else – something deeply wrong with the woman. 'What two friends? What did they look like?'

It was the smell.

It was certainly true that the Scientific and Military Elite ate better than the general population in the Dome. Ven Bercol rose from the canteen table that he had shared with a gleefully incomprehensible geneticist named Parlim, feeling the onset of indigestion, and tried to look eager at the prospect of being shown around by the draconian zealot he had heard in the entry blockhouse. He could see Tane waiting, and the prospect of the classically handsome profile and deep, narrow eyes did not encourage Bercol at all.

Tane led the way to the lift, 'We start with the main laboratory; that's the centre of operations. You will also understand that not all our projects are ready for public attention'.

'Yes, naturally'. The lift opened, and they stepped inside. Bercol asked, 'Who were those unusual men you were scanning as I arrived?'

Tane smiled sidelong. 'You'd be amazed at some of the trash we get through that blockhouse. I've no idea what they are, but they'll be shot'.

The lift opened. Bercol said, 'They might make an interesting story'. Tane scowled.

'Senior Researcher Ronson has charge of them, but they are dross. You will not put them into a vis-cast'.

'No offence intended' Bercol said politely, 'I'm sure you're right'.

He followed Tane into the main laboratory; the huge, low, metal-walled room was divided into cubicles and work stations, where white uniformed studious men performed experiments and wrote reports. Tane led Bercol to the nearest desk; 'This is Researcher Frentan, who studies the inner workings of the eye'.

=====

A stocky and balding man looked up with a welcoming smile, and invited Bercol to sit down.

Bercol carried his recording equipment in his briefcase; he clipped the camera to the side of Frentan's cubicle, and spent the next two hours looking at monitor screens, hearing exposition and accumulating notes, before his head started to ache, and he sought a tactful means of escape as Tane, with apparent delight in another man's suffering, was introducing a communication scientist named Kavell. Bercol switched off the camera.

'I wonder if you might do me the goodness, Researcher, of allowing me to interview you in about two hours?'

The man was thin with meagre side-whiskers. 'I'm free then, yes'.

'Where would you prefer? Here or –'

'The canteen if you don't mind', Kavell said, tartly. 'I don't talk and work at the same time particularly easily'.

'Wonderful', said Bercol. 'I'll see you there'. He turned to Tane, 'And now I need to hear from you: Could we go to your office, Captain?'

Tane led the way to the doors at the far end of the laboratory, and Bercol followed, smiling politely to right and left, and he noticed the two prisoners sitting in one cubicle talking intently to a small fat man with grey hair and very black eyebrows – that would be Ronson.

By the time they got to Tane's office below the blockhouse, a siren started to blare, but Tane ignored it and waved Bercol to a chair. Bercol asked, 'What's the alarm?'

'Scientific Elite meeting – nothing to interest either of us'.

'And quite beyond me anyway', Bercol agreed, unfolding his camera tripod, 'I have to produce something to reassure the public, so I wonder if the best thing to do is to show that the men working here are no different from everyone watching back in The Dome; the industrious scientist, and of course, the brave soldier', he fitted the camera and set it working, 'But you are an educated man too, I presume'.

'I studied Classical History', Tane replied, 'and I find great wisdom in The Holy Book'.

'The Holy Book?' Bercol enquired, 'Theology, surely - *history*?' – and for a moment, he really thought Tane was going to hit him – 'I'm sorry, Captain, I really meant no offence!'

'Have you read The Holy Book?' Tane demanded, 'You should. The New Way Ahead Edition contains a new translation of Kasabi's *Great Schism* – the Dividing Event. We were one people, but the treachery of Renor, the bastard son of King Chel, caused the first battle and the heresy that followed. Our people are descended from loyal subjects and pious believers, the enemy from traitors that spat upon the holy image of Azal'.

Bercol had put his head on one side and was nodding slowly, 'I can see how that would provide a new important context, but surely The Decay – surely The Holy Book can't have an explanation for that?'

'Surely it has', Tane replied with a grim little smile, 'In Augury Seventeen, it is foretold by the Prophet Grovane; *the Blight shall spread throughout the people and Barrenness shall be its name*'.

Light came, and it saw again, clearly this time; the world was made of metal squares, and it moved through the portal into the centre of a rectangle, and all eyes watched it, and Father was there.

It knew that they were all proud of Father, and of how well it was growing up, it could see how happy they were to see it march back and forth like a soldier; it was proud to be able to march perfectly, and to make Father glad that he had taught it so carefully.

Father said, 'But the best is yet to come. Nyyyder'.

And one gave it a second arm; it was the arm that it wanted above all things, and now it had that arm; the strongest arm in the world.

Father said, 'And now we will turn the creature over to total self control'.

And the metal world was a chamber filled with people like itself; all looking on in pride and amazement at its strength and prowess. It looked around from one admiring face to another and then it saw the bad things.

They were not like itself – they were unlike – unlike was evil, and for the good of the good, evil had to be destroyed on sight.

And it found voice, and heard itself say –

'Aliens! Aliens! I must exterminate! I must exterminate!'

Only it's horror at the sound of its own voice made it hesitate. It saw a flash of movement near to Father, in the corner of its single eye, and the black fog closed in bringing total silence.

Another shift later; Cleck ached. It was ration time, and the guards had brought out a big bin of grey sludge. Cleck was too hungry to heed the foul taste and too tired to care; he shovelled it down like all the rest, swallowing before any of the others might steal it. When it was all gone, he listened to Sara's story.

The Muto was hanging to her every word, but he was a shambling, graceless lump of bone and gristle; scarred and ugly, and would have listened to any stupid rubbish, but the madness made a good story to pass the time.

'And that's why, where I come from, mongrel dogs are usually more intelligent than pedegrees', she finished.

The Muto asked, 'The Dog creatures – they are your servants?' but Cleck had heard enough; he told her, 'There is no life on other planets. Everyone knows that'.

She shrugged, 'If that's what they tell you'.

Cleck laughed, 'Prove what you say'. Sara just smiled.

'I can't. Here on this planet we're the only life in the universe. Is that better?'

The Muto looked askance, 'I wonder how long til the next shift. There's no clock'.

Sara glanced at her bracelet, 'Five minutes maybe'.

'What's that?' Cleck demanded, 'What does it do?'

'This?' Sara held out her wrist so he could see; the thin strap held a little dial to her wrist. Around the face were numbers from one to twelve, with two arms reaching out from the centre. 'It's my watch'.

'What does it watch?'

'The time. It says what the time is.'

'Where did you get it?'

She was looking curiously at him, 'Ant Vinya gave it to me. Haven't you seen one before?'

Bercol looked up from his table in the canteen, and saw Kavell approaching with a cup of ky. 'Very good of you to spare the time for me, Researcher. I'm grateful'.

Kavell put down his cup, 'Just hand me your recorder for a moment'. Bercol gave it to him and, after checking that it was switched off, Kavell placed it on his own side of the table and sat down.

'I thought you were coming here to be interviewed', Bercol said, 'Can you tell me what's changed?'

'Better I'm not', Kavell replied, 'That is better for you, and for your wife and children'.

'Why?' Bercol asked. 'What is it that you do here?'

Kavell didn't answer for a moment, then he said, 'I facilitate communication; we might say between scientists who, as you've seen, all work in little cubicles here, but they often tend to think in little cubicles too'.

Bercol risked the ghost of a smile, 'And the military?'

Kavell half lifted an eyebrow, 'As I heard, passing the interrogation suite on my way here, they don't do much of that. They currently have the dissidents, and will kill them when they've done – if they are dissidents, of course'.

'If they are?'

'I have just seen an experimental security machine being tested', Kavell explained, 'It objected to those men very strongly and it tried to kill them. Ronson terminated the test'.

'Hence the military interest?'

Kavell nodded, 'I'd not put that in a vis cast if I were you'.

Bercol breathed out slowly, and looked at the ceiling. 'Can you tell me anything about reversing The Decay?'

'No'.

Looking back at Kavell, Bercol asked 'Why?'

'Because The Decay can't be stopped, I should have thought that even the President knew that'.

'He could have told me', Bercol muttered, 'I could have stayed at home and read The Holy Book to my cubs – it's the only thing I've understood since I got here'.

Kavell finished his ky, 'Yes, well we tried to keep it simple'.

'What?'

Kavell looked up with a little pity, 'I'm sorry – Tane's *New Way Ahead*, I worked on that translation just after I classified – very interesting - do you know when the first account of the Schism was written?'

'You tell me'.

'About nine centuries ago – it's propaganda from the first century of the war – it's all a lie'.

'But surely, every legend is based, to some extent...'

'It's a lie', Kavell repeated, 'Because we want to believe that we are just the same - just as strong - as the enemy, and we are not'.

When Bercol didn't say anything, Kavell continued, 'There was no dividing event; we are two separate species that evolved separately - us on the green meadows, them on the side of a volcano; when it sank into the sea, they swam over here and, instead of finding more lava, more predators as desperate as they were, they just found us – and they are stronger than we are'.

'This is treason', Bercol murmured.

Kavell nodded, 'Yes, and we blame the enemy's bioweapons, we blame The Decay, we reassure ourselves that we're cleverer than they are but, when we both run out of weapons and gas and explosives, when we're back to fighting each other with stones, they are going to win'. He picked up the recorder and handed it back to Bercol. 'Finish your report as soon as you can. This bunker is not a good place for you – or me – or any of us'.

General Gharman sat behind his desk, with his head on one side. His office was a comfortable haven within the Bunker, with carpet on the floor, and a painting of Crown Prince Sarkoff hanging on the Imperial Red-painted wall. The desk was genuine wood, with a statuette of the ancient horned god Azal; though the church was largely defunct, Gharman was reputed to retain some faith, it was alleged that, being of an old family, he retained the title Prince Archbishop.

The room also contained three old but comfortable chairs, and the remaining two were occupied by Kravos and Nyder.

Kravos found the room entirely agreeable, but he knew Nyder didn't; the security commander's crippled father had taught in an Instruction Centre, and expressions of nobility grated. Nyder's rank equated to Brigade Leader, and the narrow zealot had worked hard to get it, while Gharman was Tercio-General, just one step higher, and as the epitome of nobility and privilege, he had merely stepped into the post, earning Nyder's deep and lasting resentment (Kravos played down his own family as a direct result). The topic under discussion was their guest, Ven Bercol.

'What does he want?' Nyder murmured.

'Just what he says, apparently', Kravos answered. 'Frentan and Parlim have both been debriefed after he interviewed them, and he asked nothing inappropriate'.

Gharman raised an eyebrow. 'Perhaps that's his style'.

Nyder's eyes narrowed slightly behind his spectacles. 'Kravos; he did not seem at all suspicious?'

'Tane says he's curious', said Kravos. 'But I'd expect that. A great deal of interesting work is being done here. He could be beneficial'.

'I see little to gain from public attention', Nyder replied coldly. 'Who's he talking to now?'

'Kavell'.

'Harmless', said Gharman. 'He won't speak out of turn, and all his work on the Mark Three has applications elsewhere'.

Nyder nodded slowly. 'It's at a crucial stage now. Like a child taking its first steps...'

'Hardly steps', purred Gharman. 'Until the last demonstration, I don't think I'd quite realised how privileged we are to do this work; it's not just a series of brilliant mechanisms and a ground breaking life support system: The Mark Three could be seen not as a weapon, but as a new form of life', he paused, then added, 'So it is far better that the politicians don't find out'.

'I saw a man', Cleck said slowly, 'He wore black robes and he spoke to us, then he disappeared'.

Sara asked, 'What did he say?'

"Goodbye", Cleck leaned forward, 'You can vanish like that? Take us with you?'

'I'm not like him – there are many worlds', she whistled hopelessly, 'I can't do that'.

'But I saw a machine – the Elite were testing it – is that from your world? Did you bring it with you?'

And she laughed bitterly, 'No, but I saw it too - the worst, most evil thing in the universe - and you made it all by yourselves'.

'But a machine like that could end the war', Cleck told her, 'We could have peace...'

She looked at him with a curious horror, 'What's the name of your people?'

'Kaleds', he said, 'And the enemy are the Thals'.

'I've *heard* of the Thals', she said slowly, 'But I've never heard of the Kaleds'.

Ven Bercol shut his case and locked it, then he kicked off his shoes, and lay on the bed in his suite.

Horrible room, like a cell. The whole place seemed like a prison.

It was in the face of every man he'd interviewed; polite, informative, incomprehensible and terrified.

On the recordings Frentan had the eyes of a maddened rat. Bercol thanked his fortune that he was to leave for The Dome at dawn. He started to unbutton his tunic, wearily, with one hand.

There was a tiny tapping at the door. 'Yes!'

It was the white-haired old scientist with the black eyebrows, as much a rat in this maze as any of the rest. He was through the door before Bercol could stop him, and he shut it.

'Please, please listen to me'.

'Of course, Senior Researcher'.

'Please, there is not much time – I am afraid that if I am missed-'

'What is it, man? Sit down.'

'Listen; do you understand what is meant by mortal fear?'

Bercol stared. 'What is this? Ronson – that's your name, isn't it? Ronson?'

'Yes. Do you understand the nature of the work you have seen here?'

'Naturally'.

'In that case you are mistaken; if you knew what I know...'

Bercol raised his hands placatingly, 'I simply serve the people, Senior Researcher, now-'

'Listen! My life is over, yours is in peril – '

‘Get out!’

‘No!’ Ronson was on his feet. ‘Our academician makes the law here, not the President, or whatever he calls himself. You have to get away – now!’

Bercol laughed in his face. ‘There’s no transport – what d’you expect me to do – walk?’

Ronson stared at him, ‘You can jump a freight transport close by Door Four. It goes straight to the Dome; it unloads in K Bloc – under the Ministry’. He looked around the room, ‘Leave, Bercol’.

Bercol took a deep breath and then re-buttoned his tunic. ‘Fine. Where is this door?’

‘There are two men – they must go with you’.

‘What men?’

‘Mogran’s agents - that are under sentence of death’.

‘Only the President can *pass* a death sentence-’

‘Then who passed the one on the *last* president?’

In the holding area, work period was over; Sara crumpled to her knees almost as soon as she was inside the door. ‘We have to do something now’ she groaned, ‘If we work another shift we won’t have the strength to take any kind of action’.

Cleck dropped, and propped himself up on his elbow, ‘Action? What do you mean?’

‘I mean we’ve got to get out of here’, she replied, ‘The guard’s not expecting trouble from a group of exhausted slave workers.’

‘So we get out into the Rocket Silo, where then?’ – he felt shamed by her courage – ‘The only way out goes into a command point, and that’s going to be crawling with Thal troops’.

‘There is another way; straight up the scaffolding. It goes all the way to the nosecone of the rocket. If we could get up there, there’s a chance we could get out onto the surface of the dome’.

It was the maddest idea he had ever heard, but Cleck heard himself saying slowly, ‘It wouldn’t be too difficult getting down again. The angle of the dome is quite gentle’.

‘That scaffolding; it’s so high’, said Severin the Muto.

Sara said decisively, ‘It’s our only chance’.

So placing the chance of climbing to freedom against the certainty of rotting away with Distronic Toxaemia, Del Cleck decided on the chance.

Timing was the issue; too soon and the work detail would still be too tired from the shift, too late and more guards would have arrived for the next. For the time being, only one was on duty. Mumbling gutturally in its own dialect, Severin communicated the intention to its fellows.

After what seemed like an age, at a nod from Cleck, Sara stood unsteadily and then sagged, her eyes rolling up in their sockets as she fell back against the guard, who caught her by instinct, and turned to lean her against the wall. As he swung back, Cleck punched him hard in the jaw and he went down without a sound.

They ran out into the silo, made straight for the scaffolding and started climbing. Sara and Cleck were among the first four on the scaffolding, but some of the rangier Mutoes climbed faster, hauling themselves ever higher hand over hand.

Cleck could see that Sara was staring rigidly ahead all the time, not even looking up for hand holds, and he realised how frightened she must be. From below came the belated yawping of a klaxon.

‘That’s the alarm; they’ll be after us in a minute – come on’

Fifty metres below them Thal troops were on the floor of the silo and firing upwards. Suddenly a ragged body fell past Cleck’s head. There was another volley, and a second Muto plunged down.

Just above him, Sara was balancing in those ridiculous pink boots, one hand straining up, unable to reach the next handhold. Cleck hauled himself up beside her, grabbed her round the waist, and lifted her up -

Red hot pain burst up through his ribcage and out through his right shoulder, and the last thing he heard as he fell was Sara scream.

It is said that people that fall from great heights are dead before they hit the ground.