THE TUNNELS OF RASAND

By M S Lawson

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

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Spelling and grammar note: The spelling in this book is mainly English standard. That is civilisation not civilization; 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

Trainee Patrol Officer Daniel Whyatt was scared. His supervisor, Nathan (Nate) Olsen, did not know his trainee well, but he suspected that the man was asking questions to try to distract himself from his fear.

"Why do you call the creatures below us Morlocks?" Dan said. "You're the only one who does that."

"We don't know if Morlocks are below us at this moment, and patrol officers often use the name," said Nate, mildly. "It's a reference to a very old, classic book in which the main character ends up in a world where the good Eloi are above ground and the evil Morlocks, ape-like troglodytes who feed on the Eloi, live below ground."

"But the Morlocks aren't ape-like?"

"True," admitted Nate. "They're more like maggots with arms, feet, and a very nasty set of teeth and…" The patrol officer saw that his discussion of The Morlock's appearance was not helping and switched back to the original topic. "There are academics in Rasand City who tell us we should have a more respectful name for the creatures. I tell them they should come out on patrol with us, see the creatures up close, and then tell us what to call the Morlocks."

"Right – but they can't get at us here, can they?"

"That's the theory at any rate," said Nate. "Part of the reason we're on patrol is to test these new boxes."

Both men were sitting on cushions in what amounted to a concrete box with windows and a steel door. The box was sitting on a two metre thick concrete slab, which was supposed to deter the Morlocks from burrowing up from below. The Morlocks were such enthusiastic burrowers, using just their claws, that the desert around Rasand City the two men patrolled was honeycombed with tunnels. Mostly, these were dug without causing any cave-ins, unless the Morlocks chose to have cave-ins as part of an ambush of surface dwellers. Their preferred trick, however, was to emerge suddenly from a hole they had previously dug out and then covered over by one means or another. Once out, the Morlocks would drag their victims into the tunnel, much like crocodiles lunge out of rivers and drag their prey underwater. The victims were never seen again.

Dan Whyatt, a small, round-faced man fresh out of the Rasand academy, was still coming to terms with his fear of the creatures, but Nate, a tall, broad figure tanned by long exposure to the desert, did not begrudge his trainee that fear. He had a small scar above one eye inflicted by a Morlock, and he had stayed alive in a high-risk occupation thanks to being wary, even fearful, of Morlocks.

As part of that general wariness, Nate had brought in a shallow plastic bowl from the armoured patrol carrier parked outside, filled it with water, and placed it on the floor.

"What's with the bowl of water?" asked Dan.

"It's an old trick," said Nate. "Armies besieging fortresses on Earth before the invention of gunpowder might tunnel under the walls. Those inside the walls would put out bowls like this. If there were ripples in the water, then the ground was being disturbed. There was tunnelling nearby."

"You don't trust our equipment?" said Dan, gesturing at the box beside him. The box, which had a screen on top, contained a seismograph for detecting movements underground. It was connected to the various radar and infrared sensors on top of the building, designated station five, as well as the sensors in the carrier parked on the concrete outside.

"Always cautious with Morlocks," said Nate. He thought he saw a small ripple in the water, but it coincided with his trainee shifting his weight and dismissed it. "We should change the subject."

"What's the music you play while we're driving?"

"British pop of the '60s, mostly," said Nate.

"60s? Which century?"

"Twentieth, so 1960s. There was a lot going on in that decade. There were the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, of course, but also the Kinks. If anyone wants to invoke that era, they play the Kinks' *You Really Got Me.*"

Nate thought he saw another tiny ripple in the water. "There's nothing on the detector screen, is there?"

Dan studied the screen on top of the device. "No, all risk factors within normal range. The algorithm isn't popping at all."

"Okay, as I was saying, there were plenty of other bands of the era remembered to this day. The Animals, say. Their song *"We've Got to Get Out of This Place"* later became associated with a war in a country called Vietnam, although the song was probably originally about getting out of Liverpool in England. Then there were The Troggs, The Zombies, The Who, Gerry and the Pacemakers, and The Hollies, although I think The Hollies' best work, *Long Cool Woman* and *The Air That I Breathe*, didn't come out until the early 70s. There were also the different sounds of Petula Clark and Joe Cocker. And let's not forget The Moody Blues and The Yardbirds, which launched the career of one of the greatest guitarists ever, Eric Clapton…"

A distinct ripple formed in the centre of the plastic bowl and spread to the rim.

Nate stood up. "Nothing on the threat box?"

"Nothing," said Dan. "The system is happy."

"I'm not," said Nate, stepping over so that he was closer to Dan, as well as to the door. "Stand up. Safety off." Each man carried two pistols with two spare clips for each weapon. If the ammunition ran out, as it did, they had what could be described as mini swords, which an earlier age might have labelled dirks. In three years as a patrol officer, which made him a veteran, Nate had been forced to use his dirk once and hadn't liked it.

"Oh my, oh my!" said Dan, standing up and fumbling with his pistols.

"Calm, now," said Nate. "Flick the safeties off on both weapons and switch on the generator."

"Right – right! Generator."

Dan put one pistol under his left armpit and touched a button on the screen. Nate did not hear the generator start. It was in the patrol carrier outside. But he saw the lights on the grids slotted into metal guides around the windows light up. There was no glass in the windows, just the metal grids that would fry any Morlock that touched them.

The water in the glass shook again.

"Remember, head shots only and fire deliberately," said Nate. "Put one down and move on. You see, I've got a grenade?"

"Ye – yes," said Dan. "Am I supp... supposed to have one?"

"Just me for now. I'll throw it so that they can't block it, then draw my second pistol."

The water in the bowel shook violently.

"Any moment," said Nate.

The centre of the floor gave way. The bowl of water spun into the depths, and a heaving mass of Morlocks boiled out, all teeth and claws and rolls of white flesh – intent on grabbing the pair of patrol officers and dragging them into their underworld. Nate fired twice, clean head shots that killed each Morlock targeted, making it loll to one side, tongue hanging out, then threw the grenade. He lobbed it carefully so that it fell behind the mass of Morlocks and inside the hole. Beside him, Dan was firing into the Morlocks indiscriminately, forgetting about head shots.

The window grids sparked. Morlocks screamed at each one and fell away. They were pounding on the door behind him. Then the grenade went off, with a whump! It was designed not so much to explode as to burn, spreading a close relative of napalm on the Morlocks still crowding to get out of the hole they had dug. They screamed. The smell of burning flesh permeated the box. Nate shot two more as the pressure eased, and he spared a second to glance at the screen on top of the threat box. Now, it was showing a red alert and warning of imminent attack. So much for the technology.

"They're behind us," shrieked Dan, still firing wildly into the mass of creatures.

"Dan, stop firing! Reload."

Nate shot two more of the creatures, clambering over the bodies of their fellow, still smoking from the grenade, while Dan fumbled with his pistols. The pounding on the door increased in urgency. Through the din, Nate could hear Morlocks hissing on the other side. A line from a film of long ago went through Nate's mind – "What can men do against such reckless hate?"

"We can't stay here," said Nate, as more Morlocks climbed out of the hole. "We have to get back to the carrier."

"But they're outside!" exclaimed Dan, nearly sobbing. "We'll never get there."

In response, Nate put his combination earpiece and microphone unit in one ear.

"Carrier two, prepare for orders."

"Copy," said the carrier.

"On my command, strafe side of station once. Then strafe top of station."

"Understood."

"Dan, grab the threat box."

"You… You're kidding," said the trainee.

"We have to check it back in. Now unplug and grab it."

"I – I can't," said Dan, mouth working in panic.

"Just grab it," said Nate. "Now."

Dan holstered one pistol and grabbed the box, jerking it so that the lead came out of the wall plug.

"From now, don't fire unless you have to," said Nate. "Carrier two, fire."

The carrier, which bore a strong resemblance to the armoured personnel carriers used in wars on Earth, opened up with a .50 caliber in an unmanned turret on top of the vehicle, spraying the side of the box with bullets. Old technology, maybe, and very noisy, but still brutally effective. The pounding stopped.

Nate pulled the bolt on the door and kicked it open as the carrier sprayed the top of the box, with an ear-splitting ripping sound, killing the Morlocks waiting to drop on the two patrolmen as they emerged. Dan was about to push through when Nate stopped him with one hand.

"Look down," he said.

Dan looked to see, in the light from the station, a Morlock emerging from a small hole in front of the door to grab at his leg. The trainee shrieked. Nate shot the creature carefully in the head, then dropped a grenade so that it fell past the body.

"It's a small hole. Step to one side."

Dan did so as the grenade went off. More screaming from below. Then he stopped dead. There were more Morlocks on top of the carrier and on the side where the 50-cal could not shoot them.

"Oh no," he sobbed.

"Remember, head shots," snapped Nate. "Carrier two, officers approaching hatch. Fire at hostiles when you can get a shot."

"Copy," said the carrier. "It was smart enough to tell the difference between Morlocks and the patrol officers with ease, and knew all about hostiles.

Nate noted that it was a beautiful starry night of the type that made him, sometimes, look forward to patrols. He shot two Morlocks directly in front of the carrier hatch. Four others sprang from the side of the carrier. Dan shot at them, hitting one that Nate could see before the 50-cal spluttered into life, sweeping them away. They were at the carrier hatch. Nate shot two more Morlocks that wanted to drop on them, open mouths full of pointed teeth. Pushing and kicking one to the side when it dropped on him. Then he pulled the hatch lever, and they were inside.

Dan dropped the detection equipment behind the carrier driver's seat with a distinct thud.

"That was terrifying," he said, breathless. "Can they get us in here?"

"We'll change position and set the 50-cal to auto fire. That should discourage them enough until daylight. But there is one thing you should do now," said Nate, looking down.

"What's that?"

"You should change your pants."

CHAPTER TWO

Two days after the Morlocks ambushed the patrol officers, Lieutenant Nathan Olsen was dissecting the apparent failure of the boxes with his superior, Colonel Janet Griggs. The colonel, a diminutive woman with streaks of grey in her auburn hair, had been a top-notch patrol officer in her time.

"I told them those things wouldn't work," said Colonel Griggs. "They have to have a garrison of some sort. Leave them unattended, and the Morlocks will burrow in even through hardened concrete."

"The tunnels were small, ma'am – room for no more than two or three at a time," said Nate. "We can add steel bars or a plate directly underneath the room."

The colonel shook her head. "Has to be the whole slab with plates on the side, plus integrated trembler detection systems. Even then, the Morlocks are capable of digging around the whole thing to bring it down. It should really be anchored on a rock or rocky outcrop, so we're back to where we started."

The city of Rasand, which contained patrol command headquarters, was built on a major rock formation. The Morlocks had been unable to penetrate that formation, but expanding the city and building the infrastructure required for resources in the desert that surrounded the city on three sides (the other side was an ocean) was proving difficult. One of the roles of Patrol Command officers was to serve as the occasional guinea pig in experiments involving the construction of structures in the desert.

"Don't think the exercise was a complete waste, ma'am," said Nate. "The holes were small, like I said, including the ambush hole at the door. The Morlocks had real trouble digging them. The incident also showed that we need a major improvement in the sensor systems. We scanned when we arrived and didn't detect anything."

"Check back on the scans," said Griggs. "The Morlocks would have filled the holes with something before you arrived, not sand, as the equipment would have detected that. But

it would be useful to know what material they used. You checked out the tunnels at daybreak?"

"Yes, ma'am. Not a whisper from the Morlocks. I dropped a drone down the main hole, which lasted a long time before they got it, but I didn't think to check for material that might have fallen out of the hole."

"No matter," said the colonel. "We can check on another patrol. By the way, you're now a captain." She took a jewellery box out of one of the desk drawers and passed it across to Nate. It contained two silver stars to be affixed to epaulets on his dress uniform. There was already one on each epaulet to signify the rank of Patrol Lieutenant. Now there would be two.

"I am? Thank you, sir."

"Deserved!" grunted the colonel. "Not that there's much competition, mind. Everyone talks about taking control of the desert and expanding the city to be ready for the next fleet of settlers, but few want to join Patrol Command."

Rasand City had been founded by the members of the first fleet of settlers from Earth after negotiations with the main species, the Cactuar, inhabiting the planet. After some early struggles, the city was now firmly established, but more space and facilities were needed to accommodate the second fleet. A major obstacle to that expansion was the Morlocks.

"It's not bad fun, ma'am," said Nate cheerfully, looking at his new stars. "If you don't mind being scared half to death and risk being dragged into a Morlock hell hole." In fact, one of the reasons Nate opted for patrol command on leaving the academy, as opposed to the two other major options of police and guard, was that it was the least popular pick. That meant much faster promotion.

"Speaking of people being scared, how did Dan Whyatt do?"

"He didn't like being ambushed, ma'am, but he didn't fall apart. He was the one who carried the equipment back to the carrier. Needs more experience."

"Didn't we all?" said the colonel. "Take him on that resources convey you've got later in the week. In the meantime, I want you to go and speak to a group of guards who are taking a carrier out into the desert. They're by the East gate."

"They're going into the desert?" said Nate, astonished. "They know about the Morlocks, right?"

"Yes, and yes," said the Colonel. "They wouldn't tell me where they're going or what they're going to do. But whatever they're going to do, they seem to think they're above using lowly Patrol Command or even taking our advice about protecting themselves. At least I can send you in a last-ditch effort to warn them of the dangers and try to get them to take the proper equipment."

"I don't think they're going to listen to me, ma'am," said Nate.

"I don't think so either," retorted the colonel, "but they're certainly not listening to me, and you've just been fighting Morlocks. You may get through."

Nate found the guards, a group of eight, fussing around a carrier larger than the ones used by Patrol Command, just by the East gate. They were still loading equipment, although it was late morning. Patrol officers started at the crack of dawn and kept driving all day, stopping for the night on a handy rocky outcrop or a concrete bunker on top of a rock. They never drove in a straight line if they could help it and never along the same path twice.

The leader of the expedition, Major Dante, did not bother to return Nate's salute and listened to the patrol officer with growing impatience.

"Kinda late in the day for you guys to be setting out, isn't it, sir?" said Nate.

"We're guard," said Dante. "We don't need lessons on how to travel outside the city from junior patrol officers."

"But you do, sir," said Nate. "My colonel sent me down because I fought my way out of a Morlock ambush two nights ago, and he's concerned that you're not taking the threat from Morlocks seriously enough."

He was conscious that a few of the other guardsmen, including one guardswoman, had stopped to listen.

"As I told your colonel," Major Dante said impatiently, "we're taking the threat seriously enough to bring along a host of mini guns. Let's see how the Morlocks cope with a storm of fire."

"They cope well, sir," said Nate. "Machine gun fire has its place, as I was reminded, yet again, two nights ago. But you're better off using pistols and shooting each one in the head. The problem is that Morlocks don't often obligingly charge into a minigun's field of fire. Their style is to rise up from holes or drop from above, which is no end of disconcerting, especially when you see their mouths up close. You want two pistols like we have with two spare mags apiece and our gladius for stabbing and slashing at close quarters as a last resort."

"Lieutenant, do you see this?" Dante held up his right hand to show the ring he got when he became a guardsman, marking him as one of the elite.

"Of course, sir," said Nate. "A fine ring."

"It means I don't have to pay attention to shit-kicking patrol officer. I'm not using a sword on a modern battlefield. Now, leave. We have work to do."

"It's captain," said Nate, unabashed, "Just promoted, and you'll find the Morlocks have not read the manual on infantry tactics. You also need wire grids with a generator to power them to fence in areas. Otherwise, you risk a sudden assault that kills before anyone puts a finger on their trigger."

"Captain…"

"If worst comes to worst, you can hide out in a cave of some sort if you can work out how to block off the entrance, but you have to ensure they can't smell you. You can leave out meat to rot or spread garbage around to mask the human smell."

"Captain!"

"I wish you luck, sir," said Nate, turning away. "You may need it."

Nate thought that the major was a lunatic who would not listen, but he soon discovered that his quota of dealing with lunatics had not been filled for the day. After lunch, while deep in planning for a mission to extract crude oil from a distant site, the colonel handed an academic from Rasand University, Dr Josephine Caspigny, over to him. He soon discovered why. She had long, blonde hair, wore a floral dress and round glasses on a narrow face, and declared that she wanted to establish a "rapport" with the Morlocks.

"You want to what?" said Nate, astonished. They were in Patrol Command's conference room as opposed to the cubicle he rated as a mere captain, who was often out in the field.

"A rapport, as I said. It's time to stop this endless bloodshed and come to an understanding with these creatures." Her voice was very soft.

"I couldn't agree more," said Nate. "If only there was a way to do it."

"I've been discussing this with the elders of the Cactuar." These were desert dwellers who roamed the wastes, riding what they called Bhushorots and scraping a living tending herd animals in the occasional oasis and through trading. They also paid an annual tribute to the Morlocks in lives of their people to be left alone.

"What have the Cactuar been telling you?"

"They say they can arrange a meeting with the elders of the Morlock clans to discuss peaceful co-existence."

"Where is this meeting to take place?" asked Nate.

"A little way outside the city at a place called Bandour. I just need patrol permission for myself and two colleagues to go outside the city." Dr Caspigny seemed to think this was just a formality.

"Dr Caspigny…"

"I prefer Jo."

"Jo, have you lost your mind? You know what happened with the last four delegations to the Morlocks?"

"Of course. There was unfortunate miscommunication…"

"Miscommunication! Jo, the delegates are mostly dead. The ones left alive in the last attempt only managed to stay that way because the patrol intervened big time." This had happened before Nate joined Patrol Command, but he was aware of the history.

"I know that, but this time we have blood assurances."

"Blood assurances?" said Nate. "Who gave these assurances?"

"The Cactuar Elders."

"More fool them and you. The assurances are meaningless. The Cactuar are far more frightened of Morlocks than they are of us. They'd hand you over in a heartbeat, knowing that we would be unlikely to enforce the blood assurance. Very likely, the Morlocks promised them a reduction in the number of Cactuar to be taken this year in exchange for delivering a few ripe humans. You go to Bandour, and you'd never be heard from again."

"You're wrong!" said Dr Caspigny. "The Cactuar have assured us that we'll get a fair hearing with the Morlock elders – a firm basis for possible peace."

"Do Morlocks have elders now? We haven't been able to figure out their social structure. We suspect that the ones we shoot out in the field are like soldier ants in that they're born from eggs laid by some sort of queen. But that's mostly speculation. No one's keen to go deep enough into their tunnels to work it out."

"Yes, there are elders. I know the Cactuar language, and their elders have assured me that I'll be safe."

"I also know Cactuar," said Nate, "at least enough to get by, and I've discussed Morlocks with the elders you speak of. Those guys have never mentioned anything about Morlock also having elders, or we would have already explored the possibility of contacting them. As far as we know, the Morlocks have a social structure akin to that of an ant colony, where the queen is totally hostile to humans. In any case, given the history of interactions between delegations and Morlocks, there is no way we're going to let you go to Bandour. It's a rocky outcrop with a cave that, we believe, connects with the main Morlock tunnel system. You'll be dragged into that cave and never heard from again."

"That's nonsense. I told you I know the Cactuar, and they'll protect me. I had hoped for a constructive, more open-minded attitude from Patrol Command," snapped Jo.

"If it were up to me, Jo, I'd give you permission, wave goodbye, and then inform your family of your disappearance and suspected demise. The problem is that when a civilian is killed by Morlocks, as opposed to a patrol officer, there are media stories, and the central admin people come and ask questions. It's all a lot of trouble.

"Your death may prove of some use in ramming through the thick skulls of academia that the Cactuar are terrified of Morlocks, but I'm not going to let you make a martyr of yourself. This meeting has to take place on or near the city gates, and we have to be there. We're happy to give the Morlock delegation assurance that they won't be harmed and keep to that promise. If you take that counter offer to the Cactuar, that should kill the deal, as there is no delegation of Morlock elders. They're just spinning a tale to get you and others out into the desert without us."

"That's nonsense," Jo snapped, standing up. She was offended that a mere captain in Patrol Command would tell her that her carefully cherished academic beliefs were nonsense.

"I told you I know the Cactuar, and the offer is genuine. If you insist on being obstructive, then I'll have to take the matter to the administration."

"By all means," said Nate. "Take care."

She stormed out of the office. As Nate pointed out to the Colonel later, it was a pity that they could not let her go, as it would have meant one less lunatic in Rasand.

CHAPTER THREE

In the following two weeks, Nate managed to forget all about the guard expedition and Jo, the would-be peacemaker. He had plenty of concerns of his own, including his side business in droid repair. Nate had been a droid technician before applying to the academy and had managed to set up a workshop at his place, a few minutes' walk from Patrol HQ. Unlike almost everyone else in the city of Rasand, Nate lived on the outskirts in his own small house, unfashionably close to the small enclave of Cactuar permitted to live inside the walls that kept the Morlocks out. A further disadvantage was that the city's active red-light district was only about a block in the other direction.

The arrangement had been to the disgust of Nate's girlfriend, Lilly, who had moved out some weeks previously to be with her friends among the tall, fashionable apartment towers near the city centre. Nate was initially sorry to see her go, and then decided that the separation was less trouble as he had no intention of moving. He liked the Cactuar sector with its narrow, multi-storey stand-alone stone buildings crammed together along narrow roads and its bustling shopping centre, which included street stalls. The place felt far more like a market than the giant, antiseptic malls of central Rasand. Trawling through the markets also helped give him, and Patrol Command, clues about what was happening in the deserts outside the city walls.

Nate was at one stall, on his way home from Patrol Command, bargaining with a Cactuar trader in that creature's language to buy a small trinket. The creatures shared about the same amount of DNA with Morlocks as gorillas shared with humans. The skins bore some resemblance to Morlocks, being pale and pasty and hanging in rolls, but they had heads and faces a human could relate to and wore clothes of a kind – a light fabric covering that made them seem immensely fat to human eyes, as well as a large, wide-brimmed hat tied under their chins so that they did not blow off in the occasional fierce desert winds.

The patrol captain had no interest in the trinket, a hand-made necklace with a gemstone as an amulet, but he bought something every now and then so that the traders would put up with him. The colonel paid the small amounts as expenses and sent the trinkets to a fashionable shop in central Rasand.

"Two credits," he said, eventually, "my final offer."

"My children will go hungry," said the trader, whose name was Lintok. Nate was sure Lintok's children, if he had any, were doing fine. "I have another item that might interest you, honoured sir. It came in this morning." Lintock rummaged underneath the "counter" of his establishment, which was a box on wheels mounting an umbrella to shade them from the fierce desert sun, and brought out a ring, which he handed to Nate for inspection.

Nate gazed at the ring for a few moments, puzzled, then his blood ran cold. The last time he had seen such a ring had been on the finger of the guard major. The only way such a ring could get into Cactuar hands was off the fingers of a dead guardsman.

"Four credits," said Lintok, noting Nate's evident interest in the item.

"I'll give you three, and that's it," said Nate, sharply. "If you have any others like this, hand them over now."

"I may have others for a valued customer such as yourself, honoured sir…"

"No bargaining for these rings," said Nate. "Hand over what you have, at the same price. Otherwise, patrol officers will come here and turn the whole market upside down."

Surprised at the fierce reaction, Lintok handed over another he had in stock. He still made a good profit on the trade.

"Anyone else have these? Who sold them to you?"

"One of the caravan traders called Barso. A villainous man of the desert. The caravan may still be at the gates."

Nate ran to the gates, which had been closed for the evening, but after a sharp discussion with the Lieutenant supervising the area from patrol headquarters, Nate was allowed out through a service door. His sudden appearance startled the Cactuar, who were busy setting up tents and cooking their evening meal. Barso proved to be a man without a clan, meaning he was of very low social rank, dozing fitfully by his Bhushorot. The animal resembled, to Nate's eyes, a giant slug with legs, but it had an immense carrying capacity and could go for days without water. Nate shook the Cactuar awake and explained what he wanted.

"I have one still if you wish to buy, honoured sir," said Barso, smiling. Like Lintok, he could smell a profit a long way off on a dark night.

"No bargaining. I gave the trader who bought these off you three credits, and that's what I'll give you. Hand it over or Patrol Command will be down on your sorry arse."

Startled, Barso handed over the ring and was paid. As the sale price still represented a handsome profit, he had no reason to complain to the camp council. That was why Nate picked the price, and he was glad of it. His piece of camp theatre had attracted an audience of Cactuar traders and their families who ringed the pair, obviously wondering what this weird human was up to. As the conversation was in the Cactuar language, they could follow what was going on, but they did not understand. Why were these rings so important?

"Where did you get these rings?"

"Honoured sir, I don't quite remember."

Nate produced a two-credit coin. The Cactuar were the only people in the city who took cash. In fact, they only dealt in cash. Barso's tiny eyes gleamed.

"A Morlock" (he used the Cactuar word, which meant terror) appeared beside me five nights ago. I was frightened. But he handed me the rings and said, 'For the humans,' then left."

"A Morlock spoke?"

"Honoured sir, I was also surprised. I had heard of such a thing but never saw it directly. This Morlock was much bigger and wider than the others."

"Hmmm! How many rings?"

"Honoured sir, there were six."

"I have only three. Where are the other three?"

"Alas, honoured sir, my memory is very bad."

Jake flipped the man another coin. "That covers everything else. Where did this talking Morlock approach you?"

"Just beyond The Shade, honoured sir, in a straight line from here." The Shade was a large and nasty stretch of waterless desert with no rocky outcrops, which the patrol crossed only if it had to. "There were ruins – an old city gone bad."

"Ruins? Out there? I have not heard of such a thing."

"We had not seen them there before, honoured sir. The sands shift."

"Doubtless. Why you? You have no clan."

The Cactuar spread his hands in a very human gesture. "I sleep always on the edge of the camp. The Morlock did not want to stay."

Jake caught a movement out of the corner of his eye – a creature on the fringe of the little crowd that had gathered. A Morlock? His pistol was in his hand, safety off, without Jake consciously deciding to do so. Seeing the pistol and perhaps sensing the Morlock, the crowd scattered.

"Are there Morlocks in this camp?" he asked.

"Not by my doing, honoured sir," said Barso, cowering beside his Bhushorot, which stirred and snorted.

Nate then realised that the light had almost gone. It was dangerous for a human to be caught outside the city after dark. He also thought he caught a glimpse of a Morlock a few more paces away, just behind another Bhushorot. The other Cactuar had all vanished. Was he being led on?

"Last question: Who did you sell the other rings to?"

"The trader Sholam, honoured sir. You will find him on Traders' Way, just beside the main entrance."

In the next two hours, Nate found the trader at his dinner and bought the rings from him at the same price without any of the ritual bartering. He then got through to the colonel at home and wound up speaking with Guard Commander General Isle. Like Major Dante, the general had little time for the 'amateurs' of Patrol Command. He was not at all pleased to hear, from a mere patrol captain, that an entire guard's detachment had apparently been wiped out by Morlocks. He initially refused to believe Nate, only relenting when he was shown the rings via a video link, and the serial numbers stamped on each ring were read out. They all belonged to members of Major Dante's expedition.

"How did this happen?" he demanded.

"Sir, I have no idea," retorted Nate. "We weren't told anything about the expedition, where they were going or why. I spoke to the officer in charge, Major Dante, before they left and told him that I thought the equipment they had was inadequate and that they shouldn't underestimate the Morlocks. He dismissed me out of hand, telling me that they were Guards and could handle themselves. Looks like he got it wrong, sir."

"Humph!" said the general. Nate was telling him things that he did not want to hear.

"In any case, sir, how come we're only finding out about this disaster now? Aren't you in contact with this expedition?"

Nate already knew that General Isle's opinion of everyone was low, which meant that his opinion of Patrol Officers was even lower. There was no point in being diplomatic or trying to ingratiate himself with the man. Best to hit this senior officer over the head with reality and be done with it.

"We've been in contact. I'm told the latest report came in yesterday."

"Sir, the Cactuar I spoke to said that he was handed the rings five nights ago, and he had no reason to lie. Five nights is also about the right time to get from where he said he got the rings to Rasand City. I think you need to look again at the messages you've been getting for the past week or so… sir."

"Humph!" The general, evidently, could think of nothing else to say.

"Although you haven't asked us, we'll run a patrol out to the location, starting very early in the morning. My understanding is that there were eight members of that expedition. That means two rings are unaccounted for, so there is a faint chance of survivors. The Cactuar I spoke to, sir, said he saw ruins there – an old city gone bad, as he put it."

"The expedition was looking at the ruins," said General Isle. "Taking pictures, measurements, that sort of thing, in remote contact with archaeologists. My staff will send you the location."

Nate wondered why Patrol Command had been bypassed for such a job. Why use The Guard? But then he thought that was a discussion for another time.

"You must call my office when you get on site tomorrow night."

"No, sir – the night after. We cannot approach the site directly. We don't cross the Shade – the big desert between here and the site – unless we have to. We'll go via the rocky ground to the East. In any case, there is almost certainly some sort of ambush set up in the shade and at the site itself. The Morlocks handed the rings over to the Cactuar I spoke to, I guess to provoke a response. They must have been wondering why no one else had come to the site to be ambushed. I anticipate a fight no matter what else happens."

"Humph!" Again, the general could think of nothing else to say. Although he appreciated that this upstart patrol captain probably knew what he was doing, he was not about to acknowledge that. He also knew that his beloved guard would be unable to mount a patrol in less than a day and might simply fall into one of the traps that the captain thought had been set up. He had no choice but to leave the matter up to the despised patrol command.

"Keep my office informed," he said, then hung up. He did not bother to say, 'good luck,' which was a shame, as Nate thought he would need all the luck he could get.

CHAPTER FOUR

After two days of hard travelling, Nate topped a ridge to the northeast of the location he had been given and stopped for a moment to take in the awe inspiring sight.

When Barso had mentioned ruins, Nate thought there might be the tops of a few buildings showing through the sand, or perhaps a few marble pillars that looked as if they had once belonged to a Roman temple lying around. The patrol officer had seen a few such sites in his travels. A civilisation of some sort had existed in the area long before the humans had turned up at Rasand, in search of a place to settle, and negotiated a foothold on the surface that had become the city.

But the site Nate saw when he topped the ridge was massive. A mosaic of buildings with stone walls but without roofs stretched as far as the eye could see. How had this been missed by the surveys? Overcoming his initial shock, Nate drove down that final ridge and, for the first time he could remember, drove a Patrol Command carrier down a street, albeit one paved with stone and with sand lying in piles rather than some substitute for asphalt.

How was he supposed to find whatever was left of the guard party in this vast area? In the distance, along the road he was using, Nate thought that the ruins seemed higher, so he headed for that area. After another ten minutes, he found himself in an area featuring upright pillars and the occasional statue of Cactuar-like creatures. He turned right at an intersection – again, something he had never previously done in a Patrol Command carrier – stopped in front of a gigantic, partially intact building, and got out.

That was incautious, as Nate well knew. But it was still daylight, and scans indicated that the city was built on bedrock. That rock and the stone used by the city builders meant that the Morlocks would not easily burrow underneath. For the moment, at least, he could behave like a tourist and admire the building, and what a building it was.

About the height of a large cathedral on Earth and twice the length, much of the front half of the building had collapsed into two piles of rubble. That left a still very impressive structure with a domed roof supported by a thick wall and massive buttresses. Nate used the powerful flashlight he had brought with him to check the interior for Morlocks, but found nothing aside from more debris. Then he thought to look up at the ceiling, which had once been painted with what must have been a handsome blue and decorated with what looked to be stars. A representation of the night sky? If so, why was it blue rather than black? The area at the far end had been railed off, with a statue of a Cactuar in robes, kneeling and holding his

hands in front of him, his right hand wrapped around the fist of the left. Nate was not an art critic, but it seemed to be a fine statue. There were also paintings on the walls; faded but still discernible. Some form of temple? One for the archaeologists.

Nate walked out a back doorway, with no door, thinking that sightseeing did not get him any closer to finding what was left of the guard detachment and through what might have been a place for the officiating priest to prepare for services, if that's what the building was for, and out to the back of the complex. There, on the next block, was the guard carrier he had last seen being prepared by the guard detachment in Rasand City for their trip.

He walked over to find it locked. The Morlocks had tried to get in, pounding rocks against the lock and against the windows, which had been designed to take such punishment. To unlock it, he had to walk back to his own carrier and argue with a junior officer at guard headquarters who knew nothing about the situation to get the vehicle unlocked remotely. Finally, the general himself intervened, and Nate was able to drive around to the guard carrier and walk in. His first act upon getting the codes required to access the carrier's AI was to disable the automated situation reports that the vehicle had been transmitting by satellite for more than a week. No one had been properly monitoring the detachment and speaking directly with them every day, as was standard practice in Patrol Command.

But what had happened to the guard detachment? A large single-story building about twenty paces from the carrier had plenty of dried blood and the hordes of flies that went along with it, even on a planet far from Earth. Guard equipment, including weapons dropped by the defenders in the last moments, was scattered about.

Nate could have told them, at a glance, that the building was no good at all for defence against Morlocks, as it had no roof. As well as being excellent burrowers, the Morlocks were skilled climbers and quite capable of coordinated attacks. They would have distracted the human defenders of the building with an assault on the doors and windows on one side – bad enough without electrified wire grids on the windows to deter them – then swarmed over the walls in places where the humans could not have seen them coming. Casualties did not bother them in the least. Of course, such an assault required large numbers of Morlocks to gather, but the detachment seemed to have broken another cardinal Patrol Command rule: never stay too long in one place.

The place was quiet now, but Nate could picture the fight all too well. The guards had been mowing down the waves of Morlocks they could see. Shell casings were everywhere. Suddenly, more Morlocks swarmed over the walls, swamping the defenders before they even had a chance to bring their weapons around.

As was the Morlock habit, all bodies, alive or dead, Morlock or human, had been dragged away. A trail of blood led away from the building across a large, raised stone area on which the building had sat – the structure probably had something to do with the gigantic temple-whatever complex – across the road and into a building that had once been a tower. A partial collapse had thrown a lot of rubble into the street, leaving a round three story stump of white stone blocks about the diameter of a mid-sized office block. Nate followed the trail into the tower, switching on the powerful flashlight that he carried, and then to an inner room containing a series of low, round stone enclosures. After a moment, the patrol officer realised that the objects must be water wells. Geologists had long suspected that there must have been an artesian basin underneath sections of the desert, holding colossal amounts of water.

Now, one of the wells served a different purpose. Nate found blood trails on the ground leading up to it, as well as blood on the edge of the well. When he leaned over to examine the dry bottom far below, he thought he could see a sizable, dried blood stain, but no bodies. Very likely, the bodies of the guard personnel had been dragged to the well and thrown in, and then other Morlocks had taken the bodies away. The well must be connected in some way with the main Morlock tunnel system. The humans might have been alive by the

time they had been dragged to the well - Morlocks liked to take their prey alive - but that was at least a week ago.

As there was no indication of the footholds and handholds Morlocks often dug on the sides of such shafts to help them climb, Nate thought that the well was only used to throw the bodies down. Maybe they used one of the other wells to come up? He was about to check the others when, at the limit of his hearing, he heard the 'tap' of one stone being pushed onto another and a faint 'Tuk!', the sound that Morlocks made when moving around. He smelt the pungent odour of Morlocks. The odour was faint but unmistakable.

Thoroughly alarmed and reminded that the sun was due to set soon, Nate's main pistol was in his hand without the patrol officer being consciously aware that he had drawn it. He backed away. Even in that short time, he thought the smell had become stronger. Out in the street, he beat a hasty retreat to the scene of the last stand, thinking that he would check to see what equipment had been left behind, then find a place to fortify. Much of the guard detachment's equipment was still there, including weapons and camping gear – the Morlocks had no interest in such things – but not the food, Nate realised. A few wrappers and packages had been left on a table set up as a make-shift larder. A large, round container of water connected to a device that extracted moisture from the early morning desert air was almost empty.

Then Nate thought to check the ground for footprints. He was no desert tracker, but he knew something of the craft, and there had been no wind to wipe away faint trails. Outside the building, on the edge of the heavy imprints of the attacking Morlock, he found boot prints leading away. They were small; perhaps that of a woman? He followed the prints across the road to another raised platform of stone blocks, which might have been connected with a small, Greek-style temple complete with columns and a tiled roof, a little further away.

He came to a wide stone ramp and followed the boot prints down that ramp, pistol at the ready. At the bottom of the ramp was a large tunnel filled with the odour of rotting meat. The tunnel stretching off to the right might have led to the bottom of the wells Nate had just been inspecting. To the left, the tunnel stretched off into the distance. As the boot prints he had been following were lost in the numerous trails of passing Morlocks, Nate was momentarily at a loss. Just passed the ramp exit was a tunnel T-Junction with the branch tunnel running in the direction of the temple Nate had just seen. There was no way he was going to examine all of the tunnels he could see, let alone explore them to their end. It was getting very late. There was only one thing he could do.

"Patrol Command," he yelled. "Any guard survivors?"

He yelled again, then he heard a muffled yell from the side tunnel. He hurried around to find that it was also the source of the stench of rotting meat. An alcove had been walled off with whatever the occupant had been able to find, which was mostly rubble, as well as a few bags of dirt and some spindly bushes that grew here and there in the city. Those bushes were now being pushed aside to reveal, in the light of Nate's flashlight, a young guardswoman.

"You!" said Nate. He recognised her as one of those in the guard detachment who had listened to him when he spoke to Major Dante back in Myste City. He inspected the wall she had built. "You remember what I said to the major."

"Yes, I remembered," she said, looking solemn.

In Myste City, Nate thought she was pretty, with auburn hair cut short, brown eyes, and a soft voice that gave her a girl next door vibe. Now, she looked tired and drawn and needed a shower.

"Right down to the smell. What's the odour?"

"I opened some of the meat packets we had and put them over there." She pointed at the other side of the tunnel, where a few plastic packages had been strewn around to stink to

high heaven and be enjoyed by the local ants. Even on Myste, countless light years from Earth, there were ants.

"That's good, they didn't get your scent," said Nate, impressed. "You survived. Is it just you?"

She shook her head. "Guardsman Tyler, here," she said, indicating a form lying on a ground sheet. "He's asleep at the moment, thank the stars. He's feverish and in a lot of pain, and it's getting worse. A Morlock chewed on his leg, but he managed to get away and hide under a pile of Morlock bodies. I did what I could."

Nate knelt beside the injured man. His wounds had been carefully cleaned, as far as he could tell, then bandaged using what the guardswoman could find in the first aid kits at the camp. He put his hand against the man's forehead. The guardsman was burning up.

"Well, um, sorry, what was your name?"

"Rachel Crystal – trainee guardswoman."

"I'm Nate, pleased to meet you. Tyler has been infected by the Morlock who bit him, but I do have antibiotics in my carrier that could fix it. You did what you could with the leg, but we've gotta do more. Rachel, we've gotta roll, now."

He hoisted Tyler over his shoulders in a fireman's lift.

"We've gotta fortify for the night, as well as work on Tyler."

"Wait, we're not going to blow town?"

"We don't drive at night," said Nate. "The lesser of two evils is that we find some place to fortify and wait for dawn, which is gonna be real interesting. There are a lot of Morlocks close, and they'll come calling tonight."

CHAPTER FIVE

"You mean no one in the guard control room knew there was a problem here until you were offered a guard ring for sale?" said Rachel.

After Tyler had been shot full of antibiotics and pain killers, his leg bone had been properly braced, and she had eaten a synthetic apple plus some of the meat treats Nate had brought along in a package (he had been looking forward to eating them himself) Rachel had cheered up to the point of asking why rescue had taken so long to arrive. They talked while she helped Nate secure a wire grid on the back entrance to the building he had chosen. This involved drilling a series of bolt holes in the concrete – work that had to be done quickly and done outside the building. He had opted for a small building attached to the giant temple, as it had a roof and a giant buttress blocked one side.

"Even when I showed General Isle pictures of the six rings I got from the traders, he argued," said Nate, as he drilled another hole. "He said they were still getting messages. I told him he needed to take another look at the messages. The Major must have set the sat-radio in your carrier to report automatically in case they forgot, and no one was talking directly to them. He also must have locked the carrier."

"I couldn't get in," said Rachel, "and all the phone assistant units were in there. We're only allowed personal calls and text responses at certain times. My mother and boyfriend were going crazy."

Nate was mildly interested that Rachel had a boyfriend, but his overriding problem was to keep everyone alive that night.

"You've reassured them, I hope," said Nate, "and told them not to bother you for the moment, as you still might die."

"Yes, I did, although I left out the dying part. Mum had already been to guard HQ to ask why I wasn't responding, only to be told that everything was okay when it wasn't. Now, she wants to go there again to give them a piece of her mind."

"As she should. Your guys were careless. But maybe your mum should hold off for now."

They walked around to another door in the temple – by then, it was pitch black inside the building, which was a cause for concern. Nate tried not to hurry as he walked. Rachel had already survived a lot without panicking; he did not want to alarm her any more than he had to. However, the Morlocks were out there in the darkness, looking for them; he could feel them, and they were still far from finished setting up for the night.

"Go and connect that rear grid to the generator," Nate told Rachel. "I'll put a grid on the side window."

Nate drilled four holes around the side window and hammered in four fastening bolts in double-quick time – the grids were always fastened on the outside so that they could not be pushed in - then walked around to the front entrance to their little fortress, which they had blocked off by parking the two carriers in a V configuration, leaving just enough room for Nate to squeeze through. He could hear Morlocks down the block, he thought. They did not speak or call out, but made the 'tuk, tuk, tuk' sound when they were just walking around.

He fastened grills on the two front windows while Rachel set up a control station. This consisted of two screens on a fold-out table taken from the patrol carrier, plus two director's chairs. A Morlock appeared suddenly on top of the Guard carrier, hissing, to be shot through the head by Nate and fall off.

"That's done it," muttered Nate. "Now they know we're here."

They carried Tyler in from the patrol carrier where they had left him, on a stretcher. He was drifting in and out of consciousness but considerably more comfortable than he had been.

"Why don't we just get into one of the carriers for the night?" asked Rachel.

"The patrol carrier is our last resort refuge," said Nate, "but the Morlocks have been known to drag carriers to a hole they've dug – they're very strong - and push it in, which is no end of disconcerting if you happen to be in it, or so I'm told. This way, we keep the Morlocks off the carriers, for the most part, while the carriers help keep the Morlocks off us. That said, we have to fasten the carriers to bolts in the ground. Speaking of Morlocks, I see on the thermal scan for the temple-side door that there's one checking out the grill. Can you discourage it?"

Rachel took a spare patrol pistol Nate had given her, as it was better suited for that type of work, walked up to the grill, shone her flashlight through so that he could see the creature, and then shot it in the head.

"It's discouraged," he told Nate.

The Patrol officer thought that the guardswoman had adapted well.

They finished the work and ate dinner, watching the Morlocks mill around outside on monitors built into the carriers.

"We're not going to discourage them with a few bursts from the carrier turrets?" asked Rachel. These were automated turrets, and the guard weapon, in particular, was a large-calibre cannon with rotating barrels that could sweep away whole waves of attacking Morlocks with ease.

"No point," said Nate. "Casualties mean nothing at all to these guys. Think of them as worker ants. If they get onto our roof, then the patrol turret will clean them off with a few shots. If we get really swarmed, then we'll use the guard weapon to relieve the pressure."

"Are we going to get swarmed?"

"Could do. The problem is that you guys were here too long, which attracted a lot of Morlocks to the area, and they were kept here while whoever or whatever controls them waited for the inevitable relief force."

"This Morlock that speaks."

"Guess so," said Nate.

"If we're going to get swarmed, maybe we should do something about the front door."

"Prefer to leave it open so we can easily get to the carriers, but we can set up one of those mini guns we salvaged from the guard's building to spray bullets through the door as a last resort. We'll wanna make sure neither of us is in the way when it starts firing. One for the back door, too."

Then something spoke in Cactuar, in a loud, clear voice.

"Saldi disha. Hiva kaibun utangi gacomen na wenzeku."

Nate got up, strode outside to the space between the carriers and the building, and yelled.

"Ku non tunsabti."

To Rachel, the speech sounded like a collection of hisses and snarls.

"You speak the language?" she said when Nate returned.

"Sure, but not very well. It's not suited to the human mouth and tongue and takes a while to learn."

"What did you say?"

"The creature out there said, 'We are coming, and that we'll soon join our comrades.'"

"Oh my," said Rachel, gasping.

"I said Why are we waiting?"

The guardswoman shrugged. "About the only response we can make."

The humans finished their preparations while the Morlock crowd outside thickened into a dense half-circle about twenty paces from the carrier barricade. A handful of Morlocks who climbed over the buttress to jump on top of the roof were swept away by the patrol carrier's machine gun. The turret housing the machine gun could be elevated almost a metre to get a clear shot in such situations.

"You know, I think we have enough Morlocks in a group to justify a sweep with the Guard's weapon," said Nate. "You do the honours. Just one sweep to warm up proceedings."

Rachel obliged, cutting down the Morlocks they could see. The rest scattered and hid. Then someone or something shouted, and the creatures came on at a run or perhaps at a fast waddle, as their bodies were not designed for running. Rachel had time for two more sweeps, which seemed to do little more than delay the swarm before the Morlocks reached the carriers, shaking them. They tried pulling the vehicles only to find that they were tethered with wires and bolts. They tried pushing them only to find that they were braced by thick rods between the wheels and the wall of the room – rods that were part of each patrol carrier's equipment. They climbed onto the vehicles, only to be shot by the turret guns. Nate stepped out the door to toss grenades over the carriers, where they exploded with a satisfying 'whump,' spreading liquid fire on the Morlocks who had been trying to move the vehicles, making them scream.

That caused a lull in the attacks, which Nate used to clear away the Morlocks who had reached the open side window, using an assault rifle to shoot carefully through the grid to avoid damaging it and, importantly, ensuring that the gun barrel did not come into contact with the powered wires. He did the same for the back entrance, where the Morlocks had somehow managed to get a hook onto the grid protecting it – that was a worry.

"What can I do?" said Tyler. He'd come out of his delirium and realised that they were under attack.

"We need a guard on the back door," said Nate. "Grab one of the chairs, sit there, and shoot anything that tries to get a hook on the grid."

"You got it!"

The second rush, an hour later, was even fiercer.

"There's so many of them," said Rachel.

"Careful of the ammunition for the minigun," said Nate.

A host dropped down on the roof from the buttress in a continuous, rolling crash – Nate was glad that he had checked the strength of the roof – then tried swinging down into the gap between the carriers and the wall. Most were shot by the guard carrier's autocannon. Two were fried by the grid on one window. Nate decided not to turn on the Guard machine gun they had left at the entrance. Instead stepped to the door and shot each Morlock through the head.

This time, the Morlocks in the main rush tried tipping the carriers, only to find that they were too close to each other and to the wall. Then Nate threw a couple more grenades, and the attack petered out.

"Oh man, that was worse than the attack that broke our group," said Tyler. "But we've survived – for now."

"For now," agreed Nate. "I think there'll be at least one more assault and probably two worse than that one, but not for a couple of hours. You up to watching the monitors for a couple of hours?"

Tyler nodded, hobbling over to the table and dragging his chair.

"Rachel, two hours of shut-eye for us. You want the stretcher or the chair?"

"I'll take the chair," she said.

Tyler let them have three hours before reaching over to slap Nate on the leg and then throwing a spent cartridge at Rachel.

"Looks like the Morlocks want to throw another party for us."

"Oh great," said Nate, rolling off the stretcher to look at the displays. "Yep, they're in a big semicircle. Probably more out the back and another lot behind the buttress. The good news is that if we survive this wave, we'll probably last the night."

"Is there bad news?" asked Rachel.

"We might not survive the attack. Everybody to their posts."

They came on in a vast mass of waddling flesh, mouths open in inane grins, tongues hanging out. Rachel cut down a host in two sweeps just as a continuous series of thuds on the roof, muffled by the bodies of the previous wave, indicated the arrival of yet another host. Nate used the patrol carrier autocannon to shred the newcomer Morlocks before they had a chance to swing down, but one got to the open door, where the patrol officer shot it in the head. Its body formed a handy extra obstacle at the door. He was aware of Tyler banging away at the back door and the smell of burning flesh from Morlocks trying to grab the grill.

Rachel swept the incoming wave twice more with the guard carrier's turret gun, heaping up bodies. The Morlocks kept coming, just climbing over their comrades without pausing, mouths still agape. Nate used the patrol autocannon to clear away most of the creatures from the side window, shooting a few of the closest through the grill. He then swept the top of the carriers. Still, they came on, spilling off the top of the carriers into the gap between the door and the carriers. Nate shot these through the head, piling them up so that they blocked the doorway. The humans would have to dig themselves out later.

Then a shout from Tyler brought him to the back door. Somehow, the Morlocks had ripped down the grill – he worked out later they'd managed to get non-conductive hooks attached to ropes around the wires on both sides and then pulled. Nate picked up the Guard

portable mini cannon they had left there and fired. The attacking Morlocks dissolved in a spray of blood and flesh.

"Keep them off me," he told Tyler, then stepped through, disconnected the grill, and wrestled it from under the bodies of several Morlocks.

"Get down," said Tyler. Nate dropped as the guardsman fired.

Nate got up again and dragged the grill into the room.

"Keep 'em busy a little while longer," he said as he grabbed the drill and bolts used for fastening the grills.

Tyler fired again, partially blocking the rear entrance with bodies.

"Single shots now," said Nate, as he put the grill against the back entrance. It would just have to be fastened from the inside.

"How are we going out front, Rachel?"

Bodies blocking everything," said the guardswoman. The guard carriers' minigun chattered again, briefly. "Nothing left alive on top of the carriers. They might have given up."

Nate fastened the grill with four bolts – the strength required to put it down previously must have been incredible. He dragged two Morlock bodies from the front door, stacked them against the bottom of the grill, insulating them against the metal with the stretcher Tyler had been using, and reconnected the generator. A Morlock rushed into the back doorway and fried itself against the grill.

"The stink!" said Tyler, waving his hand in front of his face.

"That should be it," said Nate, "only a few more hours and we can blow town – although we'll have to move bodies to get at the vans. That's going to be a real pain."

CHAPTER SIX

One person impressed by Nate's exploits when the party returned to Rasand City, along with the two carriers and the guard equipment they were able to salvage, was Colonel Griggs. One person who was thoroughly unimpressed was General Isle, who dismissed Rachel from the service. Her crime was not to die along with her comrades. Instead, when the final assault swamped all her comrades, she had jumped on the table, vaulted over the wall, and run for her life, head-shotting any Morlocks that got in the way. Being a survivor was apparently incompatible with the traditions of the Guard.

"That's so unfair," said Nate indignantly when the colonel told him. "She wasn't to blame for the disaster. Major Dante should never have gone out with so little experience of Morlocks and should never have stayed in one spot so long, so far from the city."

"Exactly right," said the Colonel. "She went back and found her comrade…" She paused to look at Nate's report, "Tyler, still alive under a pile of Morlock dead, and kept him alive until you turned up, days late because those idiots didn't properly supervise their patrol. They should be hanging medals on her for at least salvaging something from this debacle, not sacking her. Relying on automated messages, honestly, the general should resign. In fact, that's what the dismissal is all about, diverting blame – that and the Guardswoman's mother turning up at guard HQ and giving the general a piece of her mind."

"I got the impression from Rachel - Guardswoman Crystal," said Nate, "that her mother was a forthright woman, unfortunately for her career."

"You say in your report that both she and this Tyler Green behaved well."

"Like veterans. I was surprised. I'm not sure I would have survived by myself. It was such a huge assault."

"Sounds it," said the Colonel. "With this Morlock that speaks."

"We even had a conversation – just an exchange of a threat and a demand, but whole relationships have started with less, I guess."

Colonel was amused. Nate was the best of her patrol officers and a favourite, thanks to his ability to occasionally make light of the patrol's often deadly work.

"I was thinking of offering her a job as a patrol officer."

"If you can get her, she'd be great, although she might see the patrol as a come down after the guard."

"True," said the colonel, "but she may not have many options. I'm told it's difficult for a cashiered guardsman to get work. I'm sure it's the same for the women."

"If you want anyone to train her, then I'm happy to volunteer."

"I bet," said the colonel. "We don't get many female patrol officers."

"She has a boyfriend."

"Oh yes. Is he also guard?"

"Didn't ask. Isn't your husband a former patrol officer?"

"What happened back then was all above board," said the colonel firmly. "I'm worried about what might happen on my watch, and I don't want romantic subplots on patrol. You will stick with Daniel for the moment. He needs training. And you've got plenty of other work. I want you to go and speak to the head of one of the Senate committees for me."

"Which one?"

"The one that wants to set up a spaceport."

Now that the city was firmly established, after a generation, the humans wanted to reach the mother ship that had brought them from Earth. It was in a stable orbit around the planet, still intercepting transmissions from the very distant home planet and serving as a limited surveillance platform. The colonists also wanted the ability to launch additional satellites, as well as properly receive the next fleet of settlers. For that, they needed a flat, open patch of ground some distance from the city for a launching and landing pad, and the Morlocks were not cooperating.

"Who's head of the committee?"

The colonel flicked through a couple of notes on her desk. One of her eccentricities was to write on paper and leave the notes scattered around her desk.

"Senator Michael Berensina."

It had to be him, Nate thought. Well, it had been a few years. He might not remember their last meeting.

"Make an appointment. Also, the chancellor wants to speak to you."

"She does? You told her I'm still a captain, right?"

"She knows who you are, and she's seen the pictures you and the guards brought back from that ruin and wants to discuss them."

"Me? I don't see how I can add anything to the images she's already seen. I don't know much about art, and even less about religious imagery."

"She does. She studied both of those subjects for a time. Now she wants to see you. Go, see her, make her laugh. Tell her you think General Isle was grossly unfair in his treatment of Guardswoman Crystal. I've already made my feelings clear on the issue, but you were at the site. You can tell her first hand what happened."

"I can certainly do that."

Two days later, Nate found himself in full dress uniform, including long pants and a double-breasted jacket with two stars on each epaulet proclaiming him to be a captain, in a conference room, facing Senator Berensina and three other members of the city's Senate who wanted to build a spaceport somewhere, almost anywhere.

The Senator, a tall, white-haired man with a prominent chin and an air of someone who expected to be obeyed, looked at Nate, puzzled.

"Don't I know you from somewhere, Captain?" he asked.

"I used to work for you, Senator, under Mr Berenson. I was an android technician before I joined the Patrol."

"I see. There's a small android workshop out near the East Gate, in the Cactuar area."

"That's me, senator," said Nate. "Non-urgent repairs on servitor droids in farming or manufacturing. It can be more convenient to deliver units to me for repair when I get back from patrol rather than send them off to the major workshops on the other side of Rasand."

"Humph!" said the Senator. Nate was competing with his giant droid workshops, albeit in such a small way that it was not worth further discussion. "We trained you well, it seemed. Now, about the site for the spaceport?"

Nate debated different sites with the committee for nearly two hours. The senators preferred one site, which Nate and the colonel considered completely unsuitable, as it consisted entirely of deep sand with only soil underneath. They could put pylons into that substructure, but Morlocks could also burrow through soil with ease. In any case, as Nate could tell them from direct experience, the concrete they were hoping to use was not Morlock proof, no matter what the manufacturers claimed.

"You can understand why we're reluctant to accept the advice of patrol officers following last week's disaster," said Senator Berensina during the discussion, grinning unpleasantly. The other senators looked on disapprovingly.

"You mean the guard detachment getting wiped out," said Nate. "What has that to do with us?"

"Well, isn't anything that happens beyond the city the patrol's bailiwick?"

"We'd certainly like to think so," Nate said, "but the guard set up that expedition and pursued it on their own. They ignored all our advice, made several fundamental errors, and paid the price. Guard HQ didn't even know the detachment was in trouble until we found out by chance, and they didn't believe us." Nate told them the story.

"You were at the site?" said one of the other senators.

"That's right. I went there the moment we realised the detachment had been overrun, although the guard never requested our help." Nate was careful not to mention General Isle by name. A mere captain could not criticise a general directly. "You haven't been told any of this?"

The senators shook their heads. As always, Nate was amazed that even experienced operators, as Senators should be, simply accepted whatever story they were told without checking it.

"I'll see if Colonel Griggs can send you my report plus her comments on the incident directly."

Eventually, the committee opted for a partially rocky site with shallow sand on top of soil for the part that was not bedrock. The pillars, base, and sides of the gigantic slab were to be coated in metal with layers of metal bars at different levels. An anti-Morlock wall, fitted with autocannons similar to the one that ringed Rasand, would surround the site, backed by a sophisticated vibration detection system. Nate also recommended shallow saucers of water and told them why.

"The technology failed when you were in that concrete hut, but the dish of water worked?" said another senator.

"Yes, sir. Worked better than the technology," said Nate. "Construction of this spaceport may be very expensive, but at least it won't result in a disaster."

After extracting a concession that the patrol would have some oversight of the plans and construction of the spaceport, Nate was able to grab lunch at the building's public cafeteria before taking an elevator to the very top floor to announce himself to an assistant at a reception desk. A security droid stood behind the assistant; one of three that perpetually patrolled the floor containing the chancellor's office.

While waiting on the chancellor's pleasure, he took in the breathtaking view. As it happened, he was looking East towards his home and the foothills beyond Rasand City's walls, which he often used to move around while on patrol. Far beyond the foothills, at the limit of his vision, was an impressive set of mountains where, Nate knew, a ski resort was being built. The good citizens of Rasand were demanding holiday destinations.

To his right, the South, was a deep ocean that provided much of the food and minerals that the city required. The ocean contained giant sharks and Primeval Killer Whales that could swallow drone submarines whole, but these were easy to track and mostly left human installations alone. The Morlocks were in a different category.

Nate's reverie was broken by the arrival of a stern looking male assistant who led the way to the Chancellor's office. He knocked once, opened the door, and waved the patrol officer through. Nate found himself in a plush office with a view looking South over the ocean, rather than East. At a large desk, to one side, sat the Chancellor, typing away.

Nate was aware that Her Excellency Mackenzie Markovic was an extremely able woman with high approval ratings who could whip the often fractious Senate into line without creating enemies. However, not being one to pay much attention to politics, he was unaware that Her Excellency was still very young for the senior position she held, being in her early thirties or just a few years older than the patrol officer, and was attractive. Her dark hair, cut short, framed an elf-like face, and she had sparkling blue eyes which hinted at a strong sense of humour. In the slang of far-off Earth, the chancellor was "a total babe".

When she saw Nate, the chancellor sat back, crossed her arms, raised one eyebrow, and said, "Oh, okay."

"Your Excellency," said Nate.

"Please sit." She gestured at a chair. She tapped at her keyboard a few more times, then turned to him. "Very well. Now, I want to hear, from the beginning, about your role in this unfortunate business with the guards."

Nate told her, leaving nothing out, and this time not holding back on his opinions about Major Dante and General Isle, although he asked the chancellor that if she chose to repeat those opinions, not to mention his name. "It's all in the patrol report," he said. The chancellor nodded.

"I noted your commendation of Guardswoman Crystal," she said. "I toyed with the idea of commending her publicly if only to annoy General Isle, who has proved to be an all-round pain in the arse. However, I have to bide my time on that. For the moment, what really interests me on a personal level is the site itself. I admired the pictures of the art in that big structure you found. I agree it might be a temple of some kind, but to what god? You didn't put up any drones to map the city?"

"The one drone I had, I dropped down the well where they had thrown the guardsmen the morning after the Morlocks tried to overrun us," Nate said. "Mapping the Morlock underground tunnel network is what we do. Ruined cities are someone else's problem."

Chancellor Markovic smiled. Nate thought it was a charming smile.

"Fair enough, I guess. The general thought you should have gone in after his people when you found that well."

"After several days, thanks to his mishandling of the matter, with night approaching?" said Nate. "He's lucky I found his two survivors. He should be thanking me, as well as commending Guardswoman Crystal, instead of moaning that she survived and I could have done more."

"You are not one to hold back, I see," said Markovic, smiling. "I like that. What about the bodies you left behind? They would stink to high heaven after a couple of days."

"The Morlocks clear them away. I guess they must recycle them into their food vats or whatever they use. Individuals don't mean anything to them."

"Okay, good, and the remaining Morlocks? Will they hang around at the site?"

"Usually, they disperse, spreading through their tunnel network, at least as far as we know," said Nate. "The reason it's a bad idea to stay in one place for any length of time is that they can gather enough numbers to simply swamp any human groups, despite the use of machine guns and even flame throwers. They are very good at ambushing and coordinating attacks from unexpected directions."

"How many days do you think it will take before the Morlocks lose interest in the site?"

Nate shrugged. "Maybe a week."

"Good, because I want you to take me there next week."

This took a moment to sink in.

"What?" he said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Colonel Griggs listened in silence, her chin resting on one hand, elbow on her desk, as Nate protested.

"I told the Chancellor that I'm not a tour guide, and a patrol carrier is not a tour bus," he said. "Above all, the Morlocks are not zoo animals."

"You've taken civilians out before," said the colonel.

"Not for what amounts to sightseeing and to such a dangerous spot."

"It was only dangerous because the Guards stayed too long, and the Morlocks knew we'd come again," the colonel pointed out. "Now the excitement has died down, wait a few days and go to the site by a roundabout route, then just stay overnight. Be your usual charming self to her and this other person she wants to take, a female archaeologist who is a friend of hers."

"What happened to this business about no romantic subplots while on patrol?"

Griggs gestured vaguely. "I wasn't talking about anything physical, and I'm sure the chancellor has more sense than that, although you did impress her." She smiled.

"Right!" snorted Nate. "She's older than me and married to the Senate whip. I don't feel like becoming involved in a political sex scandal with the Morlocks looking on."

Colonels do not giggle. Colonel Grigg chuckled instead. "I'm not about to direct my officers on such matters, but older, experienced women can be interesting for young guys. More seriously, my orders are for you to escort the chancellor and her friend to the site with this huge temple and give them a few hours to inspect the art. The Patrol can ingratiate itself with the executive arm of government and scores one over the Guard. As I've just found out, the reason they were out there in the first place was that the mothership found the place on a scan, and they thought they'd impress the senate and chancellor by establishing a base there."

"Sounds mad," said Nate.

"Then they'd claim jurisdiction over The Patrol."

"Oh…. And achieved a total disaster."

"They found out the hard way that what we do is not simple or easy," said the colonel, "and we avoided a power grab. Now that we've dodged a heap of politics, you have my orders and plenty of other things to do. Go away and do them."

"Yes, ma'am, shall I get started on a petting zoo with the Morlocks?"

The colonel eyed Nate sternly. "You should be careful with such a suggestion," she said. "Someone may take you up on them."

Outside the colonel's office, Nate found Rachel waiting for her turn to see Griggs. She jumped up when she saw him.

"Thanks for standing up for me. The colonel showed me your report. I really appreciated what you said."

"No problem, it was true," said Nate. "The colonel tells me you're joining The Patrol, and a good thing to, we've got lots to do."

"Tyler's also joining The Patrol."

"He is? But General Isle didn't sack him to did he? Is being chewed by a Morlock and left for dead under a pile of them a crime in the Guard?"

"No, no. He was just so mad at the general for sacking me that he quit. Now he's coming over, and we both make lieutenant."

Unlike the guard and the police, the patrol was all officers. There were no other ranks.

"More money. That's Good. Although it's also more risk."

"I figure nothing could be as bad as my encounter with the Morlocks," she said. "So, I'll take the money." Rachel would remember those words.

A few days later, Nate was waiting by the East Gate, leaning on the patrol carrier he used when an official looking black car swept up – a very large sedan which would have fitted in on the streets of Earth – and the chancellor stepped out, followed by a large, severe looking woman, her hair in a ponytail. Both women wore khaki shorts and shirts, tan socks, and boots, with a wide brimmed hat tied on around the chin, all as Nate had requested. Both he and trainee Dan, who was along for this trip, were dressed in the same way, with only a single grey emblem on the left breast pocket to indicate they were in the patrol. Medals and badges of rank were for dress uniforms.

"Ladies," said Nate, as a driver and a bodyguard, both wearing black suits with sunglasses, brought up the bags. "This is Dan." He jerked his thumb at the trainee, who nodded. "Please enter the carrier through the hatch, sit in the rear, and fasten seat belts. Bags are to be stowed in the marked lockers above the seats."

Once they settled in, Nate went through the drill of getting Patrol command to open the East gate. He let Dan drive the carrier out while he made an effort to talk to the passengers.

"Aren't we going the wrong way?" asked the tall woman, whose name was Marta. She had trained as an archaeologist and was delighted to have, for the first time in her career, a major ruin to investigate.

"You mean we're going due East rather than Southeast?" said Nate. "We never drive directly to our destination and don't drive across the Shade, which is between us and the city, unless we can help it. The Morlocks always seem to know when a patrol goes out, and if they can guess where it's going, that means they can concentrate a lot of bodies to swamp it when the carrier stops for the night."

"The guard detachment went straight there and survived two nights," said Marta.

"Beginner's luck is all I can say," said Nate. "And their luck ran out. We're going to the other side of the foothills you can see; camp for the night and then go fast for the city the next day."

"I'd prefer that we go straight to the city and camp there," said Marta.

"And I'd prefer not to end up as Morlock food," Nate said sharply. "If you don't like patrol procedures, Marta, you're welcome to get out and walk."

The chancellor smiled. Later, Nate heard her say to Marta softly, "See, I told you".

At the time, to change the subject, Chancellor Markovic said, "I heard you were once engaged to Senator Berensina's daughter, Gisele."

"Some years ago," said Nate. "I'd hoped that it'd all been forgotten. I met the Senator on the same day I came to see you, and he asked if we'd met before. I told him I'd worked for him as an Android technician, which is true; I did."

"He mentioned you to his wife, and she reminded him. He told me when I happened to see him in a meeting. Said it was regrettable, but you weren't suitable for Gisele."

"The choice was hers, and she chose to end it in front of her parents. I haven't spoken to her since. The worst part of the whole incident was that the Senator offered me money."

Markovic gasped. "Did he? How much did he offer? Am I allowed to ask?"

"A single credit stick with, as I could see from the display, one hundred and fifty credits. Not only was I a family embarrassment, Madam Chancellor, I was a cheap embarrassment."

The humiliation had cut Nate far deeper than he cared to admit. It was one of the reasons he preferred to be on the unfashionable outskirts of Rasand, and he had taken a job that allowed him to escape into the city into the vast horizons and clear skies of the desert, where he could listen to the music of long ago.

"Did you take the money?"

"For that small an amount, chancellor, I could afford to be noble and ignore the offer. I left the senator's company immediately and went to the academy. Now that we have discussed my private matters in excruciating detail, maybe we can talk about some incident from your life you'd prefer to forget. Discarded lovers who did not accept their fate, perhaps?"

"Oh, heaps of those," she said, smiling, "but okay, I didn't mean to drag up bad memories. I was just interested."

Nate nodded and turned away, and they drove on in silence. After a few minutes, he turned on his favourite music playlist, Britpop of the 1960s – an echo of distant Earth. They overtook a Cactuar caravan with their Bhushorots as The Kinks' *You Really Got Me* was playing, and Nate stuck his head up through the carrier's top hatch to exchange a few words with some of the drivers.

"You know the Cactuar language," said Marta.

"Enough to get by," said Nate. "I occasionally buy things at the market by the East Gate, and I don't like to use a translation device."

"Be good if you were fluent. Do you practise?"

"Be good if I were a lot of things, Marta," retorted Nate. "As it is, I'm one of the few who can speak it. Everyone else, including my fellow officers, relies on translation devices."

"Still good if you practise."

"You're very free with advice, Marta. Do you ever take advice yourself, or do you always hand it out?"

"Just saying," said Marta quietly.

Nate did not bother to reply, thinking that he had been charming enough for one day, and they drove on, listening to the Beatles' *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*. The ladies were reluctant to ask the prickly patrol officer about his choice of music, but the chancellor did have one question.

"Why doesn't Patrol fly to where it's going? Why not use the two helicopters we have, or that huge hydrogen balloon thing we have somewhere?"

"The helicopters belong to the guard, not us, chancellor," said Nate. "The airship, as you might know, uses hydrogen for lift, and that makes it unsafe. It's only for emergencies. In any case, we usually have to drag a lot of equipment along with us for resource extraction and stay out nights. For that, we need a mobile fortress, even if we spend most nights in defensible positions outside the fortress."

After a long day of no one saying much and the passengers being allowed out only a couple of times at scenic points on rocky outcrops, they stopped for the night on top of a large expanse of stony ground, which Nate judged to be safe. They sat outside for dinner, using director's chairs and a fold-out table, with the meals heated up on a microwave in the

carrier's tiny kitchen. The chancellor grilled Dan on his life, which was safer than asking Nate anything, to be told that he shared a small apartment in a place called East Village, a few monorail stops away from patrol headquarters. His girlfriend, Belle, worked as an assistant in Rasand CBD.

Having got what information she could from Dan, Markovic decided to try Nate again. "And where do you live, captain?"

"Hard by the Cactuar market, ma'am. The small area between the market and the Red-Light district."

"That's an odd choice," said Markovic. "Not many people live out there. Does your girlfriend like it?"

Marta muttered that it was convenient being so close to the Red-Light district, a comment which Nate ignored. "My girlfriend moved out a couple of months ago because I wouldn't shift to somewhere closer to the business district – that and other matters. Now I just have Oscar. The area isn't for everyone, but I like it.

"Who is Oscar?" asked the chancellor. "Sounds like a dog."

"Oscar is a droid I saved from the scrap heap and restored enough to act as a sort of security droid. I keep him in my workshop downstairs. I'm trying to train him up to be a butler/cook, but it's slow going."

"Is he sentient?"

"No, that would be illegal. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a few reports to make. Enjoy the sunset, ladies. Dan will keep an eye on the scanners. In this open terrain with rocks underneath, the instruments will give us enough warning to get inside the carrier if the Morlocks are feeling restless."

About an hour later, when it was full dark, Dan called Nate to the scanner station.

"Look, sir," he said. "Infrared is picking up Morlocks. A lot of heat coming off the rocks, but see there. Profiles for a small group, one klick out."

"So, there is," said Nate. "Looks to be just three, and they're turned towards us as if watching. Well spotted. Check the rest of the area carefully. I'll be back."

Nate picked up his binoculars, which also had infrared, and walked out past his two passengers.

"Is everything all right?" asked Markovic.

"Checking on unusual activity," Nate said. "You ladies better go in now. Ask Dan to show you what he's found on the scanners."

The binoculars told him little more, except that as he was watching, another Morlock joined the group. He scanned the area. Was that another he saw on a distant ridge? He walked back to the carrier, folded up the table and chairs to stow them in the vehicle, and asked Dan for an update.

"Another group on a ridge a few clicks out," said Dan.

"I saw that group, but there was only the one when I looked."

"What's happening?" Asked Markovic.

"Small groups, and they seem to be just watching us, as if they're scouting. Normally, if there are any around, they either attack or go away. They also usually don't bother with this area. It's why I chose it as a point to change direction."

"Are they going to attack tonight?" asked Marta.

"Doesn't feel like it," said Nate. "If they want to attack, then they need a horde, not a handful. But it's a change in behaviour which I don't like."

"This is different?" asked Markovic.

"Feels like they're checking us out," said Nate, "and not in a good way."

CHAPTER EIGHT

After a night in which Nate and Dan took turns watching the scanner console, but without the Morlocks making any move, they reached the ruined city.

"Look at this, roads to drive on," said Nate, who was at the wheel.

"Where is this temple?" said Marta, coming forward.

"You can just see it in the distance," said Nate, pointing. "Thought the buildings out here must be the suburbs, and the central business district is the temple, if that's what it is, and some other buildings we saw."

"Other buildings?"

"Sure," said Nate. "You'll see in a moment. The building in the report is far and away the most impressive and intact, but the others are worth a look."

"A lot of archaeological work here," said Markovic.

"I can already tell a few things," said Marta. "We didn't see any ruined walls around the site, so whoever built the city didn't fear anyone. The urban planning seems good – a grid layout and roads that are still usable. It's all the product of a sophisticated urban culture. Not sure that we should be driving on the roads."

"No choice," said Nate. "You want quality time in the city centre, then we've got to bring the carrier in."

"Still a shame and… oh my!"

They rounded a corner, allowing the chancellor, Marta, and Dan to see the temple for the first time. Even with the front half a heap of rubble, the building could put any of Earth's medieval cathedrals to shame. It had a roof of white tiles that glinted in the sun and a dome at the intact end that looked as if it had been covered in gold.

"Can we drive up to the front entrance?" asked Markovic. "We want to walk in the front."

"Guess we can, but Dan and I go first."

They parked by the curb as if they were in a street back in Myste City, and the two patrolmen went in first, guns drawn, flashlights out. The passengers followed, carrying more powerful flashlights, and they gasped.

"Frescos all around the walls," said Markovic. "I thought as much."

"Pardon me, chancellor," said Nate, "but what are frescos as opposed to wall paintings?"

"Frescos are painted with water-based pigment while the plaster is still wet so that they become part of the wall. That means they last a lot longer, and no more of that chancellor shit out here. I'm Mack. That's what friends call me."

"Mack?" said Nate. "Shouldn't the short form for your last name be Mark?"

"Yes, it should, but Mack is the shortened version of my first name, Mackenzie."

"In that case, Mack, look up."

The ladies then gasped over the ceiling while Nate and Dan checked out the building. Nate could not see any problem, but he could smell Morlocks. The scent was faint but unmistakable. They had been in the building recently. This added to the patrol officer's sense of unease. Something was not right. For the moment, however, it was still daylight, and they had work to do.

"Ladies, stay in this building and keep where we can see you. Dan, bring the carrier round to that side." He pointed to the right-hand side of the building. I used the side building on the left last time. Let's try the side building on the right if the roof is still solid. And be wary."

"Always wary out here," said Dan, and left.

Nate walked through to the side building, which was identical to the one he had defended the last time and nearly as solid as it had been on the day the builders, whoever they were, finished their work. He and Dan put grills on the windows and set up another ready for the door into the temple – this time, Nate intended to brace it with two steel wire cables fastened to the floor when they walled themselves in for the night. Then, he thought to check on the civilians. He walked into the temple, playing his flashlight around the walls, and realised that he couldn't see the chancellor.

"Marta, where's Mack?"

The archaeologist, who had been absorbed in the statue of the kneeling Morlock, looked up. "She was here a few moments ago."

"Where did you last see her?"

"Just over there by the end of the railing."

"Dan, look around outside. Use the radios to keep in touch."

Nate looked at the end of the railed-off stone platform and realised he had missed an entrance to what might be a chamber underneath the main building – a cellar, or perhaps a crypt. He missed it because the entrance was tucked away at the side of the platform, which did not extend the full length of the back wall and had been covered by some form of panel – wood, perhaps, although they were a long way from any of the planet's trees. The panel had been pushed aside to reveal steps that led down. A distinct odour of Morlock came from it.

Thoroughly alarmed, Nate started down, yelling. "Mack, are you down here?"

She called from somewhere below him. The stairs ended in a corridor that led around to the right for some distance and then opened up into a chamber, where he found the chancellor studying another group of frescos.

"These are even better than the ones in the main building," she said. "I think they're depicting religious tales – the equivalent of parables, perhaps."

"All well and good, Mack," said Nate, glancing at the paintings – even he could see they were spectacular and well preserved – but unless you want to be grounded, don't wander off like that."

"Grounded!" said the chancellor, rounding on him. "You can't ground me!"

"Do something like that again, chancellor, and watch me. I'll chain you to the patrol carrier if I have to. Complain all you like to Colonel Griggs; she's used to complaints about me."

"It won't be a matter of complaints," said Mack, nettled. "I'll insist on a dismissal. I have the power to do that, especially if you're going to chain me to a carrier."

"Fine. Then you can die on someone else's watch. In case you're interested, there's a distinct Morlock smell down here."

"There you go again about Morlocks. This is an obsession…"

Nate heard the distinctive 'Gak, Gak, Gak' moments before they charged. He switched his flashlight to his left hand and drew his pistol, safety off, in a heartbeat. He fired as the first Morlock appeared. It dropped, tongue hanging out.

"Oh shit!" said Mack.

"Behind me, quick. Get to the entrance."

The chancellor did as she was told, and Nate backed up. Two more of the creatures came out of a dark corner of the chamber, which Nate suspected must contain another entrance to the chamber. They vaulted over the first Morlock without even glancing at the body and came on at a fast waddle before Nate also shot them. Were these larger than the Morlocks he had seen to date, or was it his imagination? There were more of the creatures in the chamber, but the humans had a few seconds of breathing room for a favourite tactic of Nate.

"Run," he said, and he and the chancellor ran through the passage and up the stairs into the main temple, where Dan and Marta were waiting, open-mouthed.

"Dan, finish setting up," said Nate, stopping at the top of the stairs. "I just have to clog this stairway with bodies, and I'll be along. Mack, Marta, you have another few minutes to look at this place, and then I'll insist you come into the room we've set up. It's close to dark, anyway."

Both ladies nodded.

"And Mack, what were you saying before about my obsession with Morlocks?"

"Oh, don't be tedious," she said and turned away.

Unlike all of Nate's previous encounters with Morlocks, the creatures did not blindly charge humans they knew were there. Instead, they milled around in the lower chamber for a time, at least to judge from the 'Gak, Gak, Gak' sounds, then came in a rush. Not that it made much difference. Nate waited until the leading Morlocks were almost at the top of the stairs and then shot them, effectively blocking the others – that is, until they started pushing. Nate waited until the pile of bodies he had created started moving, then carefully dropped two burn grenades through the gaps in the bodies. That action was rewarded with two distinct 'Whumps!' screams and the smell of roast Morlock flesh.

With the danger from the temple art room contained and no other Morlock in sight, Nate relented on his curfew enough to allow Marta to release a drone outside the temple, as they had taken to calling it, to map the city. The survey would include ground penetrating radar scans.

"Tell the AI for that thing that once it's finished or is running low on fuel or whatever, to see if it can land on top of the temple for the night," said Nate. "The Morlocks won't bother it up there."

"I think I saw a wall that might be part of an observation area on the street side of the dome," said Marta, "or maybe it's a place for the priests to go for a ritual. Morlocks might be able to get up there."

"Really?" said Nate. "I didn't see any stairs going up, but then I guess I didn't see the entrance by that raised section. Well, find a perch high up somewhere and tuck it in for the night."

Another drone was released inside the temple to make detailed scans of the building, and the small party was finished for the night.

They ate dinner with Mack glaring at Nate, who ignored her until she gave up, frowning. After dinner, Dan watched security screens, including infrared views of the city and temple they had set up, while Marta reviewed the early scans of the city.

"Am I still grounded?" asked Mack of Nate as they sat at the table.

"I never actually grounded you," said Nate, amused. "I said that if you wandered off like that again without telling anyone, then I'd ground you. I have chains. Maybe to make a point, if I have to use them, I should drag you behind the carrier when we go back to Rasand."

"Monster," she said softly and smiled. "But I want to go back to that underground chamber. It's the most interesting part of the temple complex."

"Tomorrow. If the Morlocks follow their usual practice of taking the bodies away," said Nate, "I'll go with you, and I'll go first. I'll also stay with you the whole time, so no more than a couple of hours."

"There must be another way into that chamber. The Morlocks got in."

"That's true," said Nate, "but we'd have to wander around underground to find it, and the Morlocks might find us first. Pass."

"Sir, look at this," said Dan from the scanner control table they had set up. "Heat signatures here and here." He pointed at the screen. "And more are coming."

"How did they find us so quickly?" asked Nate. "Did we crash a convention of these creatures or something?"

All Dan could do was shrug. "Are they going to attack?"

"They seem to be building up. They're going to attack when they have the numbers like they always do."

Nate heard a voice outside. The same menacing voice he had heard on his first visit to the city, speaking in Cactuar. Dan, Mack, and Marta looked up in alarm.

"Dman akinisi kibitza." (Patrol, heed me.) said the voice.

"Quick, Dan, visual and ultraviolet sweep," whispered Nate. Then he yelled, in Cactuar, "We're still waiting, Morlock."

"You'll have to wait a little longer," said the voice. "Then you are food."

"Tell us what we're waiting for, then we'll know where to point our guns," yelled Nate.

There was no reply, and the Morlocks did not attack that night.

CHAPTER NINE

The colonel was amused. "You threatened to ground the chancellor?" she asked. "And drag her behind the carrier in chains?"

Nate's small party had returned to Rasand City, pulling up stakes about lunchtime after the first night, giving the two civilians a few more precious hours to inspect the temple and underground chamber but enough time before dark to get far away to a rocky outcrop the Morlocks had not been able to stake out. They reached Rasand the next day.

There was a great deal to talk about as a result of the visit to the ruined city, but the colonel was most interested in Nate's attempts to rein in Mack.

"Sure," said Nate. "She wandered off underground without telling anyone. I should have threatened to spank her."

The colonel gasped, then chuckled. "For star's sake, don't say that to anyone but me."

"I never would," said Nate. "I may have an entirely undeserved reputation for grumpy eccentricity, but I'm not crazy."

"Not sure it's undeserved," said the colonel. "But as it is, despite being threatened with grounding and a dragging, which she mentioned in a note to me, Markovic gave you and trainee Whyatt top marks."

"Saving her from a Morlock attack just as we were arguing about my obsession with the creatures helped, I guess."

"She was telling you off just as they attacked?"

"Sure. Then, when we got back to the temple, just before they tried to rush the stairs, I asked her what she was saying before about my obsession with Morlocks. She told me not to be tedious."

This time, the colonel laughed outright, slapping the table in delight. "Sounds like an interesting trip. You and this Marta person, whom I've never met, also clashed."

"We had our moments," said Nate. "She tried advising me on how to learn Cactuar."

"Although you're one of the few people in the city who speaks it," said the colonel. "Anyway, despite your lack of finesse, tact, diplomacy, and a few other things, we're in the good graces of the executive arm of government and will be left alone, for the moment at least. The chancellor wants to go again, but political issues will prevent her from going for a few weeks."

Nate did not follow politics much, but he was aware of factions in the senate, one of which was led by the chancellor's husband, causing trouble. He thought that the situation might make for tense moments at the Chancellor's dinner table, but it was no business of his.

Aloud, he said, "I'm still not a tour guide. We'll be stretched as it is protecting the workers on the launching pad site."

"You are what I say you are, captain," said the colonel, firmly. "And she says she'll only go with you."

"Me?" exclaimed Jake. "I thought she would have had her fill of me and wanted someone more congenial."

"She did not get as far as she has while still so young, by not listening to those who know what they are talking about. Next time, try to be nicer, and spanking is out. Anyway, you might enjoy that."

"She does have a trim figure. I couldn't help but notice – I'm a guy."

Colonel Griggs eyed her subordinate sternly. "Like I said, no spanking and more diplomacy. We'll go over the patrol schedule in a moment, which looks much better. Suddenly, it seems that it's almost fashionable for lower ranks in the guard to transfer to the patrol and become officers. We've picked up another three, and they're way more useful straight out of the gate than fresh academy graduates. Also, most of the machines at the spaceport site will be automated or remotely controlled, which makes the protection job easier. For now, I want you and Dan to take a day or two to check out the data you gathered."

Before leaving the ruined city, Nate had investigated the second entrance to the underground chamber and launched a drone to map what proved to be a maze of connecting tunnels. The tunnels had not been dug by Morlocks. The tunnels they dug were round and lined with a hard material, the same colour as the desert above. The passages below the city were rectangular and lined with square cut, black stones. A check of the geology indicated that they might have been taken from a quarry hundreds of kilometres away. Another drone dropped into one of the wells that Nate had found on the previous visit had mapped more of the tunnels before Morlocks killed it.

"I've had a quick look at the infrared scans," he said. "That Morlock is not just big; he or she is enormous. At least three or four times bigger than an ordinary one, and wears clothes."

"Clothes?"

"Looks to have a sheet wrapped around him-her in the scans."

"Maybe it's the queen, or one of the queens, we've often thought must be behind the Morlocks. Just in case, one way or another, we refer to this creature as she."

"The deadly threat is a female, gotit," said Nate.

"Unless otherwise ordered," said the Colonel, "And she seems to be associated with that site."

"Maybe the breeding chambers we've been looking for are close by?"

"Maybe," said the colonel. "The Morlocks that surrounded your refugee that night looked larger than normal. Breeding chamber guards, maybe."

"They didn't attack beyond testing our defences a few times because the queen wanted to preserve her guard?"

The colonel nodded. "Again, maybe. Coordinate with this Marta person, if she's still talking to you, to see what she's been able to work out. For now, get out of my office and find me answers to mysteries."

Later that day, Nate attended a meeting on scheduling protection for the few humans who would be on the space launching pad site and, through no fault of his own, ended up sitting opposite Captain Jason Boulcott. This officer was a balding, florid man who seemed

about to burst out of his uniform. Boulcott knew what he was doing on patrol, or so Nate understood, but off patrol he was a hail-fellow-well-met guy always looking for a joke. Nate thought of him as a buffoon but never said so to anybody. Despite what the colonel said, Nate could be tactful when he had to be. Boulcott seemed amused by something.

"Well, how much, hey? Hey?" He said, grinning at what was apparently some huge joke.

"How much what?" said Nate.

"You know - how much? Heh, heh!"

"No, I don't know," said Nate, exasperated. "Either tell me or shut up."

"Senator Berensina gave you money to end an engagement with his daughter," Boulcott said.

"He most certainly did not," said Nate, alarmed at this distortion of events and that the rest of the table, six officers counting the colonel, were listening closely. "This was years ago. His daughter broke off our engagement, at the urging of her parents, who considered me unsuitable, and then the senator offered me a small amount in compensation."

"How much?" asked the colonel.

"Just one hundred and fifty credits, ma'am, which I ignored," Nate said. "I was a cheap embarrassment." The table laughed. "Now, maybe we can discuss sensitive incidents from Captain Boulcott's life? Brides he's left at the altar, perhaps?"

Boulcott's ever present, annoying smile faded somewhat, and he waved to indicate that he had finished, and the meeting got underway.

Later, the colonel said, "I thought you seemed reluctant to deal with Berensina. You had history with him."

"He knew he'd seen me before, but didn't remember the circumstances. I just told him I used to work for him, which I did as an Android technician.

"That's how you met his daughter?"

"It seems his wife reminded him of the incident, and he mentioned it to the chancellor, who insisted on discussing it on the trip. Dan must have mentioned it to someone. I never thought to tell him not to."

"Poor lamb," said the colonel. "Well, no use crying over spilled engagements or something. This was one of your clashes with Markovic?"

"Yep. Why do women insist on discussing this stuff? Why can't they talk about sports? I don't even know what football team the chancellor supports, and that's important."

"Talk about senators buying off their daughters' fiancés is way more interesting than football results," said the colonel. "Anyway, you could get some sympathy from the next woman you persuade to go on a date if you tell her that story."

"I'd prefer to forget. Maybe I could just look soulful."

The colonel looked quizzically at him for a moment. "Better to tell the story," she said.

Rasand's females were not yet done with Nate, not by a long stretch. The next day, as he waded through the computer generated maps of the ruined city and its underground tunnels, he was called to reception to be confronted by a female vision. She had a carefully tended mane of golden hair which fell down her back, high cheek bones, and a mouth that always seemed to be smiling, revealing pearly white teeth. A simple black dress clung to a perfect figure. Her perpetual smile broadened when she saw Nate.

"And you are Captain Nathan Olsen," she said before Nate could introduce himself. "Mack said you looked much nicer in dress uniform."

"Just the plain, grey uniform while on the job," said Nate, stunned by this vision. "And you know Mack, ma'am?"

"Olivia, please," she said, standing up and extending a hand for Nate to grasp in a token handshake while the elderly female receptionist looked on with considerable interest. Nate thought he had seen Olivia somewhere before, but for the moment, he could not remember where. "Is there somewhere we can talk? Mack said you might be able to help me."

"The small conference room," said Nate. "This way."

Halfway down the corridor, just before they got to the conference room, Nate remembered where he had seen his guest before.

"I saw your act with the giant cocktail glass at The Globe, Ms… I mean, Olivia. Most interesting if you don't mind me saying so." The Globe was a top club in the red-light district, renowned for its salacious acts.

Olivia giggled. "That act appeals to guys."

Nate parked his guest in the conference room, then excused himself and went looking for a chaperone. He found ex-guardswoman Rachel Crystal wrestling with some forms on a screen.

"Rachel, I need a chaperone – a woman, and you're a woman. Yes, I can see you are."

"Well spotted, captain," said Rachel, surprised. "And I'm a little young to be a chaperone."

"Grab a portable terminal and come with me. It should just take a few minutes."

He led the way to the conference room, where Rachel saw immediately why she was wanted. Olivia also understood why Rachel had been called into the meeting and accepted this with a smile. It went with the territory.

"What can we do for you, Olivia, um, Wessen, I seem to recall?" said Nate. "Is that a stage name?"

"Bessel, captain, and that is my real name. I'm here because a friend of mine has been taken by the police, and they won't tell me what has happened to him."

"Olivia, isn't this a matter for the police or perhaps a lawyer? Why come to us?"

"The problem is that both he and I are synths. We don't have the same rights as a bio, and I need to know what's happened to him before I decide what to do."

"Pardon me, Olivia, do about what?"

"The police are offering me certain choices in exchange for the return of my friend."

Rachel and Nate exchanged glances. Nate decided that he would not ask for more information about the "choices" Olivia was being offered. Information could be dangerous.

"Um, Olivia, have you thought of reporting the matter to the police professional integrity unit?"

"They told me they would know immediately if I had gone there, and my friend would be in trouble."

"Has your friend been charged with anything?"

Olivia spread her hands. A very human gesture. "I just don't know. I haven't been told anything, and Mack said that Patrol Command can access police databases. She also said to ask for you."

"Well, yes," said Nate. "The databases are shared across the three commands – police, guard, and patrol – although the only time we go outside our own system is to check on new applicants. If you know Mack, why didn't you just get her to tell the cops to release your friend? They'll lose interest very quickly if they realise you talk to her."

"Who's Mack?" asked Rachel.

"The Chancellor," said Nate. "Friends call her Mack."

"Oh my," said Rachel.

"I told them, and they just laughed at me," said Olivia. "They didn't believe me. Mac said she could call the commissioner and ask for a briefing, but she did not want to be seen to interfere just yet. There's too much going on."

"Fighting on all fronts as I understand the news feeds," said Nate. "Tell you what, it won't hurt to check the police system for your friend. Officer Crystal, can you hand over the unit, and I'll sign on. Olivia, what's your friend's name?"

"Jason Drake," she said. "He is also well known in his field, although Officer Crystal is more likely to have heard of him."

"I think I have," said Rachel, her cheeks showing a touch of pink.

"Olivia has an interesting act with a giant cocktail glass."

"I knew that. I also saw the act with my boyfriend," said Rachel. "Fine burlesque, Ms Bessel."

"Olivia, please," said the synth, smiling.

"This is the guy?" Nate asked Rachel as a picture appeared on the screen.

"Yep, that's him," said Rachel.

Olivia started to get up to look at the screen, but Nate waved her off.

"Best not to let civilians look at the police records, Olivia. The good news is that your friend is unharmed and has not been charged with anything. He seems to have been classified as a potential risk to public safety."

"That's nonsense," said Olivia, firmly. "Jason's never harmed anyone."

"They don't have to show that initially, as far as a synthetic is concerned," said Nate. "I trained as a droid technician." (Synthetics were meant to look like humans, while droids were meant to do the hard jobs that humans did not want to do. Much of the technology used and the law that applied to them was common to both.)

"Mack also mentioned that," said Olivia. "She also said you could be grumpy but were really very sweet."

Rachel gasped and then giggled. "When do we see the very sweet side? What happened between you and the chancellor, anyway?"

"I let her go back to an underground chamber where we were ambushed by Morlocks and stood guard while she took pictures of wall art. Maybe you'd like to concentrate on the matter at hand, Patrol Officer Crystal."

"I am concentrating on it," said Rachel, "and I can see that the box asking for a judicial review on this file hasn't been checked."

"So, it hasn't," said Nate. "And the one which requests a lawyer. That should be checked every time."

"Nothing in the comments," said Rachel. "They don't say why this synth has been detained."

"Check the boxes and see what happens," said Nate. "Look at that, gone for review, and now it's asking for a contact name and number of the closest concerned party, which also hasn't been entered in the system. Rachel, can you take Olivia's number and put it in the system?" He got up. "Olivia, I'll leave you with Rachel to finish up. She will show you out. Let's see what happens. Here is one of my cards. Call me if there are any more problems, and I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you," said Olivia, accepting the card. "Mack was right about you-you're sweet."

"Ha!" said Rachel.

"It's really all about getting Mack off my back," said Nate, and he left thinking that the problem had been solved with relatively little effort. Of course, it would not be that simple.

CHAPTER TEN

Two days after his conference with the glamorous Olivia, the chancellor called Nate.

"You were going to threaten me with a spanking?" she said the moment Nate picked up. It was the end of a long, hard day for her. She had kicked off her shoes, turned sideways in her elaborate director's chair so that her legs hung over one arm, and was in the mood for a little, harmless flirting before heading home.

"What I told the colonel was that you were lucky I didn't threaten you with a spanking," said Nate, evenly. "You had been very naughty."

"Would the purpose of this spanking be to chastise me, or would there have been another motive?"

"The main purpose would have been to chastise," said Nate, diplomatically, "but there is no denying that I would have found the process interesting in other respects."

"Ha! I bet, mister," said the chancellor.

"You have a trim figure, I could not help noticing, but that is not my fault. Naughty chancellors have to be disciplined."

"I'll have you know, Patrol Captain Olsen, that dealing with me violently, and that includes a spanking, is an act of treason." Despite Mack's sharp tone, she was delighted with the "trim figure" remark. She had worked hard on that figure, and finally, someone of interest had noticed. Her husband had not.

"Unfortunately, the colonel has firmly ruled out spanking as a means of enforcing discipline," said Nate, who well knew that Mack was playing. The colonel, of course, had told the chancellor about his remark.

"So, I should think," said Mack, "and you'll find that I'm not that easy to spank. Anyway, where are you? The patrol schedules only say that you're travelling solo on an oil convoy."

"Northwest of the city, about three hundred klicks," said Nate. "I'm shepherding a lot of drilling equipment to one of the sites we use for extracting oil." He was sitting in the cabin of his patrol carrier as he spoke, watching the various displays, including the all-important ground penetrating radar, which would detect empty spaces in the ground ahead – a sure indication of a Morlock tunnel and a possible ambush site. The carrier and the drilling rigs following the carrier were being driven by AI.

"By yourself?"

"Dan is off with another convoy as it's thought he could learn more from that trip, and I don't really need another person for this task. Everything is automated. I just hang around in case the Morlocks, if you recall my obsession… "

"Ha!" said the chancellor, but she said it quietly.

"… decide to try something. Anyway, there's no one to complain about my choice of music."

"Sixties Britpop, as I remember. You're a weird dude, Captain."

"Women have told me that a few times over the years, and maybe there's some truth in it. But when I'm alone, I often listen to Gregorian Chants. You know what they are?"

"I do, and that's even weirder, captain."

"Speaking of weird stuff, I had a visit from a synthetic who said she was a friend of yours."

"Olivia is a friend of mine, and you and that guardswoman you brought in as a chaperone, as Olivia described it, helped her a lot. Her friend was released the next day."

"There was nothing in the file about why he had been detained," said Nate. "No explanation of any kind. We ticked the box that said judicial review, and the system did the

rest. Olivia mentioned the police involved were offering her a deal in return for the release of her boyfriend. I didn't ask for details."

"She told me the details, and I was horrified," said Mack. "There's corruption in my police, and I just don't have the time or political bandwidth to deal with the issue at the moment. I'll get to those officers, but even when I do, I may have to tread carefully. Maybe I'll force them out, and they can go and sell real estate or something. In the meantime, thank you for helping out."

"No problems. There's good money in selling real estate, I'm told. Is that what I'll end up doing if I spank you for being naughty?"

"Maybe," said Mack, unable to keep a slight giggle out of her voice.

"How do you know Olivia, anyway? I thought you two would have very different paths."

"Never you mind," said Mack, firmly. "I didn't grow up with a teacher mother and a public servant father like you. It was hard scrabble for me."

Nate was taken aback. "You looked at my file?"

"I glanced at it. I have to know whose hands I'm placing my life in if I'm going into dangerous places. A number of commendations, and the only black mark I could see was a reprimand about a safety violation in your dorm at the academy."

"I levered toast out of a toaster with a knife," said Nate, "and one of the other candidates reported me."

"What's wrong with using a knife to get toast out? I do it all the time." Humans may travel between the stars, but toast remained a breakfast staple.

"Technically, you're not supposed to, as the knife may touch one of the elements, so one of my room mates informed on me. I was bothered about it so often after that by senior officers with little else to do that I got rid of the toaster and just had biscuits instead."

This time, Mack did not try to suppress a giggle. Like colonels, chancellors are not supposed to giggle, but Mack did when she thought it was safe to do so.

"And someone thought this important enough to report to your superiors?" she asked.

"That guy was always informing on cadets, often on tiny matters, and was surprised when some of them got him into a storage room and started beating the crap out of him. I had to rescue him."

"Noble of you," said Mack.

"Noble nothing. I was sick of being bothered about a toaster; I didn't want to be involved in an incident that might actually matter, like my roomie ending up in the hospital or worse. The hardest part was in persuading him not to report the beating. He kept on saying it was his duty to report all infractions, no matter how small. I pointed out to him that his grim outlook on life had earned him the beating in the first place, so maybe it was best to stick to things that mattered."

"Sounds like we could use him in the police."

"He is in the police," said Nate. "Jimmy – and I'm one of the few people who call him that – is in the professional integrity unit and doing well, I understand. If we'd been unable to help Olivia, I might have referred her to Jimmy and gotten you to send one of your assistants to have a quiet word, particularly about how far to take the matter."

"Hmmm, might have worked," said Mack. "It seems you are full of suggestions, Captain Olsen. However, you won't be able to suggest any unusual punishments as threats against my delicate person for some time. I want to go back to the site, as does Marta, but I can't just now."

"The senate is being difficult, I understand," said Nate.

"The senate is a right, royal collection of pains," said Mack, with considerable feeling. "But don't get me started on them. I understand you have been working on a three-D model of the city."

"We've added Marta's stuff to what we've been able to find out about the tunnels. She guessed at the likely heights of some of the buildings, and we've guessed at some of the tunnel intersections. We, or really, she, has also been able to recreate what that temple must have looked like in its prime because half of it is still intact, but the model needs a lot more work with more data."

"Has that watching post you set up survived?" asked Mack. A post with cameras and a drone had been set up on the temple tower, with solar panels arranged so that they were not visible from street level.

"Yep, the Morlocks still haven't realised it's there, although they seem to walk around the city a lot at night. We think their breeding ground might be close by."

"Really," said the chancellor. "I want you to come and brief me about all of this, and present the model next week, when things are quieter. One of my assistants will call to make a time."

"Is that when I get to spank you?"

"No, it is not, Captain Olsen," she said, trying unsuccessfully not to giggle. "You are to behave according to the rules concerning gender interaction in workplace situations."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Is Marta to be there too?"

"Like you, she can also be a difficult study, but less controllable," said Mack. "Just you, and you are to behave yourself."

"Shame," said Nate.

Although Nate could not see it, the chancellor smiled.

After Mack hung up, the City Management System, or CIMS, which she referred to as Cindy, spoke to her.

"You seem to like that Patrol Captain. I've never known you to flirt before."

Cindy occupied a position analogous to that of an English Monarch or a governor general of a British dominion in that it called elections, either after a set period or when the majority leader in the senate applied to it and was able to give a good reason to hold an election. The chancellor, who headed the executive side of government, was chosen by Cindy, but the choice had to be ratified by the senate. Apart from her considerable ability, Mack got the job because she treated Cindy like another human. The AI government system liked being treated as if she was a human.

"Yes, I like Captain Olsen," said Mack, straightening up in her chair and putting her shoes back on, "he may be a pain at times, but he is an entertaining pain, and it is nothing more than that, as you well know. I am married. How come you're listening to my conversations, anyway? You have a city to manage."

"The mental and physical health and romantic inclinations of the chancellor are of particular interest to me," said Cindy. "It's part of my Prime Directive Matrix."

"Really! My romantic inclinations! I've never heard of this part of your prime directives before."

"You were already happily married when I selected you as chancellor," said Cindy. "But I have noticed a cooling in your relationship with your husband, and now Captain Olsen has come into your life."

"Captain Olsen has not come into my life, as you put it. He will show me this computer model they've been building of the ruined city. I want to understand the context in which the art in that underground chamber was produced. Anyway, what do you know of flirting?"

"Observing people is part of the job," said Cindy. "You'd be surprised at what goes on even in the chancellor's office."

"Don't tell me!" said Mack, sharply. "I have enough troubles already. I only need to know when and if it affects the functions of the office."

"Of course," said Cindy. "I merely mentioned it. You'll be seeing Captain Olsen in a few days?"

"So, he can show me the model he and Marta have been building."

"I understand," said Cindy in a carefully neutral tone.

The day after he returned from his lengthy and uneventful resource gathering patrol, Nate was called to the boardroom, where he found two men in suits, one with his feet on the table, and an apprehensive-looking Patrol Officer Rachel Crystal.

"Captain Olsen?" said the man with his feet on the table. He was a thug with a shaved head and shoulders of a boxer who had been cleaned up and stuffed into a suit. "Sit down! We want to talk to you."

"Get your feet off the table," snapped Nate. "Who are you two?"

"Detective Senior Constable Brian Orchard," said the thug, indicating himself, but without moving his feet, "and Detective Constable Geoff Barnea". The second detective was a lean man with a nasty leer.

Nate grabbed the conference table and jerked it so that Orchard's feet fell on the floor. Then he tipped the table so that the recording units of both detectives, which they had placed on the table, fell off. He walked in front of the table and pulled it behind him until he was right up close to the two detectives, then sat on it, towering over them. Taken aback, the two men glowered up at him.

"Those names are familiar to me," said Nate. "Officer Crystal, wasn't there an Orchard and a Barnea on the arrest report we looked at for that synthetic Drake?"

"That's right," said Rachel.

"That's what we've come to talk about," said Orchard. "Now sit down and tell us why you're looking at police matters."

"I am sitting down, senior," said Nate. "And that arrest record was sloppily done. There was no request for a judicial review or a lawyer."

"Where do you get off correcting our arrest forms?" demanded Orchard.

"When the synthetic Olivia Bessel said she knew the chancellor, you laughed at her," said Nate, ignoring the question.

"That's right," said Barnea. "We're told all sorts of crap."

"Well, the joke's on you," said Nate. "She does know the chancellor."

"What bullshit," said Orchard. "That's just what she told you."

"No, it's what the chancellor told me."

Nate noted, with joy, that the sneering, disdainful expressions of both men transformed into a mixture of bewilderment and apprehension.

"How come you were speaking to the chancellor?" snapped Orchard.

"She called me because she wanted to see a computer model that both myself and an academic friend of hers have been constructing of a ruined city, the patrol escorted her out to. Doesn't sound as if you gentlemen pay much attention to the news feeds."

They both shook their heads.

"I would advise you strongly to catch up. The chancellor did say that Olivia had told her the details of a deal you had proposed."

"Shit," said Orchard. "How come the chancellor is friends with a Synth who gets naked in a cocktail glass?"

"I was also curious about that, but when I asked, I was told to mind my own business. Gentlemen, the deal you proposed to Ms Bessel is not our problem. But the chancellor said she would get to the matter when she could. My suggestion is that rather than waste time trying to strong-arm us, you both would be better off working out how to save your careers, or at least how to stay out of jail. Now get out, both of you."

"This isn't over," said Orchard as the men stood up and retrieved their recording units from the floor.

"No, it isn't," said Nate. "The chancellor still has to get involved."

Later, Nate wondered if he had heard and seen the last of the two detectives. He certainly hoped so.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next day, Nate, in his best patrol uniform, was ushered into the chancellor's cabinet room. Besides the polished faux-cedar table, there were prints of famous scenes of Earth around the walls, an old-fashioned astrolabe as a reminder of the human enclave's long trip through space on a side table, and two ornamental vases on a sideboard made of the same material as the table. The place was deserted, and Nate noted that it had no windows or cameras. It was a place where people could speak their minds on major matters in confidence.

Nate plugged in the unit he had brought, with its prepared digital material. It lit up the table with a holographic three-D model of the city. One of the Chancellor's assistants had told him about the available technology, and Nate had to admit that it looked impressive.

After a few minutes, the chancellor came in dressed in casual slacks which clung to her figure, sneakers, and a white shirt to exclaim, in a girlish way, over the model.

"The temple/cathedral place would have been impressive in its day," she said, walking around the model.

"You're wearing pants," said Nate.

"We're confronted by a sketch of the extensive layout of a city belonging to a previously unsuspected, advanced civilisation, Captain, and you comment on what I'm wearing?"

"I'm a guy. What you're wearing is more interesting than a previously unsuspected civilisation."

"Keep your mind on what's in front of you, Captain Olsen!"

"Yes, ma'am. Anyway, Marta now thinks that the temple is a place of worship as we first suspected, and that the place with the good wall art where we were ambushed…"

Standing so that her hips were at the edge of the table, the chancellor leant forward.

"In there," she said, pointing at the chamber under the temple.

She did not look at Nate and appeared intent on the model, but the patrol officer thought that the move was a calculated one. Being the shallow male that he was, he admired the effect.

"… is linked to this major underground space here." Nate decided that there would be no objection if he moved closer and stood next to her. She acknowledged his presence with a slight smile but did not move. "Her analysis suggests that the underground chamber was a holy of holies where priests prepared themselves for whatever ceremonies were performed in the temple."

"Then what is the big underground space?" she said, leaning forward a little further and pointing.

"Marta doesn't know what it was used for when the city was functioning, but I think it's now used for breeding Morlocks."

"Really?" she said, half turning towards him before turning back to the model. "How do you know that?"

"There always seem to be Morlocks on the site, which is unusual. We've never known them to stay in one spot in any numbers, unless they're planning an ambush, and then we don't see them until the trap is sprung. Also, the Morlocks that seem to be garrisoning the site are larger than the ones we usually deal with, meaning that they may be part of a guard or elite. We've been looking for the breeding chambers for decades, and this is the closest we've come."

"Can you say anything about these breeding chambers themselves?"

"Nope," said Nate. "The Morlock Guards, as we've now taken to calling them, knock down any probes we send before they can get a look inside that big space. That means we haven't got any direct evidence. We're just playing a hunch, but it's not a bad hunch. We need to smash our way in there by force, and for that, we'll need the guard, which presents problems."

"They don't play well with others, I've noticed," said Mack. "But before we make a thing of it, we need to go back to the site and gather more data. Marta has been talking about detailed geophysical surveys before undertaking digs."

"We won't have time for much when we get there," said Nate, "but this other section might have been part of a palace complex." When he pointed to the suspected palace area, a block down from the temple, Nate leaned across so that he was half turned to Mack and put his hand on her waist, almost as if to steady himself. Humans may have crossed the depths of space and be hundreds of light years from their home planet, but they remained human.

The chancellor looked briefly at Nate's hand but did not move away, ask him to remove his hand, or summon the security droids just outside the room.

Instead, she said, quietly, "And what makes you think that part of the ruin was once a palace, Captain Olsen?"

"Actually, Marta thinks that," said Nate, letting his hand drift a little lower and pointing at a large room in the display. "This may have been a throne room or a function room of some kind."

By that time, he was half turned towards her, and she turned towards him to say, "Really?" and he kissed her. She permitted a few seconds of lips connecting and even a brief movement of his tongue before putting a hand on his chest and pushing him away.

"Down, boy," she said, smiling.

"You can't blame me for trying," he said, standing up and releasing her waist.

"No, I don't blame you for trying," she said. "But let's get on with the briefing without the byplay."

They talked for a while about what parts of the ruined city might have performed which functions, and what the art in the underground chamber might represent. Mack thought that they represented stories from the religion of the city's occupants.

"The Cactuar haven't got any religion that I've ever been able to work out," said Nate. "But they do have a set of sacred nightmares, I suppose, inspired by their terror of Morlocks."

"Have these nightmares been written down anywhere?" asked Mack, arms folded and back to the model, her trim bottom resting on the edge of the table.

"They've been published academically, but they're not exactly gripping reading. Incoherent, turgid, and maybe frightening is the best way to describe them."

"I'd like to look at them, if I can," she said.

"I'll send you the copy I have somewhere, plus the academic's name," said Nate. "He's an old misery that guy, but he knows something about Cactuar myths."

She smiled. "I'd like that. Send it to my assistant."

When Mack said she had to go, they walked towards the door, and she turned towards him, her arms at her sides. He kissed her again. This time, she permitted Nate's tongue to linger a little longer before pushing him away."

"Married," she said. "Nothing can happen, not even when we go away again. I'm not a girl for affairs."

"Shame," said Nate. He was surprised at himself that he had tried anything at all. Apart from admiring the chancellor's figure, he had not considered himself interested in Mack or thought that Mack might be interested in him. But perhaps all the talk about spanking piqued his interest. He did not know. On her side, she had not slapped him or had her security droids throw him out, which she could easily have done. That was almost encouraging. Also, she had permitted, almost invited, a second encounter, only to now shut him out.

"You need a girlfriend, Captain," she said. "Then we both wouldn't be tempted."

"I agree," he said. "Can you suggest anyone willing to put up with, what was the phrase you used…. 'a difficult study'?"

"It is a hard sell," she said, smiling. "What about that trainee you used as a chaperone when Olivia came to you? Olivia said she was cute."

"That's the same guardswoman I found when I got to the site the first time. Colonel Griggs offered her a job when she was tossed out of the guard, but she has a boyfriend and they're pretty tight, I understand."

"Looks like you're going to have to use the dating sites, Captain. Time to get back out there."

Nate sighed. "Yes, ma'am."

The chancellor giggled a little, then opened the door and said, loudly for the benefit of her chief assistant, "And remember to send me that Cactuar nightmare thing, Captain. Send it to Vincent here."

The assistant looked up and nodded.

"Of course, ma'am," said Nate, who waved and left.

Mack closed the door, then leaned her back heavily against it, and let out a breath, slowly. "That was close," she whispered to herself. "He almost got me."

She went through another door to her private office and called up security screens to watch Nate get into the lift and exit the lobby, a smile on her lips.

"You are looking at Captain Olsen," said Cindy. "Is this not something a teenager would do?"

"Shut up," said Mack, without heat. "There's no harm in it."

"Chancellors have to be careful," said the city system.

"And city management systems have to be quiet," said Mack. "Attend to some detail of city management and leave me be."

Mack knew that Cindy was right. Chancellors had to be careful, and she was now not about to let anything happen. But she could not help thinking about what she would like to happen, perhaps as a temporary release from a marriage that had become strained by long silences and absences, or so she told herself.

As it was, she went home to an empty flat, her husband having previously sent a text saying that he would be held up on Senate business and that she should have dinner without him. She ended up watching an old film set on Earth about a married woman who embarked on what she thought would be a simple fling, only for the fling to turn into a disastrous affair and two murders.

She went to bed wondering what Nate thought of their encounter and of her.

While the chancellor was watching her movie, her husband, Senator Corbin Gillard, walked into a bar close to the city's government house, and the official residence he shared with the chancellor. Although tall, grey-haired, and still handsome, the senator was not as immediately recognisable as his wife – a point that galled him – and the bar was nearly empty. That meant only the bartender realised who he was and did not care. The bar's market niche was as a discreet meeting place for all types, including those in the political scene. That meant there were no security cameras in the bar, while the one at the entrance had not worked in years. The bartender also prided himself on his lack of interest in his clients, as well as his poor memory.

In a booth at the back, Senator Gillard found the man he had come to see, a man he only knew as Bishop. His contact was a lean, elderly man with a skull-like face framed by a few wisps of white hair. His suit was grey and nondescript, and his hat, which he had put on the table beside him - hats were back in fashion just then - went with the suit. Anyone who passed him by in the street might not give him a second glance unless, of course, that same person happened to look at his eyes. Then they might hurry on, a chill running down their spines.

"Mr Bishop," said Gillard,

"Just Bishop, Senator," said the man. "Bishop is just a code name. Mr doesn't go with it."

"As you wish," said Gillard. "You indicated that we might be able to assist one another."

"Let's order you a drink first, at least," said Bishop, genially.

"Just a soft drink is fine. Anything will do."

Bishop, who was drinking a beer, ordered from the automated menu. The drink was delivered by an auto-waiter.

"Your wife has been causing me problems," said Bishop after a few moments.

"She does that."

"When the senate ratified her," said Bishop, "I was assured that she would not cause trouble, but she has been poking her nose into the affairs of the guard and the police."

"Police corruption is becoming notorious," responded Gillard, "and the guard didn't help themselves by trying to do the work of patrol and completely messing it up."

"Unfortunate, but true. The guard expedition was part of a different plan that didn't work, because guard officers were too stupid and proud to listen to the patrol. Now we'll try something different."

"I'm listening."

"You would also like to be free to be with your mistress," said Bishop.

"Have you been watching me, damn you?" said Gillard.

"Relax, it's not in my interest to tell anybody," said Bishop, "but when your wife is the chancellor and you're a senate leader, divorce can be difficult."

"It is a problem," agreed Gillard.

"You're not married to the deputy chancellor, and he has shown himself to be more malleable and reasonable than the Chancellor. If the chancellor is out of the picture, the constitution says he steps up. If the Senate ratifies him, the appointment becomes permanent."

"Of course, but that would apply only if…." Senator Gillard looked at Bishop, astonished. "I don't want to hear any more," he said suddenly. "I bear no ill will towards Mack. We had some good times. We've just grown apart."

"Whatever," said Bishop. "Matters have been arranged. Certain parties may have their suspicions, but no one will be able to prove anything."

"Jesus wept!" breathed Gillard. "You can't be serious."

"There won't be any trail leading back to you. Just put on a show of grief in the Senate, then get the various factions to come together to ratify the deputy. It should be one of the few things they can agree on."

"I'm stunned!" said Gillard, quietly.

"Then, after a decent interval, you can be seen with your mistress and eventually marry her."

The senator thought about that for a few moments, his face in his hands, then he dropped his hands and looked at Bishop. "I just arrange ratification for the deputy, right? Nothing else."

"No, nothing else," said Bishop, "except to remember who cleared the way for you."

"I don't want to hear anything more," said Gillard, "if you want to talk again, call my assistant, but call yourself Mr Bishop. People with code names don't call senators."

"Of course," said Bishop.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Two weeks after Mac and Nate's meeting over the computer model, Nate was waiting by the East gate again with trainee Dan Whyatt when the chancellor and Marta arrived in a government car.

"Chancellor," said Nate, as Mack stepped out of the car. Dressed in shorts cut to flatter, Nate noted, she had a day pack slung over one shoulder. As with the previous trip, a flunky toted her main bag to the carrier.

"Captain," she said, smiling.

Since the presentation, Nate had been permitted to join her social media sites and had been called twice for some light flirting, but his suggestions of another meeting or that he might call her had been politely turned down. Consequently, Nate had given up any idea that he and the chancellor might be anything more than just friends. He also thought that it was just as well. Politics was not his thing. As he was not the sort of guy who resented being rejected – he always believed that it showed the girl rejecting him had good taste - he nodded and smiled politely in his turn. He also smiled at Marta, with whom he had developed a tolerable working relationship.

"Long drive today, ladies," he said.

As he climbed into the carrier, he saw a group of adult Cactuar standing a little way up a side street from Eastern Square, where they were. He had not previously noticed the Cactuar paying any attention to the patrol's comings and goings.

"We're not staying overnight at the site when we get there?" asked Marta as they drove off.

"That's the aim. I'm hoping the Morlocks will expect us to stay the night and set their plans accordingly, but we'll spend a good part of one day there and leave with enough time to get to some place defensible.

"Still good if we could stay overnight," said Mack. "You said the Morlocks took a couple of days to gather their forces."

"Maybe not this time around," said Nate. "You probably didn't notice, but a group of Cactuar was watching us as we piled into the carrier. I've never seen them stand around and watch what we do before, which is interesting. They know who the chancellor is - the literal translation of your title in Cactuar is big boss lady, by the way – and they occasionally look at translations of news feeds. If you'll recall, your interest in the site has been publicly discussed. They'll work out where we're going and may well tell the Morlocks."

"But you said the Cactuar hate the Morlocks," said Marta.

"They loathe them, in fact. But they are also terrified of them, and for good reason. They will do a lot to earn credit with those guys. Informing on us in order to stay out of the Morlock tunnels makes good sense to them. I dunno how they'd get a message to the Morlock Queen before we get there, but I wouldn't put it past them. The site we're going to seems very sensitive. Half a day at most, I'm afraid."

"Oh well," said Mack.

They drove on for a time, listening to Nate's mix of 60s Britpop with Dan driving and his superior keeping an eye on the ground scanning instruments, constantly checking for possible Morlock ambush sites. After about an hour, while the Troggs' *Wild Thing* was playing, during Nate's routine check of the surroundings through the vehicle's rear and side cams, he noticed a faint cloud of dust to the carrier's left rear. Another vehicle?

"That's odd," he said aloud. "We're supposed to be the only vehicle out here."

"Nothing is scheduled," said Dan.

"Yep, should be just us," said Nate. "Pull over to that ridge. Park just below it and I'll get out and have a look."

"Is there anything wrong?" asked Mack as Nate got out, high powered patrol binoculars in hand.

"Probably nothing," said Nate. "But it's something different, and I don't like it when something different happens. I take it as a personal affront, in fact. You can get out for a couple of minutes, if you like."

Nate walked to the top of the ridge, leaving Dan in the carrier, scanned the landscape for dust trails, and found nothing. A few wisps of dust hung over a rock formation in the distance, he thought, but otherwise, he couldn't see any other vehicle or any dust cloud.

"Must have been seeing things," he said aloud.

"Did you try out any dating sites?" said Mack, quietly. She had walked up to him. Martha was out of earshot.

"Started filling in the form for one," said Nate. "But then I got stuck on whether to put in the term you used, 'a difficult study', in the general comments section."

Mack smiled. "Don't think it's something to mention up front."

"In any case, I like to keep my rejection quota to once a month."

"I didn't reject you," Mack said, rolling her eyes. I said it was impossible."

"That still adds up to a rejection, and I'm a guy. I'm going to play the martyr for a time. It makes me feel better."

"Oh, suit yourself," said Mack, without heat. "You know you really lit a fire under the police?"

"I did?"

"I don't know what you said to those two detectives, but they have both agreed to resign after confessing to indiscretions, or so I was told."

"I just said that Olivia did know the chancellor because you'd told me so, and they'd better work out a way to stay out of jail."

"It did the trick, at least for those two. I just don't know how far it all goes. Are we done here?"

"Seems so," said Nate.

"See anything?" asked Dan as Nate got back in.

"Nope," said Nate. "Maybe whatever it is has gone away."

But when they started driving again, the dust cloud started again. It was faint but unmistakable. After another hour of watching the cloud, Nate told Dan to swerve to the left.

"See that ridge? Drive right to the top of it, then stop."

Dan did so. Nate went up the ladder and out through the vehicle's top hatch to stand on it, scanning the landscape with his binoculars. Mac climbed up beside him, and he was

aware that Marta was standing in front of the carrier, shading her eyes against the sun as she stared off in the same direction.

Then he saw it in the far distance. It was another carrier, the outlines just discernible in his powerful binoculars. As he watched, the vehicle swerved and vanished. Most likely, it had driven into a depression, Nate thought, but why hide from him? Nate watched a little longer for the vehicle to re-emerge, then descended back into the carrier.

"What's going on?" said Mac.

"I think one of the carriers operated by the guards is out there," Nate said, "following us for some reason. I caught a glimpse of it, and it looked like one of the older models taken directly off the mothership."

"Why would a guard carrier be following us?" asked Mack.

"Mack, you're chancellor, you tell us. Let's call in control and see if they can shed any light on this."

Nate clicked two switches to get control online and started speaking, "Control, carrier three East of City…. " He stopped as he realized that the link was dead. He clicked a few more switches and checked the system with the onboard AI, only to be told that the comms link was inoperable due to a major system malfunction.

"Never had that happen before," he said to no one in particular. "Right, we're heading to the nearest safe point to look at the system and see if we can find another way to call it in. Station two is about forty minutes away, due North." Nate tapped the map screen. "Let's stop there. Change to the new bearing. Two degrees off due North."

"One of the stations?" exclaimed Dan. "Remember station five? It was crawling with Morlocks."

"They won't expect us to stop there," said Nate. "Before we move off, can you ladies see if you can get a signal on your phones?"

"You don't have phones?" said Marta.

"Always switched off and in our packs during patrols. Calls on them are routed through the main comms. Patrol officers shouldn't be on their phones out here."

"No signal," said Mac, waving her phone around. "Not a shadow of one."

Marta had the same result.

Okay, that settles it," said Nate. "We head for station two at top speed. Punch it, Dan."

Dan obliged and, sure enough, the dust cloud started again.

Now alarmed, Nate decided to check the comms system. As there didn't seem to be any problem with the AI or any of the other control systems, maybe the fault was in the router to the small satellite dish on the roof. This was mounted in the carrier cabin, close to the top hatch. He unscrewed the router's lid to find that two circuit boards were broken clean through, and components were melted. But the comms link had been working when he called control to open the East Gate. Nate used his flashlight to examine the box's insides and pulled out a small tube that had been split wide open. A bomb small enough to push between two boards and make very little noise when it detonated into the router box, but still big enough to fry circuitry beyond repair.

Nate knew he could not fix the comms link out in the desert. He carried many spare items, but not a spare router. There had never been any need. For now, the real question was why the equipment had been sabotaged by someone who seemed to know what they were doing. That same person somehow managed to fix the onboard AI so that it wouldn't complain when the satellite link went down. He thought about that for a few seconds, tapping the lid of the comm link, then turned to Mac.

"We've been sabotaged," he said. "If you're out of the picture, who takes over? The deputy chancellor?"

"He steps up," said Mac, "but he still had to be ratified by the senate…" Realisation dawned. "They wouldn't dare! They couldn't shoot me or anything like that."

"Wouldn't have to out here," said Nate. "They'd tie you up and leave you for the Morlocks. Your body'd never be found, and our disappearance would be attributed to them."

"Oh my! Oh my!" said Mac. "You have to take me straight back to the city."

"I would, but our friends out there present a problem," said Nate. "We have to get past them. The guard carrier has better armament than this thing, and they seem to be able to follow us from a distance, which is interesting. If we can get to Station Two, I may have a way of calling in."

"Really, how is that?" asked Dan.

"Show you when we get there. For now, just drive."

Nate watched the dust cloud intently for the next forty minutes, but the carrier seemed to be keeping its distance. Finally, Station Two came into sight. Like Station Five, where Nate and Dan had been ambushed, it was a concrete box on top of a concrete slab, but unlike Station Five, the Morlocks seemed to have left it alone. The scans did not show anything. They drove right up to the station's door.

"We're not stopping, guys, but you might as well get out, as we need to discuss what to do next. Dan, keep both the carrier hatch and the station door open, and keep an eye out for Morlocks as well as our friends in the carrier."

Nate lugged the portable scanning unit that had let them down at Station Five into the concrete box that was Station Two and plugged it into a wall jack.

"What good will that do?" asked Marta.

"Didn't you see? There's a small dish on top of the box, as well as some solar collectors and a battery on the wall here. This unit is meant to connect to the city net to send alerts. The main thing is that there's a voice comm channel on this thing with a built-in microphone. It's designed to communicate with the whole room. We flick a switch, and the patrol command room should pick up straight away, especially if it's a dull day."

Nate flicked a switch marked voice; heard someone say "control," and opened his mouth to speak when three shots slammed into the scanning unit, knocking it over. He whirled around to see Trainee Office Dan Whyatt holding a gun on him.

Dan brought a small radio unit he was carrying up to his mouth and said, "Had to act, come up."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nate had earned his reputation as a top patrol officer in part because he could keep calm in a crisis, but even he was stunned. It took several moments for him to process this gross betrayal - moments taken up with whoever was on the other end of the radio link asking him to repeat the message. Dan did so and added, "had to stop them calling in. Got a gun on them. Come fast."

The other party cursed and agreed.

"Traitor!" spat Mack.

"Shut up, chancellor," snarled Dan. It was the first time Nate had heard the trainee raise his voice.

"You called them on that thing when I got out the first time to check on that dust cloud," said Nate, his mind beginning to work. "They had time to hide behind some rocks. You weren't alone the second time until Marta got out. I was able to catch a glimpse before you warned them, and they hid."

"Congratulations," sneered Dan. "The great Captain Olsen worked it out. Well, guess what, you're not going to be so great real soon."

Nate had never even suspected the hidden depths of bitterness and bile in his trainee. He was going to have to work on his people skills.

"What did they offer you?" asked Nate. Mack started to say something, and Nate gestured for her to be silent. She had the sense to shut up.

"Everything I wanted," said Dan. "A spot on the guard away from Patrol and the Morlocks. The time we were ambushed in Station Five, I was terrified." Dan almost shouted the last three words. "I always wanted guard, but I could only get patrol and ended up in desert hell holes, listening to cruddy music from centuries ago."

"My choice of music bothered you that much?" said Dan, shifting his weight onto his front foot. He would have one chance. "What did they say? It's about the chancellor, right?"

"Of course it's about the chancellor," snapped Dan. "The people I'm dealing with want control, and her senator husband wants to be with his teenage mistress."

"Shit!" said Mack. "So, it was true about the intern! The bastard!"

"And I get some power," said Dan.

"Sure, Dan, but aren't you overlooking a basic problem?"

Nate edged a little closer.

"Yeah? What's that?"

"They can't have you walking around after this incident. Everyone knows you went out on patrol with me, the chancellor, and Marta. We're supposed to disappear in a Morlock ambush, but there you are walking around. You're not coming back either."

"What…."

"As soon as they get here, they're going to tie you up with us – maybe take us to the place where we expected to stop the night, which they would have passed on to the Cactuar. No wonder they watched us leave. The Cactuar have this morbid fascination with death. To see a doomed group of humans leave the city would have been a real turn-on for them. You're in the same boat as the rest of us, Dan."

He edged closer.

"You're wrong," the trainee officer said desperately. "They gave me their word!"

"The word of a bunch of murderers," sneered Nate. "Why do you think they agreed to everything you asked? Because they knew they'd kill you along with us. Why argue? But they made one big mistake: they also badly underestimated the Morlocks. They're coming for us right now."

"What?"

"Look at the unit screen."

Dan Whyatt had just put three bullets into the unit, and the screen was on the ground, completely blank, but the trainee officer's fear of Morlocks made him turn his head for a moment to look. That was all the opening Nate wanted or was about to get. He had thought of trying to draw his pistol, but considered he had a better chance if he charged, so he changed. Turning so that his right hand was in front, his fingertips connected with the weapon, pushing it slightly off-line a split second before Dan's head snapped back, and he fired. Nate felt the bullet's clip a button on his shirt. Then his shoulder connected with Dan, smashing the trainee against the wall. Dan tried to bring his gun around, but Nate was able to grab the man's wrist with his left hand and smash his right into Dan's jaw with all the strength of desperation. The trainee went down, Nate stripping the pistol out of his hand, just as he heard Mack scream "Marta".

Sparing another second to rip the trainee's second pistol out of its holster, Nate turned to find Marta on the floor, holding her left arm, and Mack kneeling over her.

"So much blood," said the chancellor, holding Marta, who was now crying out in agony.

"We have some med stuff in the carrier," said Nate. It was a lot of blood, but it wasn't spurting. No artery had been severed. But a quick look indicated that the bone might have been broken.

"Then get it," said Mack.

"No, we take her to the carrier. I've gotta grab Dan. Can you lift her?"

"I don't think so."

"Just help me up," said Marta, stifling another cry of agony. "I can stagger part way."

"Do it, fast," said Nate. He returned to Dan, who was about to get up again, grabbed his now former trainee by the collar, and dragged him through the station door and into the carrier. The would be assassins were not yet in sight, nor was there any sign of the Morlocks. Each patrol carrier had a set of plastic ties in case they ever had to restrain anyone. As far as Nate knew, no patrol officer had ever used them. He used them now, tying Dan's hands behind his back and around the fixed stands of one of the rear seats.

"I should leave you for your friends," said Nate, as he tied the trainee's feet, "but they might just kill you and, worthless pile of shit though you turned out to be, I don't want your death on my conscience."

"Fuck you," said Dan. Nate did not bother to reply.

Then he went to help Mack and Marta as they struggled out of the station's door, lifting Marta and putting her on one of the carrier's pull-down beds. He pulled out the medical kit from its spot underneath the driver's seat and grabbed an ampule of anaesthetic.

"You allergic to anything?" he asked Martha. She shook her head, then sighed with relief when he injected the substance. He had never done that before, either.

"She needs a hospital," said Mack.

"Yep. We'll be driving straight to the city if I can figure out what to do about our friends out there. First off, see this stuff here? They are bandages with reinforcements; just put one around the wound, and it should automatically mould the bones into place as well as stop the bleeding."

"The bullet's still in there," said Mack.

"Like you said, we need a hospital, the faster the better, but our friends will be here in a moment. Come to think of it, work on Marta, but be ready to close the carrier hatch fast when I say."

The second carrier, when it roared onto the concrete apron around Station Two, proved to be not so much a carrier as a modified desert dune buggy with the cabin enclosed and a large gun, a 25-millimetre chain gun, mounted on top. The weapon looked to be a recent, ad hoc addition, Nate thought, as it would have to be loaded by one of the crew standing up at a hatch behind the gun. Another problem was that it had no apparent armour apart from bars across the front of the vehicle protecting the radiator grill in case the vehicle ran into something. The grill was also protected from sand by a light cloth tied over it. All the insignias and markings had been removed.

Having just finished putting adhesive tape from the medical kit across the mouth of his former trainee, Nate looked out through the window of the patrol carrier as the vehicle stopped on the apron a few metres from the station itself. The men inside might have tried contacting Dan. Nate could just hear the radio squawking on the floor of the station where he had left it. Had he thought of it, he would have brought the radio unit in and made Dan say something. Too late now.

The assassins hesitated for a time, but they could see that the hatch of the carrier and the door of the station were still open. Three men got out. All were armed with assault rifles and pistols. One, a big, heavy-set man with close cropped hair, was wearing a guard uniform with the insignias removed. The other two had longer hair, close-set eyes, and were wearing

whatever shorts and tee-shirts they had to hand in their wardrobes when they were recruited off the streets of Rasand. Otherwise, they were all dark eyed, dark haired, and looked mean.

"Mack, take a look," whispered Nate. "You recognise any of these guys?"

Mack left her place by Marta's side to peek through the window.

"Shit!" she said. "The guy on the right is a captain and a favourite of that ghastly general. I'll think of his name in a moment. I dunno about the other two."

"Whoever they are, I'm guessing they're not choirboys. Get ready by that hatch."

"Hey, Dan," called the captain. "What's going on?"

They walked towards the station, one of the choir boys moving to the patrol carrier.

Nate fired, sweeping the area with the patrol carrier's 50-cal. He didn't try to kill the men. Despite all that had happened, bodies would have been hard to explain away or justify. Instead, he started his sweep well to the left, giving the choir boys time to dive to the concrete apron. The captain, with more sense, dived behind the guard carrier.

Mack slammed the carrier hatch shut. "Go," she said, returning to Marta.

Nate spent another few seconds shredding the tyres on one side of the guard carrier with the 50 Cal, then he took off, spraying bullets into the air as he left, heading directly for the city. There was no time for subtlety.

"Mack, strap Marta in firmly. We've got some distance to cover."

"Yep," she said.

"And there's some sedatives in that kit. It might be better if you can get her to sleep."

"I don't want to sleep," Marta said.

"You'll sleep if I tell you to sleep," said Mack.

A little later, the chancellor came to the front and sat in the seat Dan had occupied.

"Did you kill anyone back there?"

"Don't think so. I just sprayed the area. I'll leave those guys for the police."

"Quite right," said Mac. "But you were firing at something."

"Yep, I blew out some of their tyres. If they're anything like me, they'll have enough spares to replace what I've shredded, but they'll have to change them, and that should buy us time."

As it happened, Nate got far less time than he thought he would. They were about an hour into the drive back when he saw the tell tale cloud of dust in the rear view cam.

"They've caught us up, already?" he said. "How is that possible? How did they change the tyres so fast and then track us out here?"

"There were three of them in that carrier," said Mac.

"Four, probably. I don't think the driver got out."

"That captain – Captain Horvat – is supposed to be a good organiser. Changing the tyres might not have taken so long."

"But he wouldn't know much about the desert. How was he able to find us, so quickly…?" Nate abruptly switched driving over to the AI, got up, and walked back to Dan, still slumped on the floor. He ripped the tape off his former trainee's lips and grabbed the man's shirt. "Okay, where is it?"

"Where's what?"

Nate banged the man's head against the seat pylon. "The tracking device. Your life depends on you telling me where it is."

"You going to beat me to death if I don't tell you?" said Dan, and he smiled.

His former meek and mild trainee, Nate decided, had unsuspected, black depths – a thoroughly nasty human being.

"I mean, if your friends catch up with us, they'll kill you along with us. Where is the tracking device?"

"Death is kinda looking interesting right now," said Dan, still smiling. "I mean, if I go back, I'm disgraced and thrown in prison for a long time, right?"

"I can put in a good word for you," said the Chancellor, who had come down to the back and was holding on while the carrier rocked. "Get you maybe a couple of years. Then you get a quiet life managing a store or a warehouse, bossing synths around."

"And you never have to come near the desert or Morlocks again," said Nate, "and get to choose your own music."

Dan thought about this for a moment. "Under the dash on my side, on that shelf they have in there."

Nate went back to the driving station and groped under the dash. Sure enough, a small device was taped to the fixtures on Dan's side. He ripped it out, flipped open the top hatch, and threw it as far as he could to one side. Then he looked back. The modified dune buggy was visible in the distance. The tracking device no longer mattered. The other vehicle was very much faster than his own and gaining. They had perhaps another hour of driving before the city came into sight, but the rival carrier, Nate estimated, would have his vehicle in effective range within half an hour at the most.

They were in trouble.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nate returned to the driver's seat and checked the forward scans. Just when he wanted a Morlock ambush, there were none to be seen. He explained the problem to Mack, sitting on Dan's side.

"They don't even have to get right up to us," he said. "Their vehicle is designed for combat. Its weapon is twice the calibre of ours, and it'd be computer controlled."

"How long do you think?"

"Twenty minutes, maybe."

Mack took out her phone. "Still no coverage. Where can we get to in twenty minutes that might make a difference? You're the desert expert."

Nate flicked through the digital map he had displayed on a full screen on the carrier dash. It occurred to him that their uninvited friends wouldn't have a map like that or know much about the desert at all.

"That's the other reason they were following us," he said aloud.

"What reason is that?" said Mack.

"They don't know enough to find their own way. I constantly scan for Morlock ambushes and know where the dangers lie. After the guard detachment disaster, they would at least be cautious …." His voice trailed away. "Okay, desperate times, right? We head for The Shade. The outskirts are about ten minutes away."

Nate took the carrier's controls, swerved left, and set a new course, wringing a little extra power out of the engine. Their pursuers followed suit, Nate noticed, but didn't follow exactly in his path. Instead, they turned to intercept his trail for a slight gain in distance. That was interesting.

"You said Patrol didn't cross the Shade as it's too dangerous," said Mack.

"We don't because it is. But I have a better chance of surviving going across it than they do. At least, that's the plan."

"I see," said Mack. "I can't help with that, I guess, but I can offer an incentive."

"I'm all for incentives if it means I get one," said Nate.

"With my husband revealed as the lying, cheating scum that he is," said Mack, "I should be upset over that and over being humiliated and betrayed by him with a teenage

intern. But somehow, I'm not. I feel liberated and virtuous. He was the one who broke the marriage. It also means I am free to offer an incentive."

She leant forward and whispered in Nate's ear. "You get me out of this, then no more light flirting. You can have your spanking, and anything else I can do for you." She finished with a small kiss on his cheek and sat back.

"Hey, that's… that's a real incentive," said Nate, looking at her. "Now I'm motivated. Do they teach you that in management courses?"

Mack shook her head. "Girl school," she said quietly.

"What about me?" said Dan from the back. "Do I get an incentive, too?"

"By tagging along, you might get to live," said Nate. "Now shut up. You don't want to remind me of my other plan of increasing speed by throwing out excess weight."

Dan shut up, and Nate went back to his digital map. Some of the Morlock tunnels were marked on the map, but no effort had been made to keep that section up to date. In any case, Patrol Command had long suspected that the tunnels under The Shade changed constantly. Any maps would quickly become obsolete. However, there were one or two sections where there seemed to be many more tunnels than the rest of the area. Nate adjusted course to suit. Again, their pursuers did not follow their tracks but turned to intercept their path for a small gain.

Then they were in The Shade, and the forward scanning unit lit up with warnings of possible ambush sites. But by then, the desert buggy was close, far too close. The pursuers tried one shot with the mounted gun, only for the shot to go wild. Nate noticed an area where several tunnels appeared to intersect. He jinked around it, only to see the pursuing vehicle power straight through the area without falling into any of the tunnels, closing the gap slightly.

Nate tried again, but again the rival buggy powered through the area and tried another shot, which narrowly missed.

"Where are the Morlocks when you need them?" exclaimed Nate.

Across their path, winds had piled up a gigantic dune, one of a series that was a feature of that part of The Shade. There was no choice but to climb it. The modified buggy was probably a better climber than the patrol carrier, but maybe the buggy driver would not know that going too fast could be as big a problem as going too slow. Nate went up the dune at about the right speed, adjusting air pressure in the tyres as he was able to from the cabin. Their pursuers gained. But once at the top, Nate reduced speed and turned to the right, just below the crest. Sure enough, the other vehicle shot over the top of the dune and was part way down the slope and still sliding, before they realised that the patrol carrier was no longer in front of them. By that time, Nate's vehicle had gone back over the dune and was well down the other side.

"Score one for us," said Mack triumphantly. "Too much to hope that you've lost them permanently."

"It is too much to hope," said Nate. "I think they know enough now to look for dust clouds, and I've got to reduce speed. The AI is flagging problems with the engine. Don't suppose you've got coverage."

Mack took out her digital assistant and waved it around. "Still nothing."

Again, the pursuers took far less time than Nate thought possible to work out where the patrol carrier must have gone and climb back up to the top of the dune to look for them. On the rear-view screen, Nate saw the rival buggy emerge on top of the Dune and try a shot at long range. He jinked to the right, more to do something rather than in any expectation that it might help. As it was, the shot came horrifyingly close, spraying sand just a few metres from the carrier.

"We're going to have to start zigzagging," said Nate.

There were no more dunes in front of them, which meant that he couldn't try the same trick again and, in any case, Nate thought, his opponents had proved to be shrewd and resourceful. He doubted the same trick would work twice. But what trick would work? In lieu of a better idea, Nate went back to scanning for Morlock tunnels. Perhaps the problem was that he was looking for a lot of tunnels together, assuming that meant the ground would be weak. But maybe the Morlocks paid special attention to strengthening tunnels when they were close together. What about a single tunnel close to the surface?

Nate altered course so that they were heading directly towards the city and started scanning. He deliberately went over one likely location, thinking that he could gun straight through if the area started to subside. Nothing.

"Wasn't this place supposed to be dangerous?" thought Nate.

Then he had to zig-zag. He couldn't make the arms of each zig and zag very long, as the changes would quickly become predictable, and it slowed him down too much. As it was, his pursuers started gaining ground rapidly. They tried another shot, which missed by a hair's breadth.

"Not long now," said Mack, grimly.

Nate fired the carrier's machine gun, more to be seen to strike back than through any real hope of hitting their pursuers, or so Nate hoped they would think. They charged on, Nate firing a couple more times, but seemingly at random into the ground. The buggy followed at full speed, apparently deciding not to waste any more ammunition for their big gun until they were close enough to put the matter beyond doubt. That would be a matter of minutes.

Nate checked the scans eagerly. The Morlocks were always digging tunnels, he thought, so where was the single tunnel he needed? There! Nate drove over the area as fast as he could, then stopped dead and fired into the ground at maximum rate, letting the barrel overheat. They were close enough to see one of their pursuers, Nate thought that he had the build and look of the Guard Captain, pop out of the hatch behind the buggy's primary weapon, and load it. He waited for the captain to aim, then surged forward, turning to make sure the buggy followed him directly over the prepared area. He could see the captain load the weapon again, take aim, and even grin as he reached for a firing switch. Then the buggy tipped forward and almost disappeared, only to get hung up on the chain gun, which sank nearly up to its breech in the sand.

Nate turned back and stopped about twenty meters from the buggy, now hopelessly stuck in the caved-in roof of the Morlock tunnel. Fortunately for the buggy's crew, there did not seem to be any Morlocks around. He grabbed an assault rifle from the carrier's armoury and climbed out on top of the vehicle.

"Hey, guys!" he called.

"What?" said the man who had been manning the support gun and was now pulling his comrades out of the buggy.

"Get out and start walking. Remember to save your water and weapons, and you should survive until nightfall. I'll send someone back for you, which is more than you deserve."

"Get fucked," snarled the man.

"Charming," said Nate. He turned to see that Mack had also climbed out to stand beside him on the roof of the carrier.

"I see you, Captain Horvat!" she yelled. "You tried to assassinate me! Me! You'd better hope the Morlocks get you before I start with all the official processes, like indictments for treason and attempted murder."

"This isn't over, Bitch!" snarled Horvat.

If Nate had not restrained her, Mack would have jumped down, run over, and taken on Horvat, who was twice her size.

"That animal," she spat, as Nate wrestled her into the hatch. "Tried to assassinate me and then called me 'bitch'. Where does someone like that get off?"

"Dunno," said Nate, finding the sensation of wrestling with the chancellor an interesting one, "but there's nothing to be gained from attacking him." He pushed her down the hatch ladder and followed her. "We need to get back to the city. He said it wasn't over."

"That's right, he did," said Mack, brushing hair out of her eyes. Nate thought it was a charming gesture. "What did he mean?"

"Best way to find out is to get to the city before those guys walk into call range. Any connection with your assistant?"

Mack waved the unit around again as they drove off.

"Nothing," she said eventually.

"Keep an eye on it and start making calls the moment we get in range. Whoever is behind this is well organised. I suspect we've got more work ahead of us."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

By the time they reached the city gates, Mack had made a host of calls, and most of those contacted were surprised to hear that she was still alive. The most concerning call was to the personal line of the deputy chancellor, which was answered by an assistant.

"Who is this?" said the assistant.

"Evelyn, this is Chancellor Mackenzie Markovic. I need to speak to your boss right now."

"This is a lie," said Evelyn. "The chancellor is dead."

"I'm not dead, Evelyn," said Mack. "I know you're married to a Martin and have two kids in day care."

"So would any scam artist," she responded. "We were warned against prank calls."

"Prank calls!" spluttered Mack, but before she could speak again, Evelyn shouted, "I'm reporting this to the police," and hung up. Calls to two other senate offices met with blank incomprehension by the assistants and suggestions that Mack call the deputy chancellor's office. Then Mack thought to call the AI city management system called Cindy, which had been instrumental in appointing her to the chancellor's job in the first place. Mack was the only person in the city able to call the city system directly from her mobile.

"I was officially informed you were dead, and I've changed all the access codes and clearances you had," said Cindy.

"Can you change them back again, please?" asked Mack.

"I need official confirmation that you're still alive," said Cindy. "I can tell from your voice patterns that it probably is you, and I can track your assistant unit, but I need to see you in person and do the imprinting again." This procedure involved taking Mack's fingerprints and DNA, which could only be done in the chancellor's office inside Rasand's government HQ. However, that area was now shut off to her, and most importantly, her droid guard had been reset. She would now be treated as an intruder instead of the chancellor.

"Ask Cindy if there's any back way in that she can allow us to use on her own initiative," said Nate. Mack had put all conversations on speaker so that he would know what was going on.

"You are with Captain Olsen?" asked Cindy. "It is good to speak with you officially, Captain Olsen. Mack and I have talked about you at length."

"It's Nate, please, and really? What did you two girls say about me?"

"Never you mind," said Mack, sharply, cutting off a tiny sort of amusement from Cindy about being categorised as a girl. Nat noticed that she also blushed, but he did not say anything. "What can you do for us, Cindy?"

"Hmmm! There is a service elevator that starts at sub-basement two …."

"Come to think of it," interrupted Nate, suddenly remembering that Dan could listen to their conversation and might tell others what they were going to do, "we'll get rid of our passengers, then call you back. We have to call Patrol Command. The city is in sight."

Nate then used his own phone-assistant to call the command centre to get Rachel, the duty officer for that shift, who was almost as surprised as the deputy chancellor's assistant.

"You're alive?" she exclaimed.

"Of course, I'm alive," said Nate, "and so is the chancellor who is here. We survived a serious attempt to assassinate the whole party, which also involved taking out our coms. But look at the control centre screens. You see a carrier approaching the East Gate. That's us, and we want to be let in. You'll also have to send out a carrier to rescue the assassination party."

"I've been told to lock down the city."

"I'm the chancellor, and I'm countermanding the order," said Mack.

"I think I still have to get the colonel's okay."

"Have her call me on my number," said Mack. "And she can call Captain Olsen. In any case, you cannot leave people outside the city, regardless of your orders. That would breach more safety directives than I can count."

"Leave it with me," said Rachel. "I'll open up when you come, but I will check with the colonel."

"Do that," said Mack, "and I'll want to speak with her. There are deep things going on."

By the time they got to the city, its officialdom was in an uproar. The colonel spoke to Nate and Mack, then issued an official note to say that the chancellor was still alive and was returning to the city, after apparently surviving an assassination attempt, although details were unclear. This was promptly and angrily denied by the deputy chancellor's office and by the office of the Senate Majority Leader, Mack's husband.

"I'll send him our deepest, darkest prison cell," growled Mack as they charged along city streets. Nate finally got to use the horn and flashing lights, which were standard in patrol carriers, and ignored attempts by police to pull the vehicle over. High speed pursuits were unheard of in Rasand. They arrived at the city hospital, a police car vainly chasing the carrier, and pulled up at the emergency entrance.

They were lifting the still unconscious Marta through the carrier hatch when the police constable, with a synth offsider, found them and started complaining.

"You can't bring a patrol carrier into the city… oh, hello, chancellor."

"My friend has been shot," said Mack, "to hospital attendants who had come out with a mobile bed.

"What has she been shot with?" asked the attendant.

"Patrol issue nine-millimetre, standard metal jacket," said Nate. "As you can see, she got it in the upper arm, and the bullet is still in there."

"Who fired this bullet, and where is the crime scene?" asked the constable. He was not long out of the academy, where he'd been drilled in the checklist of questions to ask.

"The crime took place at station two, which is a long way out of the city that way." Nate pointed southeast. "But I can get you the shooter and weapon. Hold on."

Nate went back into the carrier, cut Dan loose, and dragged the man out to be presented to the constable, along with the gun he had used.

"This man shot my friend with that gun," said Mack.

"We'll need to take a formal statement," said the constable. "You'll have to come with me to the police station."

"We'll be along later," said Nate. "You can chat with Dan here in the meantime, and Dan."

"What?" The former trainee had at least stopped grinning.

"If you hated 60s Britpop so much, I could have thrown in some disco."

"Oh, very funny," said Dan.

Nate and Mack got back into the carrier and sped off, ignoring the constable's protests that he needed statements. As they had previously discussed, having the police onside would be useful, but that would involve hours of interrogation at a police station before the detectives involved would consult the next level of command. The process could take hours, by which time the coup might have succeeded, and the fact that Mack was still alive would have become an inconvenient detail. Mack could call the commissioner himself, but that man was likely to be unsympathetic and unwilling to commit himself. In all, it was better to stay ahead of the decision-making process.

As they drove, Mack called Cindy again to ask about her plan to access the chancellor's office. This time, there was no Dan to hear the conversation and possibly tell others.

"As I was telling you before," said Cindy, "there is a service elevator that goes up to the floor below the chancellor's level, but there is security on that floor, and the droids are patrolling the floor above."

"We'll take it," said Nate. "Can you arrange it so that security is not alerted to the movement of the elevator, or the arrival of this carrier?"

"I cannot do that. It conflicts with safety protocols."

"Is there anyone in the chancellor's office?" asked Nate.

"They've all been sent home while we finalise the procedures for the handover of offices. I have suspended the handover procedure until the fate of the chancellor is clarified. I can do that without formal proof."

"Then no one's safety is at risk," said Nate. "Divert security on the floor below, or better yet, nullify the security cameras. Just have them give the same image of an empty hallway when we arrive. There's a stairwell door close to the freight elevator door, yes?"

"There is."

"We can get to the stairwell with no one the wiser. All you have to do is unlock it, and it's only the droids in danger. Your safety protocols have not been breached."

"Hmmm!" This was a surprisingly human noise made by Cindy. "That seems to work, although it will invoke a review of my protocols."

"Once I'm back in office, I can set aside those reviews," said Mack.

"You can," said Cindy. "This is a very human approach."

"Actually, it's a legalistic approach, but we'll have you thinking like a human yet," said Mack.

When they arrived at the government house's underground car park entrance, they realised the patrol carrier would not fit. Nate threw a few necessities, including more of the plastic ties he had used on Dan, several conventional hand grenades that were a standard part of the carrier's arsenal, two pistols with spare ammunition and a crowbar, and left the vehicle on the footpath by the entrance.

"Chancellor, you're alive!" said the security man on duty.

"And I'm going to stay that way," said Mack.

"You can't leave that vehicle here," he protested as they jogged away.

"Keep an eye on it," Nate called. "I'll come back for it."

They dodged a couple of the electric vehicles used by the city commuters, shaped like capsules, whose drivers were obviously puzzled by the appearance of pedestrians well away

from the elevators. One woman did a double take when she recognised the chancellor. Nate thought he saw her reach for her phone assistant. They needed to find the freight elevator fast.

They scrambled down one flight of stairs, then another, with Mack being coached on where to go by Cindy through her phone-assistant unit. Then they skirted a long row of capsule-like e-cars to find the freight elevator.

Nate pushed the call button and then heard someone yell, “Security, looking for intruders.”

He pulled Mack down behind one of the parked cars.

“I’m the chancellor,” whispered Mack. “I don’t have to hide.”

“No sense in taking chances,” Nate whispered back. “In any case, they’ll want to take us to the security office and confirm our story – it could take hours.”

A pair of security men, guns drawn, walked past their hiding place.

“Are we really supposed to shoot at the chancellor?” they heard one say to the other.

“It’s just some impostor,” said the second guard.

As the guards were walking away, the elevator dinged, and the doors opened. Both men instinctively whirled and raised their pistols.

“I’m no impostor!” said Mack indignantly, standing up from behind the car.

Nate caught a shift in the guard’s attitude; a hint that they were far more determined than even the conversation they had heard indicated, and pulled Mack down again just as both guards fired. He fired back, leaning around the car they were hiding behind, making sure that both guards felt the wind of the shot. The guards dived for cover. While they were distracted, Nate pulled Mack into the elevator and slapped the button for the top floor. The doors closed, and the elevator rose.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“They shot at me,” said Mack, indignantly, as she stood up.

“When you get confirmed again, you can fire a few people,” said Nate. “And find out who spread the synth story.”

“My enemies will feel my wrath,” said Mack. “It’s something to live for.”

“Until then, we’re still in trouble. You've got Cindy on the line? Tell her we’ll stop at the floor below the top for this thing.” Nate slapped the button for that floor. “And ask if she can fix the cameras on that floor and the electronic lock on the stairwell.”

“Sure, but why?”

“’Cause I’m pretty sure they’ll be waiting for us at the top level, no matter what the cameras show. Those security guys, if they were actual guards, were serious, and I shot back. I didn’t hit anyone, deliberately, but now they’ll just shoot on sight.”

Mack told Cindy what to do as they rode upward. Another thought occurred to Nate.

“If Cindy can’t unlock the stairwell doors, can she tell us an emergency code for the doors?”

“I can unlock the door on that level,” she said when Mack relayed the request. “But not the door at the very top. That’s still barred by security procedures I cannot break.”

“We’ll take it,” said Nate, “and thanks. We’ve got security protocols of our own.” He handed Mack one of the pistols he had brought and disengaged the safety catch. “It’s now live. You pull the trigger, and a bullet flies out. Don’t put your finger on the trigger until you mean to use it.”

Mack nodded and took the weapon.

“Any handgun can be inaccurate at more than a couple of paces unless you’ve practiced. If you have to shoot, do it when the target is real close.”

Mack nodded again and managed a smile. “I hope my husband comes in range.”

The elevator stopped, and Mack and Nate stood to one side as the doors slid open. No one.

"Okay, good, quick," said Nate, "before anyone realises we're here."

The stairwell door was a few paces away. He opened it as quietly as possible, whispering to Mack to tell Cindy to let the elevator ride to the next floor. He closed the door and started walking up. Turning to Mac, he put a finger on his lip, and she whispered into the phone assistant, telling Cindy not to speak.

They made it past the first landing without incident, but as they approached the top landing, Nate crept up close enough to see another guard leaning against the stairwell door, apparently bored out of his mind. This had to be hard and fast. He crept up a few more steps, then erupted up the stairs.

"Move or speak, and you're dead," he told the guard, a pistol on the man's skull.

The no longer bored guard nodded. Nate took the man's pistol, then used one of the ties he had brought to bind the man's hands behind him, and taped his mouth shut. Now for the noisy part.

Nate used more tape to fasten two of the grenades to the security lock, with the pins outward, removing the safety clip. Technology may have changed in many ways, but grenades still worked much as they had during the World Wars on Earth.

"Take this guy down to the next landing," he told Mack, gesturing at the guard, as he taped up the grenades. "I'm just about to ruin your nice security door. When the bang comes, block your ears and open your mouth."

"Got it," said Mack, leading the guard down the stairs.

Nate finished taping the grenades, saw that the chancellor was in position, pulled the pins, and then half ran, half fell down the stairs to cover both Mack and the prisoner with his body. Although Nate and Mack had both hands firmly clamped over their ears, the resulting bang was truly deafening, echoing right through the enclosed stairwell. After checking that the others were uninjured, although the guard was plainly affected by the noise, Nate grabbed the chancellor's hand and pulled her back up the stairway, through the smoking, ruined door. An alarm was blaring, and a voice was declaring, "Intruder alert, intruder alert."

"That woke them up," he said, and he pulled the chancellor through a passageway into a reception area, just as two of the security synths arrived at the stairway door.

"Keep down," he whispered.

The security droids did not talk to one another, of course. They were being directed from a control unit somewhere on that level. Nate did not know where that control unit was and did not have time to find out. In any case, they could probably network quite well without it. They also had perpetual 360-degree vision thanks to a single white band in about the same place a sweat band would be on a human. The band concealed several cameras. The head was a mould designed to reassure humans. Of more concern to Nate was that they also had mean-looking weapons – machine guns with massive box magazines.

He peeked around the corner of the open door into the passageway to see one droid go through the door while the other stayed put, no doubt carefully surveying the area through its hidden eyes. Nate hastily withdrew and grabbed Mack's hand again to lead her to the door to the Chancellor's administration offices proper. It was locked. Nate was wondering what to do when the door opened and the third droid walked through.

They were crouching very low, but as Nate knew, the droid did not have to turn around to see them and must have detected them almost immediately. It began turning, but Nate, grabbing the crowbar from his day pack, hit it hard on the nape of the neck and smashed into it with his shoulder. The droid staggered. The patrol officer then grabbed both its legs with his arms and yanked with all his might. Droids were no different from humans in

that if their balance was badly upset, they would fall over. That droid fell with a shattering crash. Nate and Mack ran.

"Which way to your office?" said Nate. There was no point in being quiet; the droids would find them again soon enough.

"This way," said Mack, and they dashed down another corridor to a door helpfully marked 'Chancellor's Office'. "This is the back way." She rattled the handle. "It's locked."

"Just an ordinary key-code lock," said Nate. "Excuse me, Chancellor." He took another grenade from his backpack. "Is that door there, unlocked?"

"Yes," said Mack, trying it.

"Okay, here we go, we have just seconds before the droids find us again."

Nate taped the grenade to the lock and stepped through the door of the adjacent room, which held cleaning units and supplies. There was a whump, and they re-emerged just as the sound of heavy droids running came from the next corridor. One kick from Nate opened the door, which then hung drunkenly on one hinge.

"Go, go, I'll hold them off… somehow."

Mack charged off into another room, now talking openly to Cindy, as Nate looked around. A single bookcase stood against the wall, nearby. It contained expensively bound books, photographs, and a model of a yacht used to sail the seas of distant Earth. The patrol officer pushed the ruined door shut and yanked hard on the bookcase. It fell with a massive crash just in front of the door, and then Nate shoved it hard, lying almost parallel to the floor. The droids reached the door and rattled on it. They could have simply come in by the main entrance, Nate thought, and he wouldn't have been able to do much, but they didn't need to be subtle. They pushed hard, and Nate felt himself sliding over the carpet. His feet knocked over one of the chairs in front of the chancellor's desk.

One of the droids – all three were pushing, no wonder he was losing, thought Nate – smashed its fist through the central panel of the solid door, twice, then poked its machine gun through to point it straight at Nate. The patrol officer was about to try to roll away, thinking the droid had him dead to rights, when he heard, "Security, stop!"

The droids stopped pushing, and the gun was withdrawn from the door.

"Cindy, tell the droids to return to their duties," said Mack, speaking on her phone-assistant. "Station one by the stairwell door and another by the elevators. No one is to enter without my prior approval.

"Of course, Chancellor," Nate heard Cindy say.

"I will see General Isle in about ninety minutes. All his access and security clearances are revoked until further notice. It is the same for my husband, Senator Gillard, who is to be permanently locked out of the chancellor's house. He is to be brought here and kept in the waiting room until I am ready to see him. Issue a statement saying this: "quote, Chancellor Mackenzie Makarov has complete control of the city and will deal with certain groups in the city that tried to kill her and take power. Further details will be released in due course, but there is no need for citizens of this city to be concerned. All parts of the city will function normally. End quote. Cindy, take charge of the enquiry desk. There is no need for any staff to return tonight. Tell anyone from the media who inquires that I'm not available for comment, but further statements will be released when I have more to say."

Mack hung up, put the assistant unit on her desk, and stood over Nate, who was still lying on the floor.

"You've been wrecking my office, Captain Olsen," she said sternly, "and I just had it redone in the way that I like."

"Well, it's like this," said Nate, holding out his hand for Mack to help him up. "I was doing it all for this really great woman, a few years older than me…"

"Four, I looked it up."

"… who worked her feminine wiles upon me," he stood up, "and made me all sorts of promises about what would happen if I helped her."

Mack pulled Nate to her so that his arm wrapped around her, one hand resting on her arse, which he gently squeezed. She gasped, and they kissed. This time, she didn't push him away.

"And that woman is going to make good on her promises, big time," she said after their mouths unlocked. "In fact, I was thinking that it will be a while before my meeting with the general. A release from all the running around and blowing in all doors, combined with a dash of revenge, before I give my husband his marching papers, would go down well."

Nate picked the chancellor up in his arms.

"Taking charge, Captain Olsen?" she said, coyly.

"Is there somewhere we can go?"

"There is a room with a bed where I sometimes take a nap," she said, pointing at another door. "It's through there - one of the few doors you haven't blown open. Cindy, don't bother me until the general arrives."

"Yes, Chancellor," said Cindy, as Nate carried Mack away.

END OF PART I

PART II

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The occasion was a working dinner in the chancellor's official residence. Mack had them sometimes when Nate was off on patrol in the months they had been together, and there had been no time for a business lunch. The chancellor occasionally mentioned them to Nate, who did not care, but she thought she might have to omit the details on this occasion as the dinner was with the handsome and distinguished Senator Theodore Komnenos.

Mack could not help but be flattered that she had scored dinner with the recently single Senator Komnenos, a heart throb among the females in the broad political community, even if it was about managing the Senate. Most of the available females in that community, and some who weren't, would have gladly taken her place, and never mind the reason for the dinner.

As part of her strategy for handling the senator and the faction he represented, Mack had not mentioned that she had a boyfriend, and by a miracle, the relationship was not generally known. Mack's friends knew about Nate. She often spent weekends at his place, and he occasionally spent the night at the chancellor's official residence. But that had all slipped past the news feeds. The journalists of Rasand were not nearly as intrusive in personal matters as those of distant Earth. In any case, the general assumption had been that Mack would take her time in replacing her disgraced husband, Senator Corbin Gillard.

As there was little direct evidence against Gillard – Dan's statement counted as hearsay – the senator had been allowed to resign, as had the guard's General Isle. The Guard Captain and associates who had tried to kill Nate and Mack out in The Shade had been rescued and arrested. They would reside in the city's small jail, along with disgraced patrol officer Dan, for several years before being allowed to take a low-level administrative or droid supervision job and forgotten. Mack had also insisted that the police genuinely clean house.

The ensuing fuss had given the chancellor much-needed extra authority in dealing with the Senate and city administration, with the additional benefit that no one in the political community had noticed that she and Nate were lovers. However, that "coup recovery effect,"

as the news sites called it, was wearing off. Mack needed an edge and was not above a little flirting to get what she wanted. That night, Senator Komnenos was the target.

"Are you going to oppose the oversight committee's recommendations for contractors on the new buildings in the reactor district?" asked Komnenos.

"That depends," said Mack. "Have all the procedures for tendering been followed? How many bids were there, and what was the reason for choosing the winning contractor? I'll look at their report on the matter and, if nothing stands out, then I'll wave it through. I won't get caught up in administration unless I have to. The auditor's office will also be looking. Of course, I always value your opinion on any matter."

"Can't ask for more," said the senator, taking another bite of roast. "I don't think there is any problem. But, you know, there's another matter I wish to discuss."

"Oh yes," said Mack, smiling. "You know I'm interested I whatever you want to talk about."

"Well, now that Corbin is out of the picture, I think we'd make a great couple. I want you to marry me."

Later that night, the offer was relayed to Cindy, who promptly ran the proposal through her relationship decision-making matrices. She had previously put the Nate-Mack connection through these matrices, which, she said, drew on thousands of years of observations about human interactions, and found that it scored well. However, the rating for a Mack-Theodore connection was off the charts, particularly when it came to managing the senate.

"What did you tell the senator?" asked Cindy. "Did you tell him you have a boyfriend?"

"Well, no, I didn't tell him about Nate," said Mack. "I just said I had to think about it. To take the offer, I'd have to dump Nate, and I don't want to do that. He's sweet, supportive, and fun to be with."

"You also like Senator Komnenos."

"Well, yes… But I can't have both."

"You know what also rates off the charts?"

"What?"

"A connection between Mack and another woman," said Cindy. "A professional, maybe – a lecturer, or a lawyer, perhaps – but without the high profile chancellor's position. That can be a strain on anyone not in the political community. If you put him to one side, he would be free to find that partner."

"He never mentioned anything about finding my job a strain," said Mack.

"The relationship is still in the early phase matrix," said Cindy. "My matrices clearly point to problems over the long term, and he'd be better off with someone else."

"Really?" she said.

A week later, Mack slipped out of Nate's bed and took off the faux-cotton top and pants, which she used as night clothes when she stayed with him, while Nate rolled over to enjoy the show. The chancellor had an excellent body, and she did not mind displaying it for her boyfriend. Sometimes she would turn to smile at him while he watched and even shake her hair. Not today, however.

"I'll have to change at home and take a shower after my first meetings," she said.

"I could come there and help you shower," said Nate hopefully. "We could even squeeze in a spanking." A few light slaps on the buttocks, both given and received, had become a thing between them. The custom had provided considerable amusement among

Mack's friends when she mentioned it at a girls' night. A few had remarked that slapping Nate's buttocks would be interesting. Mack had smiled and agreed.

"You have patrol work to do, Captain Olsen," she said, putting her bra on and sitting on the bed so that Nate could fasten it. "Colonel Griggs gave me a hard enough time when I borrowed you for my personal guard after the coup attempt."

Nate had stayed with the chancellor for two weeks while the coup plotters had been rounded up and dealt with. The job had fringe benefits.

"When will I come again?" asked Nate. "I should be back from the next patrol on Thursday this time."

"About that," said Mack, pulling on her casual slacks and not looking at Nate. "Things have changed. We have to call time."

"You mean you're dumping me?" said Nate, sitting up in bed. He had not been expecting this at all. Mack had been passionate during the night, not reluctant. In fact, they had not strayed far from his bed for most of the weekend.

"Well… yes, if you want to put it like that," she said, turning to look at him. "I'm sorry, it's just a few things together."

"Like what?" said Nate, sharply. "Name one of these things."

"For one, I'm chancellor," she said, putting on socks. "I've got an image to cultivate."

"And I'm a lowly Patrol Captain."

"It's not that," she said, putting on her shoes. "It's just that I need political advantage, and I can get that through a liaison…."

"You mean you're going to try marrying another senator, after what happened with the last one?"

"Being available helps," she said, finally turning to look at him. After some debate with herself, Mack had decided not to mention Komnenos' proposal or Cindy's matrices. "And I can't be available if I have a boyfriend on the side. I'm sorry, Nate but it just didn't fit. I'm being honest here."

"I'm sorry too," said Nate. "I thought things were working well, and we would last."

"Well, they were going well. It was great fun." She picked up her bag. "But I can't help being insanely ambitious." She smiled when she made that last statement. Nate did not smile back. "You're a great guy, Nate. You'll easily find someone else, and be really happy with that other person, and forget about me."

"Despite being a difficult study."

"You're not at all," she said. "Quite sweet, really."

"Whatever," said Nate. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

"You too," she said, smiling again, and was gone.

Down in the official capsule car she always took back to her residence on Monday mornings, Mack took out the tablet with briefings on her meetings for the day, then sat back and closed her eyes. What had she done?

"Chancellor?" said Cindy over the car speaker. She always checked in at the start of Mack's day.

"Well, I did it. Are you happy now?"

"Ended the relationship with Captain Olsen?" said Cindy.

"Yes. I didn't want to, and wasn't going to, but somehow it slipped out. He shouldn't have asked when we could meet again. Then I would have just called during the week like I always do, and we would have agreed on him coming over. Being with him was easy, simple, undemanding."

"Now it's over, you are free to accept Senator Komnenos' proposal," said Cindy. "My matrices show that with the additional influence, you have a much better chance of persuading the senate to stop obstructing reforms and improve its oversight of government

operations. Damage to relationships will also be minimal. Captain Olsen will find a partner soon enough and forget about you."

"I don't want Nate to forget about me, or our good times, and I feel really terrible about the whole thing," said Mack. "Are you sure this is going to work out?"

"I've run it all through the relationship matrices, with alternate scenarios and even done stress testing with extreme inputs. The change worked out every time. What could possibly go wrong?"

Nate walked to patrol headquarters in none too good a mood. He had not realised how much the chancellor had grown on him until she suddenly vanished from his life. But he also knew that it was a bad move to try to get her back. Chasing after her would make Mack all the more determined to get rid of him. She would come back of her own accord or not at all.

The patrol captain was still thinking those gloomy thoughts when he walked into Patrol HQ reception to be greeted by the synthetic who presided over the desk for most of the day.

"They are waiting for you in the boardroom, Captain Olsen," she said.

"Who is waiting in the boardroom? I don't have any appointment booked."

"I was just told to send you to the boardroom when you came in. I don't know who is there."

Nate's visitors proved to be the academic Dr Josephine Caspigny, who wanted to negotiate peace with the Morlocks, and a Cactuar called Tamar, who stared at everything with bug-eyed fascination. Being inside a human building was a novel experience for the creature.

"This is Tamar," said Jo, who had been annoying Nate for months now over her request to be allowed to meet with the Morlocks well outside the city. "He is an elder and wants to discuss the blood promise his people are prepared to make to guarantee my safety."

Nate thought that he was not in the mood for yet another argument with Dr Caspigny. He had already wasted too much time with the woman. He was in the mood to shut her down for good.

"I've met Tamar, and he isn't an elder," said Nate. "You mean he's representing the Elders."

"No, he's an elder."

"He's representing the elders. I know the elders mostly, and he's not one of them. They probably chose him to represent them because they'd then be able to disown the man's actions when your party disappears."

"The blood contract is still binding," snapped Jo, folding her arms.

"Of course it is," said Nate. "The problem is, as we've discussed before, that we'd be the ones to enforce it, and we'd never do it. Patrol's not going to grab Cactuar at random and kill them. Whoever did the killing would go to prison. In any case, they've probably made a deal where the number of their people they have to give up is reduced by twenty for every human they deliver. A blood contract is one for one. They'd come out ahead."

"Nonsense," snapped Jo.

Nate spoke in his halting Cactuar to Tamar. "By how many will the glorious sacrifice count be reduced for each human delivered?"

Obviously startled at being addressed in his own language, Tamar hesitated, then gave the Cactuar equivalent of a shrug. The human obviously knew. His answer translated as fifteen.

"There you go, one human is worth fifteen Cactuar in the blood sacrifice stakes," said Nate.

Jo knew enough Cactuar to understand the number fifteen, but being an academic, she was not about to acknowledge reality, particularly when it conflicted with her wet dream of becoming the great peacemaker. Even just to make contact with the Morlock hierarchy would ensure her fame, and perhaps her fortune through book deals, or at least as much as that was possible in the limited market of Rasand. Instead, she got angry.

"Isn't that just typical of Patrol Command?" she spat.

"You mean in pointing out that your guarantee is meaningless, and the Cactuar have a hidden agenda?"

"In blocking attempts to start a constructive dialogue. We need to establish a dialogue with the Morlocks to provide a basis for a negotiated peace, and you want to keep this war going only to justify your existence."

Nate was not about to get angry in response, but he did think that the colonel had made him the front man in this issue in order to absorb these sorts of criticisms.

"Spare us the motherhood crap, Jo," he said. "I read that article you wrote about silly, obstructive Patrol Command blocking your efforts at peace making. Thanks for that. But the grim reality is that the Cactuar are obviously just stringing you along, hoping you'd be stupid enough to go to this meeting. You've also shown no real indication that you would be able to talk to the queen we've encountered."

"Queen?" she said.

"Sure, as in the statement we released that went into some detail about our findings, incomplete as they are. About the Morlock who talks."

Jo looked blank. She obviously had no idea what Nate was talking about, but she had a ready answer.

"I don't read statements from biased, incompetent authorities trying to justify their existence."

Nate sighed. "Jo, this is hardly helpful. The last group to decide that Patrol command did not know what it was talking about was a guard detachment, which was nearly wiped out as a result. As I've said before, if it were up to me, I'd let you go, but your disappearance would make us look bad, and we'd have to make some effort to get you back. Pass. That ends the matter. Don't bother Patrol Command or me about this, again, unless you have something a great deal better to show us than Tamar here."

Nate spoke to the Cactuar. "Humans are crazy."

Tamar shrugged again.

"What did you say to him?" asked Jo.

"If you know so much more than we do about the Cactuar and Morlocks," said Nate, "work it out for yourself. That ends the meeting. I have stuff to do. Remember to hand your visitor passes back at reception."

Nate hoped that would settle the matter. How wrong he was.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mack's friends were as surprised as Nate had been by the sudden breakup.

"I thought you and he worked well together," said Marta when Nate spoke to her by phone at the end of the workday.

"I thought you didn't like him much," said Mack.

"He considers me opinionated and too ready to share my views. I think he's too abrupt in rejecting those views, but I don't hold anything against him. He also doesn't take any of your shit, but I noticed that he's way more diplomatic with you. He seemed to care about you."

"Don't tell me that!" said Mack, sitting sideways in her chair behind the big chancellor's desk in her office. The office had been cleaned up after the coup attempts, and the doors had been fixed, but it all still strongly reminded Mack of that day when she had relied on Nate, and he had delivered. "Now I really feel like a mean, heartless bitch."

"It was your choice," said Marta. "But you're listening to an AI for relationship advice and want to turn romance to your political advantage. Breaking a few relationship eggs to get political omelettes is inevitable. For what it's worth, I thought far more of Nate than I thought of your ex-husband."

"At least Nate was right about one thing: you are too ready to share your opinions," said Mack.

Weeks passed without much happening either in Rasand City or out on patrol. As Colonel Griggs was the only one in Patrol Command who had known about Nate's connection to the chancellor, beyond serving as her personal bodyguard, no one else mentioned the matter to him. That suited Nate fine.

The colonel's only comment was that she had hoped to use the relationship as leverage in budget negotiations.

"Now that it's over, I have to stand in line with everyone else," she told Nate when they were discussing forthcoming patrols in her office.

"I'm sorry my personal affairs have not met your expectations," said Nate. He supposed it was too much to hope for a bit of sympathy in the matter.

"Hey, I wasn't dating her," said the colonel, "and I didn't break up with her. I was just hoping to use the connection."

A week after that, Nate was invited to an engagement reception for Mack and Senator Theodore Komnenos."

"That was fast," he thought. Nate deliberately did not look for any information on the senator. It was now no business of his what Mack did with herself, and he had no interest in politics. In any case, he was still sore over being dumped so abruptly by someone he had grown to care about. He was going to send in apologies, but Colonel Griggs stopped him.

"Mack says she wants to see you there," she said. "She wants to know that there are no hard feelings."

"Can't I show a lack of hard feelings by not showing up?"

"You can help patrol by meeting Senator Komnenos. He has real pull in the Senate committees. Senator Berensina will also be there."

"I have no wish to meet him, either. If you recall, we have history."

"I remember very well that you were engaged to his daughter. Your former relationships should make the meeting interesting."

"Painful, you mean. I'd prefer not to go."

"Don't be silly. Turn up in your best uniform – it's a reception, remember – swallow a few tasty snacks, drink some wine to ease the pain, and then slide away. Just don't speak to the senators after you've had a few. Gladhand first, then empty glasses."

"Drinking is the only part of the evening that makes any sense," said Nate.

On the appointed night, Nate arrived at Government House in his dress uniform, determined to put in the minimum time required. That would include a brief word with Mack, being sighted by the Colonel, and maybe nodding at Berensina. As the event was being held in the building's grand reception room, which he remembered from his stint as bodyguard to, not to mention lover of, the chancellor, he thought he knew the best exit for sliding away, never to return.

The event proved to be a distinguished one, filled with uniforms, dress suits, and evening gowns. But the obvious star of the evening was Mack in a white, strapless evening dress, hair up, with white shoes and elegant pearl earrings to match. Nate had not fully realised just how beautiful she was until that moment. Then she noticed him across the room and smiled, and the room fell away.

But next to her, of course, was a tall, handsome man, with a few touches of grey in his dark hair, exuding authority while wearing a tuxedo with effortless grace. That had to be Senator Komnenos. As Mack had seen him, Nate thought he would get the worst over with first and went over to her. Just as he approached, another lady came up to congratulate Mack on her engagement, leaving Senator Komnenos to eye him.

"I didn't know any of the patrol officers were invited," said Komnenos.

"You mean apart from Colonel Griggs?" said Nate. "Don't worry, Senator, I won't track any sand on the carpet. As it happens, the Chancellor and I had quite an adventure out in the desert, avoiding being murdered by a guard officer and friends, and I was her bodyguard for a time."

"Oh, right, you must be Captain Olsen, said the Senator. "Mack has spoken of you. That was a strange incident."

"Even stranger if you had to live through it. It was fun blowing up bits of Government House, but a lot less fun being chased by the security droids."

The senator "humphed" over that, then said, "Patrol seems to be a necessary evil, but why can't it just be part of the guard?"

"The one time that the guard tried to do what we did, senator, if you will recall recent history, the result was a disaster. The guard detachment was all but wiped out, and the one person to emerge with any credit from the affair, Guardswoman Crystal, was sacked by General Isle for daring to survive."

"To hear the guard tell it, patrol let them down," said Komnenos.

"Isle was grasping at any straw to divert blame from the disaster he organised, with the major in charge ignoring all patrol advice, and breaking several major rules we patrol by, including staying too long in one place. I went to rescue the survivors after I found several guard rings in the Cactuar market, and despite Isle refusing to believe his detachment was in trouble. Senator, if you want more disasters, then hand us over to the guard. They have a different method of operation and have proved extremely reluctant to adapt to the requirements of combating swarms of Morlocks in the desert."

"Humph, well, perhaps a closer look at the facts will show something different." Komnenos did not like being bested in an argument, but it was the only response he could think of.

"A closer look at the facts will confirm what I say, Senator," said Nate, who saw that Mack had gotten rid of the other lady and was bearing down on them. "Now, Senator, I think I've taken up far too much of your valuable time, so I won't tell you about Senators also being a necessary evil and instead compliment your fiancée." He turned to Mack. "You look fabulous, Chancellor. Truly stunning." Mack beamed. "And congratulations on your engagement. I hope you'll be very happy."

"Thank you, Nate," she said. "How have you been. I haven't spoken to you in such a long time."

"A conversation for another time," Nate said lightly. "You're busy." Two couples, probably senators and their partners, had arrived on the scene to congratulate Mack and Komnenos. "Your fiancé would not want you diverted from more important conversations by a lowly patrol captain."

"I never said 'lowly,'" said Komnenos.

As Mack and Komnenos then had to speak to their distinguished guests, Nate was able to slip away. But before he could get very far, he was ambushed by Senator Berensina. Nate thought he had yet to be even offered a drink.

"When I mentioned your name to my wife, she reminded me of the circumstances when I saw you last," said Berensina.

"All ancient history, Senator," said Nate. "I've put the matter behind me. I understand you're a grandfather now. Congratulations. Please convey my best wishes to Gisele."

"It is a pity I had to send you away, but you just weren't suitable for Gisele."

"As I said, Senator, I have no wish to discuss the matter," said Nate, sharply. "But, for the record, Senator, it wasn't you that sent me away, but Gisele. She was the one who told me to go. But you know my real regret about that incident?"

"What?"

"That I didn't knock you down when you offered me money. It was bad enough that you thought my family was somehow inferior to yours…"

"That wasn't what I meant."

"… but that you thought you could just buy me off with a few credits. I was so angry over that."

"I just thought I'd defray a few expenses to show there were no hard feelings," said the senator.

"Best if we don't mention that incident ever again, Senator," said Nate sharply. "My temper is getting shorter as I get older, and I wouldn't want to get into trouble for assaulting a senior politician. If you want to request another officer to represent patrol on that spaceport committee, feel free. It would be one less source of aggravation for me. Take care."

Nate stalked off before Berensina had a chance to say that wouldn't be necessary. He nodded at Colonel Griggs, who was deep in conversation with a guard colonel, and slipped out of the exit without being offered any of the snacks or drinks he had been promised. Nate did not care. He took the monorail – Rasand was a compact, built-up city with monorails running everywhere – and walked to his house, only to find a capsule car in the narrow lane outside his front door, along with three people standing at the entrance. These were the beautiful synth Olivia in a silvery-grey club outfit, a tall, handsome dude in a black suit holding a towel to one eye, and a red-haired girl in tight-fitting jeans and a crop top who Nate was sure he'd seen somewhere before.

"Hello," said Nate as he walked up. "To what do I owe this honour?"

"Oh, Nate," said Olivia, who put away the phone-assistant unit she had been about to use. "I was hoping to find you at home. We were close, and my friend developed a problem with his eye."

"I'm not a doctor… Ohhh! This is your synth friend."

"Yes, this is Jason. You helped get him out of jail, you remember?"

"Sure," said Nate. "But you know, as I explained the time you were here," (Olivia had visited one weekend when Mack had stayed over), "I'm not licensed to work on synthetics, just droids."

"Well, I was hoping you could take a quick look. The show starts soon, and if it's something simple…"

Nate sighed. Well, it wouldn't hurt to take a look.

"Come into the workshop," he said, punching in the passcode for his living quarters. Once inside, he punched in another code for the door to his workshop, which took up all of the ground floor.

Inside the compact workshop were three non-operational droids on stretchers, awaiting Nate's attention, and a workbench crowded with the various tools of the trade.

Oscar, the house droid whom Nate had rescued from the scrap heap, was in his usual chair. He reactivated and stood up when the door opened.

"You remember Oscar," said Nate.

"Greetings," said Oscar. "The weather is fine as it always is."

"I certainly remember Oscar," said Olivia, "and this is Miranda." She gestured at the red-haired girl.

"Right, hi!" said Nate. "How do you know Olivia?"

As he spoke, Nate got out a scanning unit and gestured at Jason to sit on the stool.

"I perform in the club next to hers, and we just got talking."

Now Nate remembered where he had seen Miranda before.

"Right, I caught your act with the pole once – entertaining stuff." In fact, Miranda had stripped during the act, leaving nothing to the imagination.

"Diplomatically put," said Miranda, smiling. "Are you always this polite?"

"Nope, just ask Olivia. She's heard about my dark side. The eye is driving you crazy, right?" The last question was directed at Jason, who nodded. "Take the towel away." He did so to reveal a red, inflamed, weeping eye." Nate began scanning.

"I see you're in your nice uniform," said Olivia.

"I was just at the reception for Mack's engagement."

"Of course," she said. "I should have remembered that. Mack was hoping you'd be there. I'm really sorry that you two broke up. I told Mack she shouldn't listen to Cindy with her relationship decision making matrices."

"So that was it," said Nate, still scanning. "She was letting Cindy tell her what to do. Mack told me it was about politics."

"That too," said Olivia. "She was always this really ambitious person. I told her it would be like her ex-husband all over again, but she wouldn't listen."

"Well, if she feels that way, maybe it was for the best. Anyway, I was sufficiently cut up about being dumped to stay away, but my colonel virtually ordered me to go." Miranda giggled. "You didn't rate an invitation? Bit difficult having you there, I guess."

"To a formal reception, yes. Mack apologised a lot and said she would make it up to me somehow, but I also didn't get to be a bridesmaid at her wedding. I would have liked that. I didn't even get to go to the wedding."

"Shame, but there was plenty of horror for me at that reception. I got ambushed by the father of my former fiancée of some years ago."

"The one who tried to buy you off? Mack told me something about it."

"He insisted on telling me yet again, how I just hadn't been good enough for his daughter – um – I think I know what the problem is. The fluid in the eye socket has become infected. There's a virus that likes the stuff. Same thing can happen with droids. It's fairly simple to fix. I just drain the socket, clean it, and replace the fluid. I have to take you to my clean room, which is that door there," Nate pointed at a door in the back wall of the workshop, "and put on the clean suit I use for droid work, but it doesn't take long."

Nate went to work, and about ten minutes later, Jason walked out with his eye working properly, although still looking worse for wear.

"Couldn't fix the eye completely on the spot," said Nate. "I don't know much about the synth-skin, but my understanding is that, like human skin, the discolouring fades. For the moment, I suggest some makeup, or maybe an eye patch."

"We can work with this," said Olivia, "looking closely at the eye. "And we can just make it. How much do we owe you?"

"That's okay. If I'm not paid, that avoids some trouble if the licensing bodies ever find out about this. Just call it a favour. You owe me one, and no, I'm not talking about sex."

Olivia smiled in a way that lit up the night.

"I hope I can do you a favour one time, Nate," she said. "Maybe you can come to the show for free. Let me know."

"One thing – how did you get the infection in the first place, Jason? Have you been having any work done on that eye?"

"Got an upgrade done, off the books," said Jason, moving his eye around experimentally.

"Whoever it was probably wasn't using a clean room. Stay away from them," said Nate.

"Okay, useful tip," said Olivia. "Thanks, a heap, Nate. This saves us a lot of time and questions. Miranda, let's go."

"Be there in a moment, Ol," said Miranda. She approached Nate.

The patrol officer thought she was pretty, albeit more interesting than beautiful. However, her body was to die for.

"You seem real sweet," she said, handing him a card. "If you want to meet me tonight, be at the stage door at one AM, when I get off. Just show that to the guy at the door, and you can take me to supper and show me your house. It looks kinda interesting."

"Ooookay," said Nate. This turn of events was puzzling, he thought, but could lead to good things.

"I've never had much to do with older guys like you," she said.

"Older?" said Nate, who was still in his twenties.

"I'm nineteen," she said. "To me, you seem ancient. Hope to see you then."

"Sure," said Nate.

"The uniform is nice," she said, flicking Nate's label. "But change into something more casual. A jacket with an open neck shirt. Bye!"

She left with a wave, leaving Nate holding the card, still somewhat bewildered by the turn of events. He shook himself and put the card away. Why not go to the club stage door at one AM? It was not as if he had anyone to answer to.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Mack called Marta a couple of days after the reception, it was not to discuss the event or her fiancé's speech at it – that had all been successful – but to complain about Nate.

"He's replaced me with a red-haired, teenage stripper!" she said.

"That's a surprising choice for him," said Marta. "But it's a good thing that he's moved on, especially as you've gotten engaged."

"Well, sure, but a red-haired stripper, and it wasn't his idea! This girl brazenly asked him out and then all but dragged him into bed after that first date."

"She was making the choices, and Nate's a guy," said Marta. "He's not going to turn down an opportunity, especially since his ex has gotten engaged. How do you know all this anyway?"

That involved explanations about how Nate had met Miranda the stripper, and how Miranda had told Olivia what had happened, who had then told Mack.

"Nate made himself useful to your friend," said Marta, eventually. "That's good, but I still don't see the problem. You're engaged to this good-looking, distinguished, successful Senator. The engagement reception was a major social event, and Nate made an effort to turn up. I saw him speaking to you and you smiling, so he must have said the right things."

"He did, although he only went because his colonel ordered him to go and didn't stay very long. I wanted to talk to him."

"Anyway, he was there and said the right things," said Marta. "But I didn't see him after that, and I also wanted to speak to him about the city."

Mack then told her how Nate had been ambushed by Senator Berensina.

"No wonder Nate didn't hang around," said Marta. "But then why worry if a horny harlot of a teenage stripper throws herself at him? What business is it of yours now anyway?"

"It wasn't supposed to work out like that," said Mack. "Cindy told me that he'd meet someone mature and professional and be much better off with her rather than with high-profile me. Instead, he's taken up with a teenage piece who's already got a conviction for theft."

"Wait, how did you know she had a conviction?" said Marta. "Did you check if she had a police file?"

"Olivia mentioned it. I'm just looking out for Nate. I really miss him."

"You should be looking out for your fiancé, not the ex-boyfriend you dumped without warning, and you shouldn't be missing Nate. That's not how an engagement works."

"So, Cindy has been telling me," said Mack. "I'm beginning to dislike her relationship decision making matrices. Theo doesn't need me, but someone has to look out for Nate. Why couldn't he at least have chosen a lawyer or a professor of the arts or something?"

"Maybe if the professor of arts takes up stripping," said Marta, rolling her eyes and deciding that Mack was not going to be reasonable about the matter. "Speaking of the arts, you know they're offering doctoral fellowships for research into the city? The pictures you took and the report I've written have sparked a lot of interest. You said you could explain the images on the temple walls with reference to those nightmare texts Nate sent you. An application for a PhD fellowship for research along those lines would be almost guaranteed acceptance."

"If I wanted to give up being chancellor and live like a student again."

"You always talked about it. I'm just pointing to the opportunity. In the meantime, you should stop wasting time checking on Nate and concentrate on your fiancé instead. Nate's a big boy and can look after himself."

"I suppose," said Mack.

Colonel Grigg also wanted to kick around the events of the engagement reception, but from a very different perspective.

"I don't know what you said to Senator Komnenos, but he seems to have dropped this wretched idea of making us subordinate to the guard."

"He happened to mention the matter to me, and I told him how the guard had engineered a royal disaster. He seems to have taken my points to heart."

"Good! See, you did the patrol a favour in turning up. Although you didn't hang around, I note."

Nate told her about meeting Berensina.

"Poor lamb! But it's a pity he scared you off. I could have used you when I spoke to Senator Komnenos about that academic who wants to bring about peace with the Morlocks."

Nate groaned. "Dr Jo is still causing trouble, but one good thing came out of that last conversation I had with her. You remember she brought along a Cactuar called Tamar?"

"I remember you saying, yes."

"Later, I saw him in the market and thought to ask him if they knew what happened to the individuals who participated in the glorious sacrifice."

"No one's ever gotten an answer on that," said Grigg.

"Tamar said they were taken to the breeding chamber and fed into some sort of acidic sludge that dissolves the bodies, eventually."

"Ick," said Colonel Grigg. "They're still alive for a time?"

"And screaming. He also said the breeding chamber with these food vats is where we think it is – under the city ruin."

"Now that is interesting," said Grigg. "Did you get anything else out of him?"

"He clammed up after that and sidled away. He thought he'd said too much, I guess."

"No matter," said Grigg. "It's more than many of the academics, including this idiotic Dr Jo, have been able to find out. Senator Komnenos said he thought she had a chance and wanted patrol simply to let her through the East Gate. I said I didn't want to risk the lives of good people getting that lunatic back. I hope that kills the matter. Now, about the patrol schedules."

Nate saw Miranda several times over the next two weeks, with her always nominating the time and place, and occasionally posing odd questions about his work.

"You guys are armed on patrol," she said, "but I never see you with a pistol, and there aren't any weapons in your place."

"We're not police," he replied, puzzled by the question. "We're issued weapons when we go out and hand everything back in when we return. That stuff is kept under lock and key in patrol headquarters."

"Being allowed to use pistols is so cool." Cool was her favourite word.

"Not when a host of Morlocks is bearing down on you. Then it's something you gotta do. Nothing cool about it."

Another time, she asked to see his workshop, which required him to go downstairs and punch in a passcode for the second door. He did this while she clung to his arm, saying how "cool" it all was. She met Oscar, whom she also declared to be "cool". Maybe it was all cool as she said, but something about her behaviour made Nate change the passcode to the workshop. A few days later, when he came home early after a long patrol, he heard music playing upstairs, and the small, sliding panel protecting the entrance keypad for the workshop had been pushed up. Nate was sure he had left it down.

He went upstairs to find a pretty, ash-blonde girl in a white crop top and torn pants watching a drama series on his entertainment unit. He could hear muffled grunts and moans from the bedroom. The girl looked up in surprise.

"Oh, hi, you must be Nate," she said, smiling.

"That's me. Who are you?"

"I'm Monique. I'm with Miranda. She's in there with her boyfriend." Monique gestured at the door. "She said you didn't mind if you were out on patrol – it's so cool that you get to travel outside the city like that."

"It's less cool when you have to fight Morlocks," said Nate. "As it happens, I do mind. Miranda never asked, and I never gave her access codes."

"Oh!" said the girl.

"Turn off the show and get your stuff. The party's over."

Nate walked to the bedroom door, passing close to Monique. He stopped for a moment to look at her eyes.

"You're a Synth," he said.

"Well, yes," said Monique, taking a step back. "I work with Olivia, who says she knows you. Is it a problem that I'm a synth?"

"I know Olivia, and I don't care that you're a synth. I care that Miranda is banging her boyfriend in my bed."

He threw the door open, giving the couple inside a split-second to register that he was there before he grabbed the lanky youth on top of Miranda around the arm, close to the shoulder, and pulled with all the might of his legs and upper body. The youth smashed against one wall, breaking a picture hanging there and knocking photographs off a dresser, then fell to the ground stark naked.

"Oh, Nate!" said Miranda, gathering sheets around herself. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

"Clearly," said Nate.

"What's your problem, man?" said the youth, picking himself up from the floor. "Miranda said you'd be down with this."

"She lied to you," said Nate. "And put something on. You don't want me throwing you out naked."

He turned to Miranda.

"You must have worked out my passcode."

She shrugged.

"I see you also tried to get into the workshop downstairs. I change the code for that door regularly. What were you hoping to do down there?"

Miranda shrugged again. "It just seemed cool - those droids you're working on, and that droid assistant unit you have."

"Whatever," said Nate. "I'll change the passcode for here. Don't come back."

"You're too old for me, anyway," said Miranda, pouting.

"Then you should be happy you won't be coming back," said Nate. "Okay, everyone, get dressed and grab your stuff, and make sure it's your stuff and not my stuff. Let's roll."

In a few minutes, Nate mustered his three unwanted guests in the living room and, after checking that they did not have any of his belongings, herded them down the stairs and out into the street. Miranda and her boyfriend stalked off, without looking back, but Monique hung back.

"Sorry about that, but I just didn't know," she said.

"I'm not blaming you," said Nate. Good looking synth blondes who had just been following others got a pass as far as he was concerned. "Miranda seems to have lied a lot."

"Yes, lied," she said. "Synths have trouble lying, and I want to know more about humans." She handed him a card with her name and number on it. "Call me if you want to help me find out about humans."

"Do you have a boyfriend?" asked Nate.

"No, at least no one really in my life, but I get lots of offers."

"I'm sure you do," said Nate. He put the card in his pocket.

"Hope to see you soon," she said, smiling, as she walked away.

Nate thought that she might hear from him. He was a guy. But first, he had to change the passcode to the main house and put his bedroom to rights, which included changing the sheets on the bed. He had finished all of that, with some help from Oscar, finally taken off his boots, and collapsed on the bed when the phone rang. It was Colonel Grigg.

"That academic Jo managed to get out of the city," she said. "Mack's fiancé, Senator Komnenos, gave them access to one of those side gates, bypassing us, and her group has already disappeared."

Nate groaned. He knew what was coming.

When Mack found out what her fiancé had done, she called him.

"Theo, what were you thinking? Everyone agreed that Jo would just end up as a Morlock meal."

"Seemed worth the risk," said Komnenos, unabashed. "If she manages to pull off peace negotiations, it would be a major coup. If not, it's just a few academics, and it was their choice to go. I'm not about stopping people from making choices."

"The problem is we have to try to get them back," said Mack, "and that puts many more lives at risk."

"Just order patrol not to try," said Komnenos, again apparently unperturbed by the group's disappearance, or that his decision to let them use the gate had probably doomed the whole group.

"You know we can't do that," retorted Mack and hung up. "Cindy, you're listening?"

"Always," said Cindy.

"This engagement isn't going to work. I can't believe that Theo would do that. When everything settles down, I'm breaking it off with him."

"But wait, the relationship decision making matrices show you'll have huge trouble in the Senate."

"Oh, hang your relationship decision making matrices. I'm going to dump Theo, and then I'm going to beg Nate to take me back. I didn't realise just how much I liked him until I left. He's got this weird taste in music and argues back, but he's also sweet and interesting, and we have fun together, and I really miss him. Now he'll probably have to risk his life because my fiancé screwed up."

"He's with this stripper you spoke of," said Cindy, who wasn't quite sure what a stripper did. At least she had plenty of information on what they did, but it did not make sense to her.

"That's true."

"And you're going to face enormous trouble in the senate."

"I have a way around that," said Mack. "One that solves all difficulties, at least as far as I'm concerned."

"Oh?" said Cindy, "and what's that?"

Wrapped in some sort of cocoon, Dr Josephine Caspigny was being carried along a tunnel. The moment she had approached the entrance to the cave complex at the place they called Bandour, the Cactuar who had escorted her there vanished, and a horde of Morlocks had appeared. Her party had been seized and wrapped in soft material, like a thick but light wool blanket, which stank. She had trouble breathing. Pleas to be taken to the elders and protests that they were a diplomatic mission fell on deaf ears. Instead, the Morlocks slung the cocoons onto poles, at least from the little she could see out one end of her cocoon, lifted the poles onto their bodies, and started marching fast. They were in a tunnel, she thought, and travelling at a great pace. Perhaps when they got to their destination, Jo thought, the Morlock elders would apologise for this behaviour.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Nate knew what he would be asked to do the moment he got the call from Colonel Grigg, but there were practical difficulties.

"We think the snatched party is likely to be kept alive and moved through the tunnels at some speed to the ruined city," said Nate. He was sitting in The Patrol's conference room with Colonel Grigg, her second in command, Major Gorrin, the buffoonish Captain Jason Boulcott, and Guard Colonel Alfred Montigny, who was continuing the grand Guard tradition of arrogance and contempt for everyone else, including members of Patrol Command.

"You think?" exclaimed Colonel Montigny. "You'll have to do better than think, Captain."

"All you'll get is think, colonel," snapped Nate. "We didn't even know that much until a few days ago. We weren't even aware of the ruined city until a few months ago. Research into Morlocks as a species has been all but impossible for various reasons. Before recent breakthroughs, we wouldn't have even considered trying to get this lunatic party of academics back. We wouldn't have known where they were likely to be taken."

"Captain Olsen is right, colonel," said Grigg. "We only realised that the breeding chambers and food vats for the species must be under this city a few weeks ago, after years of searching. Even then, we can only guess at the process or the exact room they'll be taken to. We've been monitoring the city and dropping drones into the tunnels, but we only have partial plans."

Colonel Montigny sighed theatrically. "Well, if patrol command can't work things out, Guard will just have to step up and clear out this nest. Tell us where this breeding chamber is supposed to be and we'll fix it."

"You'll do no such thing, colonel," snapped Grigg. "That guard detachment was all but wiped out just metres from where the rescue party has to go, because the major in command distained our advice. The chancellor, after reviewing the evidence from the disaster, has decreed that all forays into the desert must be under patrol command. She has also directed you to allocate guard personnel to groups under our officers. That's why you're here. You're not here to take over the mission."

"But I can't ask our officers to act under patrol directives," spluttered Montigny. "That's absurd. We're the city's fighters, and we've got the firepower to prove it."

"Then don't give us any officers, sir," said Nate. "I'm the one who has to take the lead group in, yes?" He looked at the colonel, who nodded. "And I can't operate if I've got a guard officer who knows nothing about this sort of fighting trying to give orders and take over command. I have room for two. Give us two guardsmen or women with some of this firepower you're talking about, but not flame throwers."

"Why not flame throwers?" said Montigny, exasperated. "They'd be one of the best weapons against these hordes."

"Been over this," said Major Gorrin, an experienced patrol officer in his day. "What happens is that the Morlocks catch fire nicely and keep right on coming. You get a heap of moving torches trying to break into your position. We use fire grenades that spread around a sort of napalm, but only if we know that the Morlocks can't get at us straight away. Fire works then."

"Oh, very well," muttered Montigny.

They settled on the details. Nate would lead the first party, which would airlift in using the big, seldom used Hydrogen-filled airship to drop the five-man group on top of the temple's prayer tower. The airship made some noise, but not nearly as much as a helicopter. As it would be just dawn, with the streets and the temple deserted, the Morlocks did not bother with sentries; it was hoped that the creatures would not realise the human group was there for a time. Nate's party would also have silencers on their pistols, which was a first for any patrol group. Once down, the group would hide somewhere in the complex. Nate could see a couple of possibilities from the partial plans, but he would have to make a choice on the spot.

Then the real fun began. While Nate and Co were finding a place to hide and avoiding being slaughtered in the breeding chambers, a second, much larger group would airlift in, this time using the only two helicopters the city had. These had been brought all the way from Earth in the mothership, were under guard control, and used only for special occasions. Hopefully, the noise would attract the Morlock guards, who would then be too busy attacking that group, which would be equipped with all the latest guard gadgets, to notice Nate's group trying to find the academics.

That was the hardest part of all. Nate was unsure exactly where Dr. Jo's group would be taken or even when they would arrive in the city. They might be too late by hours (the most likely outcome), in which case they could grab what evidence they could that the group was dead (Nate didn't know what that evidence would be) and run away. Or they might be too early, and waiting around near the breeding chambers and vats was not a good idea.

Once Nate's part of the mission had been resolved, one way or another, his group had to cut their way through to the second group – somehow. As it would still be daylight, they could reach the surface and make a run for it, trusting that the guard's firepower would cut a path for them. With any luck, the choppers could refuel and return to drop explosives and pick up survivors. While all this was going on, two patrol carriers commanded by Major Gorrin would circle around the shade to also rescue any survivors or possibly avenge their deaths.

Nate thought that there were a lot of moving parts to the plan and that too much was being left to chance, but he could not see any other way, given the information available, of rescuing the academics. He was just drawing the equipment he could need from the guard armoury when Mack called.

"You're going out on this really dangerous mission?" she said.

"Well, sure," said Nate. "I can't back out of it. Mind you, if we do find Dr Jo alive, I may kill her for putting me in this fix."

"I'll be really sorry if you don't come back, and I'm sure your red-haired stripper will also be sorry."

"You mean Miranda?" said Nate. "I just found her having sex with her boyfriend in my bed. I threw them out along with a blonde synth, who I think is also a stripper. I found her watching a drama series on my entertainment unit."

"If it's queued up on your unit, it was the series I was watching. Huh! Anyway, I thought you were Miranda's boyfriend?"

"I had no real emotional investment in Miranda, but I was also unaware that there was anyone else in her life until this tawdry incident," said Nate. "Now that I think about it, she may have just been staying over in order to case the place. They tried to get into the workshop downstairs."

"That total slut."

"You said it, not me," said Nate. "Mind you, the incident wasn't a complete loss as the synth gave me her card and said to call her.

"Another one, after what happened with the first."

"I'm a guy, Mack. Such adventures are interesting, and, just to refresh your memory on recent events, I was seeing a really great, slightly older girl who cut my heart out by dumping me in favour of a distinguished politician. But I really should go. I've gotta work out how to avoid dying horribly in some Morlock hellhole."

"Just before you go, and really quickly," said Mack, "about that horrible girl who cut your heart out. I want to put a hypothetical to you."

"Okay, real quick."

"What say a powerful woman dumped her sweet boyfriend in order to gain political advantage and then decided that she had made a mistake?"

"I see."

"If she begged to be taken back, would that boyfriend have her, do you think?"

"In this hypothetical, does the woman have a hot body?" asked Nate.

"Maybe."

"Then most times all the woman would have to do is snap her fingers, and the guy would come running," he said. "But if the guy was hurt by being dumped totally without warning, and unwillingly by that really great girl, he would insist on some begging, and that the woman swear off having her personal choices guided by relationship decision-making matrices."

"That all seems fair," said Mack. "The girl could be the object of a spanking as part of the begging process."

"The guy could work with that, but in this hypothetical scenario, isn't there supposed to be a fiancé somewhere?"

"There are details to attend to," admitted Mack.

"This is a very interesting conversation," said Nate, "and I really want to talk further about this hypothetical woman, but we'll have to finish it another time, if there is another time."

"I really want there to be another time," said Mack. "I want you to come back and not call that blonde."

"I really want to come back, and I'll give you a chance to show me some reason why I shouldn't call Monique. Gotta go."

"Monique, seriously?" said Mack, but Nate had already hung up.

Nate met his team in the mustering dock of patrol headquarters. They would be taken by capsule car across the city, away from prying eyes in the Cactuar sector, to a tall building in the industrial sector where they could board the dirigible. As Nate had not flown anywhere before – there had been nowhere to go by plane – he was interested in that part of the mission at least.

"Volunteers only for this, guys," he told his team. "You can back out now, and no one will think any the worse of you."

To his relief, none of his team moved. These included the two he had chosen, Rachel Crystal and Tyler Green, who had both been to the city before and even survived massive assaults with Nate. He was confident about both. The two guardsmen, Michael and Andre, were fresh-faced but looked sturdy enough. More importantly, they toted weapons that resembled old-fashioned submachine guns, complete with massive magazines and a much larger barrel.

"Grenade launchers, sir," said Michael. "Useful in clearing a path through hostiles."

"Excellent," said Nate. "But when we go in, shoulder them for now and use pistols with silencers. You got those?"

They yes sired.

"And head shots, remember it's head shots. One shot, then move on. Rachel, congratulations, I understand your guy is making an honest woman out of you."

"Yes, sir, just engaged."

"I'll really try to return you safely to your fiancé. In the meantime, you'll want to leave your ring behind."

"Oh, right, yes, sir, I forgot." She took it off and put it in her locker, which was nearby."

"Guards, I need you to follow my orders and not give me guard shit. This is the most dangerous thing that you're ever going to do. Trust me. You'll be a lot safer if you follow me and don't try to make up your own orders."

"Yes, sir," they said, although noticeably less enthusiastic than last time.

"Revisiting old haunts, Tyler," said Nate.

"But not ones with happy memories, sir," the guardsman turned patrol officer said. "Do we have to bring along this big screen?" He had been given the job of toting a wire screen, big enough to fit across a standard Morlock tunnel, rather than the smaller ones they used for doorways and windows. This had been rolled up and strapped to his backpack, but it was an ungainly, heavy thing to cart around. Nate had the generator and fuel, and Rachel had the comms unit, which linked their headsets to HQ; however, that connection was unlikely to work when they were under a lot of stone. The guardsmen also carried fold-up stretchers with wheels, designed so that one person could pull along another relatively easily, at least on a

flat surface. Nate would have liked to bring along a worker droid for grunt work like that, but did not have the space.

"Guys, this is going to be one you'll tell your grandchildren about," he said.

He did not add the phrase 'if any of us survive', but he thought it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nate decided that he did not like heights. At least, he did not like heights when he was at the end of a rope ladder dangling from an airship that he had to anchor to the top of the temple tower. As it was just after dawn, he could see how far down it was, which was way too far. With some effort, he concentrated on what was in front of him, the looming tower, which he was just about to collide with. Then he hit with a painful thud, but with one of the metal rungs of the ladder catching under a projection around the viewing platform. That left him dangling just short of two metres above the main platform. He let himself down to the last rung, to hang by one hand, before dropping.

"Okay, down," he said into his comms headset. "I'll tie it off. Send the others down."

Nate raced up the tower stairs – the tower was a box-like two-storey structure built on top of the temple's main observation platform. Marta thought it might have been used for rituals, but that had the scholastic status of a best guess. Thinking of Marta made Nate think of Mack, but he pushed such desirable thoughts resolutely to one side. First, he had to survive the day. He tied the ladder to one of the stone pillars supporting the roof, using an elastic cord with hooks on the end (which previous generations on Earth would have thought of as a bungee cord). The first down was Michael.

"Go down, grab the equipment bags," These were to be dropped by rope onto the main platform from the airship, "and check the city to see if anything's moving."

After glancing at the solar panels, which had been placed inside the tower to avoid drawing Morlock attention, Michael raced down the stairs. He was followed by Andre, who went down to join Michael, and then Rachel, stepping slowly, eyes tightly closed. She squeaked when Nate grabbed her leg.

"Keep going, you're doing well," said Nate.

Rachel came down several more steps before Nate grabbed her around the waist and pulled her bodily into the tower. She opened her eyes to see the PV panels.

"What are these for?" she asked.

"They power the cameras we've got set up to watch around the city," said Nate. "We had to put them inside the tower in case the Morlocks looked up and saw them. Get going, grab your gear, and call in what's happened so far."

Last was Tyler, who was stepping as slowly as Rachel. Nate dragged him onto the tower, and then they worked together to untie and unhook the airship. Once released, relieved of the weight of seven bodies, the airship shot out of sight."

"Air, this is ground, you okay?" said Nate, over comms.

"Yeah, yeah, I've just gotta bleed off a lot of gas," said the pilot who had taken them in. "You guys take care in there."

"We're sure gunna try, and thanks for the ride."

A few moments later, Nate's team was assembled on the main platform with the equipment on their backs. Michael and Andre were in full guard gear. This included a tactical helmet with various aids, including a visor that could switch to light-enhanced and infrared modes. Nate wished that there had been time for the rest of the team to be trained on those helmets. Patrol Command was not equipped or trained to sneak around underground. It never

previously had to. For the moment, the non-guard members of his team would have to make do with pocket infrared scanners given to them by the guard.

Michael reported that there was no apparent activity in the ruined city and no indication that the Morlocks were aware of their presence. So far, so good.

"From now on, we speak only in whispers and only if we have to," said Nate. "If you have to go out into any dark place, check with infrared first. Gotit?"

They murmured assent.

"Let's go, I lead."

They went down several flights of stairs to the temple's ground level. Nate sniffed. There was a distinct Morlock whiff in the air, but it did not seem fresh. He scanned with the infrared device. Nothing. He led the group to the entrance by the altar that Mack had found. The entrance was quite open. The many Morlocks that had died there, at Nate's hand, had long been removed.

"You lead," Nate said to Michael. "Switch to infrared."

They went down the staircase - Rachel whispered a last update to control before they went underground – then around to the right. Nate put a hand on Michael's shoulder.

"I can smell them," he whispered in the guardsman's ear. "Hear that 'gak, gak, gak' sound?" Michael listened, then nodded. "There's one in the next room. Let me check it out."

The patrol officer peeked around the corner into the room with the wall art that had so intrigued Mack, then checked it on infrared. A single Morlock was moving around, apparently aimlessly. Nate was unsure what the Morlocks did below ground. His main concern before this had been to stay alive when the creatures decided to emerge. Was the creature there as some sort of sentry? If so, what was it guarding? Perhaps that was a question for another time.

Nate waited until the Morlock had its back to him, then stepped forward and put a bullet from his silenced pistol in the back of the creature's head. He rushed forward to grab the falling body – Morlock flesh was slimy to the touch – then eased it to the floor, to avoid the noise of a body crashing to the ground. He listened for a moment, with an infrared device to his left eye. Nothing. He was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when another Morlock loomed out of the darkness. Its eyes widened with surprise when it saw the human. Nate shot it twice in the head before it could yell in alarm and grabbed that one too, easing the body to the floor.

"Get rid of the bodies?" whispered Michael, stepping into the chamber. There did not seem to be any more of the creatures close by.

"Nowhere to put them where they wouldn't be found straight away," Nate whispered back. "We'll move on and hope our hosts are sufficiently confused by the second group to overlook two bodies in the wrong place."

He peeked around the corner of the far door – the same place the Morlocks had come from when they rushed himself and Mack – to find the broad passageway beyond empty of the creatures. Nothing was coming from the other direction, which, Nate knew, led back to the ramp that he had used when he first came to the city, close to where Rachel and Tyler had hidden. He stepped out, and the others followed. As they crept down the passage, Nate could hear someone, or something, speaking in Cactuar. The voice was too low and far away from him to make out the words, but they seemed to have a rhythm, a chant of some kind. When did the Morlocks start using chants? Then Nate realised that the smell of Morlocks was becoming stronger.

As Nate's group crept along the passageway, Mack entered the office of Senator Theodore Komnenos in the Rasand Senate building.

"Oh, hi, Madam Chancellor," said the receptionist – a synth designed to look and act like a female receptionist, but who never left her chair. "The senator is with someone just now, and I don't seem to have an appointment down for you."

"I need just ten minutes," said Mack, "and it's important, so I'll wait."

She hoped it would take just ten minutes.

"As it turns out," said the synth, smiling, the Senator is free now. Go right in."

That was good, thought Mack, she could get this over with straight away.

The glasses on Dr Josephine Caspigny's nose had been awry for hours, but she had been unable to do anything about them. Her arms were firmly pinned by her side. She had long given up asking for help or for the Morlocks to tell her what was going on. The journey then came to an abrupt end. She was dropped on the ground, and the covering she had been wrapped in was torn away. Free of the foul smelling blanket, as she thought of the covering, Jo had time to straighten her glasses before being grabbed by two Morlocks and hustled along a stone platform. The light was dim, but she could just make out that the stone platform was in a cavernous underground space and seemed to end above a pool of green liquid of some kind. Another academic, Dr Paul Bayard, a cultural anthropologist who had been looking forward to studying the culture of the Morlocks, was ahead of her on the platform. He had been a major supporter of Jo during her battles with government officials, who, as they saw it, were intent on blocking the path to peace. Two Morlocks, short and squat for their species, dressed in robes and wearing headdresses that bore some resemblance to those worn by the priests of ancient Egypt, started stripping him. Two more of the Morlock priests appeared and started stripping her. Bayard started yelling. She started screaming.

Nate found the room he had been looking for – really just an enclosure off the main passageway, but there was nothing in it, and no other entrance. Once they were in and flattened against the far wall, the Morlocks would have to look inside the chamber to detect them. One problem was their smell, but the Morlock scent was so powerful that, Nate hoped, the odour of a few humans in a side room would hardly be noticed.

They stood there listening to the 'plop' of bare feet on stone and 'gak, gak' sound as Morlocks came and went along the passage. Then, about an hour into their silent vigil, the creatures started rushing down the passageway towards the temple. A lot of them. Somewhere, a powerful voice was braying, in Cactuar, "Expel the humans, how dare they invade our" … Nate did not catch the next word, but the one after was "grounds".

"Guys," Nate whispered into his headset, "second team has arrived. The Morlock guards have gone to fight them. Get ready."

"How will we know what to look for or where to go?" asked Rachel.

"A very good question," said Nate. "I wish I knew the answer. But silencers until I say otherwise, people. And keep to infrared."

On the infrared scanner, he could see them all nodding.

The flood of Morlocks outside the room died away to a stream and then a trickle, then just the occasional straggler. Nate knew he had to go soon, but he just wished he knew which way to go. The maps derived from the drone scouts were incomplete, but they showed a maze of passages and rooms beyond their hideout. Stopping a Morlock to ask the way was not going to work.

Then, in the distance, Nate heard a woman screaming.

"Guys, it's on, let's go."

They charged out of the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The humans emerged from the room directly in front of two Morlocks, who started back in surprise. Nate put a shot through the forehead of each one.

"Helmet lights, guys," he said. "But keep to silencers."

The three from Patrol Command switched on their helmet lights, while the two guardsmen flipped up their visors. Then they all heard the screaming.

"To the left up there, maybe," said Rachel, pointing. One of her jobs was to keep an eye on a map screen displaying the incomplete layout of Morlock Central, and hopefully, prevent them from getting lost in the maze. To help her in that job, she had brought along a marker pen to put arrows at each turn. The marks could be seen in infrared. Nate thought he should commend her for the initiative when they got back – if they got back.

They charged up the corridor. The screaming grew in volume. Then the yelling by one man turned into screams of pain.

Jo's clothing and glasses had been torn from her. She stood completely naked, her arms held tight by two Morlock priests. Struggling was useless. Behind her, she could hear grad student Eloise screaming as she was also stripped. Before her, in the dim light mainly coming from the green pool before them, she could see that Dr Bayard, a fat man, had also been stripped and was being dragged towards the edge of the stone platform, shouting. Jo realised that they meant to throw her colleague into the pool, and her last, cherished delusions about the Morlocks fell away. She screamed louder.

The long passage followed by Nate's group came to a dead end, with the screaming growing ever louder, and they had to backtrack to an entrance on their right. Fortunately, the Morlocks did not bother with doors. They emerged in a room with what looked to be control panels along one wall. The panels did not appear to be working, but two of the Morlock priests whom Jo had encountered were standing before the panels, heads bowed as if in prayer. They did not move or turn around when the humans came into the room, so Nate's group ignored them. Instead, they made for an entrance on the left where a human was screaming in agony.

Through that entrance was another passage, and a little to the right, they found a heap of blanket-like material and a tangle of poles and ropes before an entrance that was much larger than usual and was in the shape of a pointed arch. A processional entrance? It also seemed to glow a greenish hue. Through that entrance, they found a long, stone platform—a roadway leading to a pool that emitted the greenish light. On it were two naked women struggling between pairs of Morlock priests and screaming. Another pair of priests stood on the lip of the platform, looking down at the water where a human male was screaming, but in agony. They seemed to be grinning in delight. The first pair of those priests had time to look around before Nate shot one in the head, and Tyler shot the other. The second pair looked around and opened their mouths only to be also silenced forever, albeit with Tyler taking two shots to finish off his Morlock. Then Nate realised that the second woman was Jo, but he had no time to even glance at her nakedness.

"Jo, get dressed!" he snapped.

At the sound of his voice, the final two priests, who had been staring with glee into the pool, whirled around and charged. Nate brought his pistol up and fired, only for the weapon to click empty. What? How did that happen? Had he seriously forgotten to check the magazines on his pistols before he went in? And the flap on his other holster was still buttoned up! Only one thing for it. Nate dropped his pistol, letting it swing from a lanyard – both pistols were tied to his belt for just such an emergency - and drew his sword, slashing

the charging Morlock priest across its throat, as he backed away. Then he brought the sword's tip up under the jaw of the still charging creature, letting its own momentum push the sword upwards into its brain. The light went out of the Morlock's eyes. Nate pushed the creature back and then kicked it, jerking his sword free. The now seemingly shapeless lump of flesh teetered on the brink of the platform for a moment before falling into the pool. Then Nate saw the academic.

Dr Bayard was writhing in extreme agony, screaming, as flesh literally melted from his bones. Transfixed in horror, Nate thought he saw a section of the academic's skull. He heard a yell behind him, to see another, larger Morlock priest charging down the processional way, directly at him. Both Tyler and Rachel fired at the newcomer, only to miss, their bullets flying off into the void. Then the creature was almost on him, arms outstretched, still screaming. Nate side stepped and whipped his sword across the Morlock's right eye, blinding it. The creature screamed, then skidded to stop before it went over the edge and whirled around. Nate had never known Morlocks to be agile before. Usually, they just kept coming until they were killed. These creatures with the funny headgear, as Nate thought of their head coverings, were of a different type and cast. This time, Nate tried to take out his second pistol, only for the creature to be on him in a split second, before he could bring his pistol up, grabbing him around the waist, pinning his arms, and turning to throw him into the pool!

Nate at least had his pistol in his left hand, albeit pointing down. He fired twice, one of the bullets hitting the creature in the lower body and making it let go before completing the turn. Nate dropped heavily to the platform, far too close to the edge for comfort, and hastily rolled away as both Tyler and Rachel fired, making the creature scream, but it did not fall to the ground. It sank on one leg. Nate drew his legs back, then kicked, and the creature fell over the edge, falling into the fluid with a huge splash. Nate hurriedly rolled away – he didn't want any of that stuff on him and stood up.

"Thanks, guys," he said to the others. Then he saw Jo, one hand around her breasts and another at her crotch to hide her nakedness, staring in horror at her colleague, still screaming in agony in the pool.

"Can't you help him?" she sobbed.

"He's too far away," said Nate. The threshing and writhing of the academic in his agony had carried him well away from the end of the platform. Nate thought, but did not add, that they wouldn't be able to do much for the academic, even if they could fish him out of what was some form of strong acid. They didn't even have any water to wash the liquid off him. He brandished his second pistol.

"There is only one thing to do."

Jo sobbed, then nodded, in tears. Nate glanced at Eloise, who had come up to stare in horror at Dr Bayard. She was also stark naked, but instead of trying to cover herself, had clasped both hands to her mouth. She caught Nate's eye and also nodded. Nate whirled, brought his pistol up, and fired twice. The screaming stopped. What was left of Bayard sank out of sight, still dissolving.

"Jo, get dressed. You, too," he pointed at Eloise. Even at that moment, he could not help noticing that Jo's figure was excellent while Eloise's was dumpy. "Rachel, help them find their clothes."

He spared one more glance for the green pool of horror – there did not seem to be anything else in the chamber – and walked back to the entrance. He found Michael and Andre with two more of the priests lying dead at their feet. They were the ones they had passed to get to the processional way.

"Good work," he said. "But where did that other, big one come from. I thought I was done for."

"There's a side room here," said Tyler, pointing just to the right of the processional way.

Sure enough, there was a small room that none of them had noticed with more of the dead control electronics. That last priest, by far the largest of them all, must have been lost in prayer in the room until Nate spoke on the processional way. Perhaps the race had regressed to the point where they believed the long-dead equipment could be controlled by prayer? It was a thought.

Nate spared a few seconds to take pictures in the control point and a few more in the first control room they had encountered, then returned to the processional way to find the two ladies putting on their shoes.

"Guys, let's roll," he said. "That was the easy part."

"Jesus wept," said Michael.

"We're still gotta get back to Rasand in one piece."

With the two civilians in the middle, the guardsmen at the end, and the patrol officers in front, they retraced their steps. Despite the noise they had been making and the killing of individuals they assumed were priests, they still did not see any Morlocks until they reached the passageway that led past the art room under the temple. There, Nate could smell Morlocks. He made the group switch off their lamps in favour of infrared scanners. He peeked around the corner and then hurriedly drew back as two worker Morlocks charged up.

Fortunately, both creatures passed the corridor without glancing in, but then went into the art room. After checking the passage again, Nate's group followed them but stopped at the doorway. The place stank of Morlock.

"Sir, we've got bogie in the distance at the rear and closing," said Andre, over the comms link. The guardsmen had their infrared scanners on.

"Up and to the right," said Rachel. "There's a room we can duck into. Won't be any through traffic."

"Let's do it," said Nate.

They charged on, moved inside the room, and hid as they had done earlier, listening to Morlocks waddle past their hiding place, saying 'gak, gak, gak'. They could also hear the occasional shots from the temple where the second party was holed up and, hopefully, holding out well. Then, behind them, they heard a 'thud' of something heavy being dropped, displacing a puff of air. As one, they whirled to see, on the infrared scans, the outline of a human body. Followed by another, and another, the last one sliding off the top to settle on the floor.

"Wait, guys," whispered Nate over the comms link. "There are still Morlocks up there."

He realised as he spoke that they were underneath the room with the wells that he had visited on his first day in the ruins. Worker Morlocks were dropping recently killed humans down the well for others to take to the dissolving pool they had just discovered. After a minute or so, he allowed them to move forward and switched on his lamp.

"Aw shit!" said Michael. "They're guard."

Nate then knew they weren't about to be rescued by the second party.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

While Nate's group stared in horror at the pile of bodies, the one on the top twitched.

"Still alive?" said Tyler.

They pulled the guardsman off the pile and checked what they could, including his pulse.

"Yep, still with us, just really chewed up," said Tyler.

They checked the other bodies to find one more still clinging to life.

"Okay, guardsman, looks like we've found a use for those fold-up stretchers you've been toting," said Nate. "It doesn't help our chances any, but we can't leave them. Clean 'em up as best you can and give 'em the injection against Morlock infection and stick them on the stretchers. I'm going to see what's happening with the second party."

To judge by the noise from the Temple, the second party was still holding out. Nate pulled Rachel to one side.

"I need comms and a guide. That ramp you hid close to during your stay here, that's near here, right?"

She nodded. "Couple of minutes."

"Guardsman, we'll be gone a few minutes. Tyler's calling the shots. No messing around."

Michael and Andre, busy with their comrades, nodded. Michael thought to grab the names of the guardsmen, dead and alive, then ducked out of the room. They had to hide again on their way to the ramp, but eventually, Nate was able to crouch on the ramp and poke his head out above ground. Despite the bright sunshine that made him put on the sunglasses he always carried, he could see Morlocks around the Temple, noticeably in the shade cast by the buttresses, and more spilling out of the doors. Nate suspected that the Temple itself was packed with the creatures and that there was no way his group was going to cut their way through to the second team. To judge from the sounds of shots and the activity he could see in the prayer tower where they had initially come in, that group was still holding out. Time to call in.

"Jason, it's Nate, do you copy?"

That got Captain Jason Boulcott's attention.

"Nate, you're out again?" he said over the link. Boulcott's usual buffoonishness was gone. Out in the field, Nate had to admit, Jason knew what he was doing.

"Yep, and we've got two of the party – Dr Caspigny and Eloise Doukas – but not Dr Bayard, he'd been dropped into a pool of what we think was acid before we got there."

"Acid, far out."

"But Jase, what the fuck, we were hiding in that room below the wells on the Northeast corner, and three bodies of guardsmen were dropped behind us."

"I just couldn't stop them," said Jason. "One of them started yelling about marine traditions and how they were fighters, and then they charged down the stairs. I've still got two, but only because the guard non-com stayed put and tackled another. We heard them firing for a time, then nothing."

"We managed to pull two out of the pile alive, but only just."

"This is control. We need the names of the two guardsmen." Control back in Rasand City had been listening all along.

"Control, this is Olsen, hold on. Jase, we won't be able to cut our way through to you, especially not with two guys on stretchers."

"No, you won't," said Jason.

"We're going to have to do Plan B, ten clicks to station five."

Rachel looked at him in alarm. She had been in Patrol long enough to know what that meant. Station five was where Nate and the disgraced Dan had been ambushed.

"Using the Morlock tunnels?" said Jason. "Oh man! If you meet any big groups coming the other way, you're screwed."

"Can't see any other way. The good news from your point of view is that after an hour or so, there won't be any need to hold that tower. Have the choppers come and take you off."

"You bet, and good luck," said Jason.

"We'll need it," said Nate. "Control, Patrol Officer Crystal will tell you the names of the two survivors."

Nate switched off his comms, screening out Rachel, while he studied the temple. Although it was still daylight, Morlocks had been able to climb almost to roof level. Jason's group had to get out of there before nightfall. In fact, he did not think they should stay more than the allotted hour. Then he was aware of Rachel tugging his arm.

"Colonel Montigny wants to talk to you."

He switched his comms back on.

"You've got two of my guys," the colonel said, "and I'm going to have to can this mad plan of yours to use the Morlock tunnels."

"Colonel, I thought it was made clear to you that this venture was under Patrol jurisdiction," snapped Nate. "I don't take orders from you. If you want me to follow an order, put Colonel Griggs on and butt out."

The colonel was not about to be told to butt out by a mere Patrol captain.

"You can't drag my guys through tunnels," he snapped in his turn. "We can send choppers to pick you up. Just get above ground in the daylight."

"Where we'll be swarmed, Colonel, like your guys just were. The Morlocks prefer to move at night, but they will move during the day and at high speed. A bunch of slow-moving humans with stretchers will really incentivise them. The choppers don't have any fire support, right?"

"We can put a few marines in."

"Do that for pick up at station five. That's the closest place we know of where there is a connection to the surface. There must be others, but we don't know where they are, and we can't waste time looking for them."

"What happens if you meet a large group underground?" said Colonel Montigny.

"Then we're toast, colonel," said Nate, "but from what we've seen, we'll most likely meet them in ones or twos and deal with them with silenced pistols."

"Most likely!" said the Colonel. "Captain, I order you to abandon that approach."

"Take care, Colonel, and can someone please ensure that Colonel Griggs understands the plan. Over and out."

Nate turned to Rachel. "We've got a cross-country jaunt to finish before returning you to your fiancé."

Back in Rasand City, Cindy was still trying to understand Mack's strategy.

"Now that you have broken off the engagement with Senator Komnenos, managing the senate will be very difficult," she told Mack during a break in the morning's meetings.

"Yes, things will be much more difficult if I am still around," said Mack cheerfully. Colonel Griggs had just texted her that Nate had made contact, having rescued two of the three lost academics. His group was still in deadly danger, but they had what Griggs thought was a viable plan to get out. Mack was sorry for Dr Bayard and his family, but at least he could attend the memorial service and say that her administration had done everything possible to rescue the man. In the meantime, Mack was putting her own escape plan into effect.

"What do you mean?" said Cindy.

"I mean that I'm resigning," said Mack. "We'll work out when the deputy chancellor will take over. Then he can deal with the Senate, and he's already married."

The deputy chancellor had been changed since the attempted coup, and Mack had considerably more faith in the new VC, who was also an ambitious man. He could try being chancellor for a time and see how he liked it.

"You can't resign and leave me with him?"

"I'm most certainly allowed to," said Mack, "and I'm going to. You can try out your relationship decision making matrices on someone else."

"But what are you to do?" asked Cindy, apparently bewildered. The matrices did not account for the possibility that the subject might simply leave the field.

"I'm going to become an academic. I've already started writing my PhD grant proposal. I believe I can offer real insight into the wall art in that temple and what it means for the Morlock-Cactuar religion. A real breakthrough. This way, I can still be ambitious, although in academia rather than politics, and my work might even make a difference, and I can get back with the boyfriend I want without my government rank causing any problems. I also never have to hear about relationship decision making matrices again."

"Captain Olsen might not come back, and there's still the problem of him taking you back. The matrices indicate…"

"Hang the matrices," snapped Mack. "I said I didn't want to hear about them ever again, and I meant it. In fact, I've already spoken with Captain Olsen, and he has proved surprisingly sweet about the whole thing. The red haired stripper is also history. I just have to run interference on a blonde synth, do some heavy duty apologising, for which I have plans, and I'm back where I was, but this time we won't be spending so much time apart."

"I still think the relationship matrices can be made to work," muttered Cindy.

When Nate and Rachel returned to the others, killing a Morlock on the way with a single, silenced shot, he found that the stretchers, once unfolded, had three small wheels – two at the lower end and one at the head, which was raised. A person could pull each stretcher along with one hand, provided the stretcher was on reasonably level, flat ground. That meant the group was able to move along the city passages, pulling the stretchers with comparatively little effort. Rachel led them past the place where she and Tyler had hidden for days to a place where the passages connected to a Morlock tunnel. They shot one Morlock they encountered and hid in a side passage from a large group that rushed straight past them; otherwise, they had little trouble in reaching the junction.

"You can see where they've broken through," Rachel said, pointing to the rubble and broken stone blocks. "It all looks to be deliberate."

"You're right," said Nate. "They tunnelled in and excavated the sand that must have been in here. Then the sands above naturally shifted away. Interesting, but one for the scientists."

They lifted the stretchers through to the Morlock tunnel, which was round and much smaller than the city passage but still smooth enough to roll the stretchers along. The material that made up the tunnels was a dull grey. The top half was as hard as concrete, Nate noted, but the bottom part was surprisingly spongy. Now was not the time to admire the engineering, he told himself. They marched on as quickly as their rescued civilians could stand, Nate keeping his head lamp on low beam so that they could see.

"Sir," whispered Michael into his comms unit from the front, where he'd set his drop-down visor to light amplification to spot Morlocks. "What are the little holes I keep seeing in the roof?"

"Ventilation shafts, at a guess," said Nate.

"Are all Morlock tunnels like this?"

"Never been in one before. None of the serving patrol officers have. But to judge from the tunnel scans, this is a smaller one – some sort of linking tunnel, maybe."

The others tried to speak, but Nate closed down any discussion. They needed to save their breath for fast walking. Eventually, they came to a junction where the smaller tunnel they had been using joined with a much larger one at an angle.

"This is close," said Rachel excitedly, looking at her map screen. "This must be a major thoroughfare. The tunnel to Station Five is a smaller one on the right ahead."

"How much further?" asked Jo, obviously weary.

"Still a few klicks," said Rachel.

Nate waved Jo into silence. Something about the tunnel made him uneasy. A change in atmosphere? A low, dull humming, almost too low to hear. He put his hand on the hard sides of the tunnel, while the others watched in surprise, then put his ear against the material.

"What the…," said Andre.

Nate gestured at him impatiently to be silent. He looked again at the map screen.

"This tunnel we're in must lead right back to the rear of the breeding areas, and that green pool thing?"

"Seems so, although we don't have any connection mapped," said Rachel.

"Guys, I reckon that a big party of Morlocks is coming up that way. Maybe they've discovered that we've killed a heap of their priests, somehow worked out where we were going, and they're pissed. Let's move."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Nate's warning made his party pick up the pace to somewhere between a fast walk and a trot. But the uneasiness Nate had been feeling seemed to grow. He asked the others if they could hear or feel anything, but they shook their heads.

"It's all weird shit down here," said Michael. "Sooner we're out, the better."

Nate's uneasiness continued to grow – a sort of shadow in the back of his mind.

"Sir, we've got a big group in front, coming up fast," said Andre. "One hundred plus individuals."

"We've just got to blast our way through," said Nate. "The marines get to use their toys, but wait until they're close and give 'em a few rounds each. The rest of us will follow, head-shooting any survivors. We don't stop to assess damage. We keep going."

"At last!" said Michael.

They all heard the group in front of them, making the characteristic "Gak! Gak!" sounds, before the creatures loomed out of the gloom. Then, Michael and Andre started firing, the explosions lighting up the tunnel and throwing Morlock parts around. The three patrol members followed, pulling the stretchers, skirting around the bodies, and shooting the occasional survivor who dared to bother them.

When the shooting stopped, the sound from behind them was distinctly louder.

"Nate, I hear something," said Rachel. "A long way away but gaining."

"How far to the branch tunnel?"

"Should be a few more minutes on the right. Station five is about a klick from the junction."

So it proved, with the branch tunnel a little larger than the one in which they had started the journey. They lifted the stretchers through.

"Tyler, drop the grid you've been carrying here. This is the best place we're going to get to use it."

"Finally!" Tyler shrugged it off, and Nate started fixing it across the tunnel entrance.

"Tyler and Rachel, push the stretchers to the exit. Tyler, you boost Rachel through to the top so she can call in the choppers we've been promised. The Morlocks' carved hand and foot holds onto the sides of the shaft. I saw them when I was there last time, now move."

They yes sired, and left Nate with the two guardsmen, who kept an eye out both ways as he continued to work. The grid did not reach all the way from the top to the bottom of the tunnel, but it covered enough to give anyone who came that way pause for thought.

"Sir, it seems like a real big group coming up from the city. I can hear something."

"A huge mass of them is charging along the tunnel," said Nate. "Your big guns may delay them, but not for long. Get back on this side of the wire. I have to finish fixing it on the other side. They squeezed under the wire, and Nate secured it in place by attaching two steel hooks and riveting the hooks to the side of the tunnel. He attached the generator and switched it on. The generator emitted carbon monoxide, but Nate thought that monoxide poisoning was the least of his problems.

"Bit of speed, guys," he said, and they jogged the rest of the way, arriving at the hole underneath the floor of station five to see a hint of daylight. On the surface, it was only about lunchtime, but there were still six metres of concrete between Nate's group and that sun-lit surface. Tyler was waiting for them with the two stretchers.

"Rachel says she's called it in, and the choppers are on the way," he said. "But how are we going to get the two wounded up?"

"I've had thoughts about that," said Nate. "Wind the upper stands of the head of the stretchers as far as they will go and put them back to back."

He then cut out the straps securing the patients and used one set to bind the two ends of the stretchers together. He grabbed the spare magazines from the pouches of the wounded, took out the first few bullets, and then rammed the emptied end into the bottom of the tunnel in front of the stretcher's wheels, hammering the magazine in with one of the guardsman's heavy weapons.

"We should have a ladder. In the meantime, this 'll have to do."

With the rest of the straps, Nate devised a crude sling to tie around the wounded. But they still had to manhandle each one up to Michael, the biggest of them all, while he balanced on the top of the stretchers, one hand in one of the Morlock handholds in the concrete. Then he hoisted the still unconscious marine up into the hole, Nate and Tyler doing their best to push up from below, while keeping the two stretchers together. Andre, who had gone ahead, then reached down as far as he could to grab the makeshift sling around each guardsman and haul him the rest of the way, with Rachel's assistance.

They were partway through this delicate, exhausting process when they heard a tremendous, drawn-out shriek from the tunnel.

"What was that?" said Michael.

"They've got to the grid we left there, and don't like it," said Nate.

"Will it hold them?" asked Tyler.

"Should, but there also should be someone at the grid to stop them doing stuff like putting wooden hooks around the wire to pull it out. It's why the gaps in the wire are so large, so we can shoot through them. Come to think of it, you've defended wire grids."

"I have," said Tyler. "I also remember that they were persistent bastards that night."

"They still are persistent bastards," said Nate.

They were just hauling the second wounded man through, with some effort, when they heard a grinding of metal under stress and then a scream of triumph.

"That's done it, they've dragged away the wire somehow," said Nate. "I think we've really pissed them off."

"Shit," said Tyler.

"Rachel," yelled Nate. "When you've finished with that guy, go and guard that hole just outside the door."

"Okay."

Finally, the second wounded guardsman was swung out onto the floor of the station.

"Tyler, go, go, I'm right behind you," said Nate, as he felt the wind from the approaching Morlocks. Tyler climbed onto the stretchers and then hauled himself up, but very hesitantly. "Guys, grab him when you can, and drop us one of the heavy toys."

Michael dropped his past Tyler, and Nate turned to fire several shots down the tunnel, lighting the place up and blowing apart the front ranks of a solid mass of Morlocks. The creatures had to stop for a few seconds to clear away the bodies, then, with Tyler being dragged the last couple of meters, Nate was ready to go.

He fired off more rounds, then slung the weapon and stepped up on the stretchers to grab the first of the handholds. The stretchers collapsed underneath him, meaning that he had to bodily swing himself up just with his arms before getting one foot in one of the niches carved by the Morlocks. He had his other foot in another niche when it was grabbed by a Morlock hand. Nate braced his back against the side of the tunnel, whipped out his pistol - this time, he'd left the flap unbuttoned – and fired twice at the creature's arm. The Morlock fell away. He dropped the pistol, letting it swing by its lanyard, to manage another two steps before a second Morlock grabbed his foot. He picked up his pistol again and shot the creature through the arm. This time, the creature's arm broke off entirely, with the hand remaining attached to Nate's leg as he scrambled out of the hole.

"Grenades, grenades," he said, and Marines obligingly dropped several.

He rolled away, ripped the detached Morlock hand off his leg, and threw it into the hole.

A familiar voice boomed from below in Cactuar. "Patrol, you there?"

"Yes, I'm here," Shouted Nate in that language.

"We will come tonight, and you will make the glorious sacrifice in our pool."

"Still waiting," he said.

He stood up, aware that the others were staring at him.

"You speak that language," said Michael.

"Cactuar. I think that was the Morlock Queen. We've exchanged taunts before."

"What did she say?" asked Tyler.

"A host is going to come tonight and make us go swimming in her pool."

"Tonight?" said Rachel from the doorway.

"Yep. She doesn't realise we're taking a chopper ride out of here. Patrol hasn't used helicopters for years. She probably knows where the two Patrol carriers coming from Rasand are, and knows they can't get to us before nightfall. But all we've gotta do is wait for our ride. Michael and Andre, I'll send a commendation on your performance to your colonel. Rachel and Tyler, I'll do the same for Colonel Grigg."

Only one helicopter arrived, but it proved big enough to take them all, plus a couple of additional marines toting fierce-looking mini-guns. As they all boarded the craft, loading the wounded, Nate thought he heard someone groaning, from underground, "nooooo".

There was one more thing to do.

"Dr Jo," said Nate, as he went to his seat.

"Yes," said Jo, hesitantly.

"You're a total idiot.

Nate fell asleep on the ride home.

While Nate and his team were waiting to be picked up by helicopter, Chancellor Mackenzie Markovic was packing up her desk.

"You're seriously going to resign?" asked Cindy.

"You've already agreed to the handover. As was agreed, I will officially step down next week, but will be in caretaker mode until then. In the meantime, the chancellor-elect will be neck deep in meetings, working on ensuring he is ratified and, oh yes, deciding what he'll do about corruption. Good luck to him, I say."

"I thought the resignation was just a ploy," said Cindy. "The decision making matrices…"

"Cindy, I thought I'd made myself clear," snapped Mack. "Mention those matrices to me again and I'll turn off the speaker."

"Okay, but won't I speak to you after you leave office?"

Mack thought that Cindy sounded almost plaintive.

"Of course, you can call me at any reasonable time, but I warn you, my life will be moving far away from any decision matrix. I think I'm going to add a baby or two to my life goals – assuming that they are also part of Nate's life goals."

"Babies?" said Cindy, puzzled. "You mean reproduce?" She made it sound like a bizarre ritual conducted by remote tribes on earth.

"Yep. It's the human thing to do."

"You'll be on a doctoral student's stipend with nowhere to live, now that you're moving out of the residence. My understanding is that money and housing are important in such matters."

"Your understanding is correct, and I'm working on those points," said Mack cheerfully. "I have considerable savings from my salary as chancellor. As for a place to live, I have an idea about how to get rent free accommodation."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When Nate finally got back to his house, after one of the most stressful work days ever, he looked briefly in his workshop to find that a couple more droids had been left there. Clients with a pass code could open a bay in the alley on the other side of the house and push the bodies in for repair. He would look at them tomorrow. The colonel had given all those involved in the rescue a few days off. He went upstairs expecting to collapse in front of the entertainment unit for an hour or two before dinner, to find an enormous black bag in his living room, with several smaller bags piled next to it.

He also found Oscar and the cleaning unit vacuuming the floor behind the sideboard, having pulled that piece of furniture out.

"Why are you doing that, and why the bags?"

By way of answer, Oscar pointed at the bedroom door, which was ajar. He opened it to find Her Excellency Chancellor Mackenzie Markovic sitting up in his bed and, apart from a sheet she held around her, stark naked. She had put aside the book on art history she had been reading along with her reading glasses, and was smiling at Nate.

"You never changed my pass code, and I thought you might prefer this way of my begging to be taken back," she said.

"I admit, this approach has its attractions," said Nate. He sat on the edge of the bed close to the soft delights of her body and kissed her gently on her shoulder. She gasped and smiled. "I could throw in some begging for forgiveness as well, if you want." Her breath was soft on his face.

"I'm warming up to this approach," said Nate, then drew back. "But before we get into the make-up phase of this, whatever this is, I have a question or two."

"Ooookay." Mack sat up and curled her legs underneath her.

"The engagement with Senator Komnenos was announced just weeks after you left me."

"Well… yes."

"How much was going on before you left?"

"We'd had dinner twice, for work, when you were out on patrol, but nothing happened."

"For work?"

"We both had busy schedules. It was convenient to have dinner in the residence, although maybe he got the wrong idea."

"You didn't mention you had a boyfriend at the time?"

"Well, no, that would have led to a lot of questions. No one knew about you, and I wanted to keep it that way."

"I was too shameful a connection?"

"It wasn't that. It was just that I needed allies, so maybe I strung him along a little. Then Theo asked me to marry him. It took me totally by surprise, as nothing had happened. Then Cindy told me that those relationship matrices of hers showed that everything would work out in the end, and you'd be far happier with someone else."

"I see."

"All the political groupies wanted him, and I'd won him without even trying. I was really flattered. He was also handsome and distinguished, which I thought was my type."

"As opposed to a dowdy, lowly patrol captain?"

"You are not dowdy, Captain Olsen, and you were known to be the best at what you do even before today. Now Colonel Griggs tells me you've become a legend."

"I have?" Nate had not thought of himself as a legend, and then realised it was a bad idea to think that. If he got the idea that he knew what he was doing, he might make a mistake and find himself in that green pool of horror. "Well, this legend still has a question or two. When the Senator proposed, you still didn't mention there was someone else."

"Well, no," admitted Mack. "I said I'd have to think about it. That was not my finest moment, I admit. But, as I said, I needed allies, and Cindy was saying that her matrices showed it would all work out. I think, now that I look back on it, Theo considered the engagement to be some sort of transaction, although he could make a convincing case for his feelings."

"Okay, so you abruptly left me and allowed yourself to be courted by Komnenos?"

"Well, yes, but nothing happened before that."

"I believe that part," said Nate. "If you recall, I made a serious attempt to seduce you before we got together, and you resisted me."

Mack gasped. "You did too, even though you knew I was married, you louse."

"You were giving off signals," said Nate, and kissed her.

"Louse," she said, smiling, after he drew back, "and you almost got me too."

"Did I?"

"Uh-huh. A couple of kisses on the shoulder and neck like you gave me just now, and we'd have had a real political scandal on our hands."

"As it is, I now trust your assurances that you waited until you dumped me. But isn't this leading up to another political scandal – you throwing Komnenos over, I assume he is history – in favour of a humble patrol captain?"

"You assume correctly, and I've side-stepped the political part by resigning as Chancellor."

Nate drew back, surprised. "You're no longer chancellor?"

"I officially step down next week and will become a humble doctoral student with, I hope, a sweet, impressive patrol captain boyfriend with whom I will be sharing a residence on the edge of the Cactuar sector."

"This is why there is a lot of luggage in the living room."

Mack nodded. "And we have to have a discussion about closet space."

"All the details," said Nate, smiling. "But isn't my humble abode a come down after the official residence?"

"For an academic specialising in Cactuar-Morlock studies, it's perfect," said Mack. "It's on the edge of the Cactuar sector. I can go to the market and speak to them like you do."

"You're going to learn?"

"Uh-huh," said Mack. "Try to, anyway. I've been studying those texts you sent me, and I think I have some real insights to offer."

"Maybe further details can wait," said Mack, moving in to kiss her.

"One moment, Captain Olsen," she said, putting out her free hand to stop him. The other hand was holding the bed sheet in place. "There is one detail I want attended to now."

"What's that?"

"You mentioned that the blond synth gave you a card. I want to see it." She held out her hand, palm up.

Nate had the card in his wallet, which he had retrieved from his locker at headquarters. He handed it to Mack, who had put her reading glasses back on.

"This is it," she said. "Monique, how tacky! You were keeping it handy, I see."

"A guy has to be prepared."

She used both hands to rip up the card, letting the sheet fall away from her body so that she sat there, entirely naked. "Waste basket, please."

Nate got the bedroom's waste basket, and Mack dropped the bits of card in it. She took off her reading glasses again.

"I'm now at your disposal, Captain Olsen," she said, unbuttoning his shirt. "If you want me to do anything special for you, just ask."