

Prologue

The operative crawled up the lifeless slope. Dust sneaked through the gaps between his helmet and his gillie suit, and sweat glued the dust to his neck and shoulders. Pebbles rolled between his chest and the ground. He sucked at a straw and hot water from a bag between his shoulders flooded his mouth.

At least the heat vents on the suit's front were open. Some of his body heat would slither between his chest and the baked ground. Enough to escape detection by the locals' decades-old IR sensors.

From over the top of the slope came the rumble of a large vehicle. He froze, arms and legs at odd angles. He sucked more hot water from the straw. The bag crinkled against his undershirt.

An overlay projected onto his field of vision by his transcranial stimulator reported no motion to his sides or behind him. If not for the vehicle, he could be the only person within fifty miles.

He crawled toward a rock the size and shape of a squashed basketball, straddling the contour line of the slope. Agonizingly slowly, giving the multicolored e-ink camouflage time to change patterns without a casual glance noticing. Finally he made it. He lay face down, inhaling warm air through slits in the sides of his helmet. The rock's narrow shadow covered the crown of his head. Barely cooler, but still a relief.

He subvoked a command to the computer implanted under the

skin of his chest. A heat vent on the top of his helmet opened, dumping heat to the shade of the rock. Not much, but it would delay heat stroke a few seconds longer.

Another subvoked command. Diagnostics for his cameras, microphones, and volatile molecule sniffers whirled in his field of vision. All green. The implantable's static RAM could hold nearly an hour of data.

Time to look at the other side of the slope.

He closed the heat vent atop his helmet and slithered six inches sideways. Subvoked the commands to record on all channels. Lifted his head.

On the other side of the contour line, the ground sloped gently down to a field of pebbles and rocks in jumbled shades of khaki and pallid rust, scattered randomly by a billion years of wind and rain. Against the natural rockscape, a dull black structure of metal/carbon nanotube alloy, thirty yards long by ten wide and high, instantly revealed the hand of man.

The structure curved away from the operative, as if a robot with uneven wheels laid out the long sides during construction. The structure's long side facing him held double doors deeply recessed in the alloy wall. Near the far end, tiny holes in the alloy formed a grid about two yards square.

The operative's breath caught. His gaze completed the circle defined by the alloy walls. White spray paint drew a circle. *Estimated diameter 45 meters* appeared in his vision.

More sweat bloomed in his armpits and on his back. Estimate, hell. The circle's painters knew the intended diameter to the millimeter.

The men who'd built the structure and painted the circle also knew to hide their work from prying eyes. Thin poles staked around and throughout the circle held up a giant camouflage net, its sinuous surfaces rising from near ground level to simulate a low hillock. The nets glittered with strips of metal radar chaff.

Small wonder orbital surveillance had missed this site.

The operative breathed harder. His head wanted to jerk around, make sure the cameras caught everything. He resisted. Sudden movement might catch the attention of—

To the left. Half a mile from the curved structure, twenty men in woodland green camouflage scurried around a flatbed trailer bearing a red steel shipping container. The container was twin to a hundred million others carried by ship and truck and railroad around Earth and the colonies acceded to the Convention.

The halves of the container's top suddenly flipped open and struck the sides.

From the container's open top, a six-tube missile launcher emerged and swung its muzzles toward the curved structure. The clang of the opened top reached his hiding spot over the rocky ground. Fire streaked from the tubes. The missile launches shrieked in his ears.

Impact. Fireballs billowed into the cloudless sky. The explosion roared over the operative's hiding spot. The microphone's gain meter maxed out for a moment. Waves of hot wind stank of vaporized metal.

Sweat trickled down the operative's face. Plain as day what the locals trained for. Didn't they know the damage they would cause to their own planet?

They didn't care.

Smoke dissipated from the structure. Five gouges scarred the alloy wall facing the missile launcher. One missile had punched through the grid of tiny holes, leaving a jagged hole dripping with melted metal. Not enough to destroy the cooling system.

The men shouted among themselves. The operative couldn't hear their words, but from their tone, he imagined their expletives. Other than their shouts he only heard a faint buzz, like an insect near his ear.

Insect? No plants this far from the inhabited zone. Should mean no insects—

Something jabbed through his gillie suit into the back of his thigh. His heart slammed and he swatted his hand at whatever stuck him.

His arm turned into useless meat, dropping to the rocky ground. His head slumped, face-down onto the dust. Pebbles filled his vision like boulders, dim in the slivered light sneaking between the ground and his immobile head.

He tried wiggling his other arm. His legs. Nothing. He couldn't even turn his head. Paralyzed? Drugs could do that, delivered by dart—

How could he think so calmly? Yet he did. His heart pumped

steadily, no faster than if he walked at an easy pace. His diaphragm rose and fell in a corresponding rhythm. He should panic... yet the thought skittered over the surface of his mind while his subconscious took its cues from his heart and respiration rates.

A paralyzing drug and sympathetic nervous system inhibitors. The locals knew their business.

The insect-like buzz became louder, then ended with a springy rattle about five feet to his right. An airborne drone landing, like a vulture.

Pebbles crunched on the rocky ground in the missile launcher's direction. Footsteps, several people. Coming his way. Far too close to have left the group at the missile launcher when the drone darted him. They'd tracked him, hid in camouflage twenty or thirty yards downslope. He'd looked right past them.

The footsteps resolved into three people. They fanned out around his head and halted.

"The Chinese man?" said a callow young man's voice in the twangy local accent, two yards to the left.

"Yup." Another man's voice, to the right. Hard-bitten as the dusty landscape.

Breaths heaved in and out of the young man. "I always heard tell Chinese were decent enough folks, if you got them out from under the reds."

From in front of the operative, a woman spoke, her voice melodious yet cold. "He serves a more evil master than the Chinese Communist Party."

The wind sighed, skittering dust.

"He serves the United Nations."

1

Clouds brushed the tops of nearby highrises and flurried snow onto Marcus Garvey Park. Stone Chalmers stood at one end of the practice field with the six boys playing defensive back. They looked up at Stone through their wire mesh face shields and rubbed together their electrotouch gloves. Pale nine-year-old faces, cheeks red with cold, noses running.

"When's practice going to end?" Edwin muttered to Tiansheng. "I'm cold."

"Practice ends—" Stone said. Edwin lurched back, eyes full of whites. "—when head coach says it ends." Stone nodded toward the far end of the field. The team's head coach went along the offensive linemen, touching shoulders and padded blocking shields to make fine adjustments.

Nearer, twenty yards away, the other assistant coach thumped his free hand against a football. "Stone, ready?" he called.

Stone nodded. "Time for man coverage drills," he said to the boys. "Vikram, Hamza, you two first. Hang tight with the receivers and work on your breaks."

Vikram and Hamza nodded and trotted into position opposite two receivers. All four boys looked like blue marshmallow men in heavily padded uniforms and concussion-resistant helmets. Green diagnostic LEDs on chests and backs showed all the players' tag force sensors in

working order.

"Hut, hut!" the other assistant coach called. The receivers took off. Hamza's man sprinted straight downfield on a fly route. Hamza pivoted and ran shoulder-to-shoulder with him.

The other receiver ran five yards, then cut in. Vikram backpedaled until the cut in, then closed—and the receiver cut again and raced toward the end zone.

Vikram twisted, lost momentum. Five yards of separation. The other assistant coach tossed a tight spiral arcing into the receiver's hands.

Stone stuck out his arm and caught the receiver across the chest. He patted the boy's helmet with his other hand. The soft plastic firmed up under his palm. "Good cuts. Hand me the ball." Stone tossed the ball to the other assistant coach. "Bryce, Gonzalo, your turn."

The two boys ran toward the line of scrimmage. Gonzalo held out his hand to low-five Vikram. Vikram trudged along, shoulders hunched and head down, and missed the gesture.

Vikram came closer and looked up at Stone. His eyes crinkled, ready to cry. "I tried to work on my break, Coach Stone."

Stone pulled him into a hug and rubbed his helmet. "It's fine. Practice makes progress. Keep at it, you'll get it."

Vikram nodded. He walked, head raised, to his place in line. Stone watched him go and the cold sensation of lying washed down Stone's throat. In his mind's eye appeared his great-grandfather, Trajanus Chalmers, his Mexico City Conquistadors cap precariously balanced on his graying waves. A slow head shake, a glint in his yellow eyes, and Paw-Paw said *You can't coach hips*.

Stone drew in a lungful of chill air. None of these boys would grow up to become football players—lack of hips was the least of their shortcomings. Boys from the glass-faced carbon-nanotube highrises north of Central Park, sons of UN and non-governmental organization officials, they faced more important futures than playing football. The burden of maintaining the galaxy's fragile order would soon fall on them.

The team's shortest, slowest receiver ran two steps, then turned back and caught a pass. Gonzalo shoved him, both hands in the re-

ceiver's back. The LED on the receiver's back turned red.

Stone clapped. "Way to close on him," he called to Gonzalo.

A ding sounded in Stone's ear. Against Mount Morris' exposed gray schist and the brown trunks of leafless maples, bright green letters appeared. Not memory-neural activity induced by a network of nanometer-wide wires grown around his hair follicles and linked to the worldweb.

Come to office immediately. 108 on New Moravia. Out.

Stone blew out a streamer of breath. The sender lacked any need to identify himself. Only Gray could force a message past Stone's software assistant.

The burden of maintaining the galaxy's fragile order now fell on him.

He raised his hand and the six defensive backs looked up at him. "Boys, I hate to do this, but I'm being called into work."

A chorus of groans. Edwin's eyes drooped. "Can't they send someone else?"

Stone cocked his head and smiled, mouth closed. "When you're good at your job, you're in demand." He patted Edwin and Tiansheng on their shoulder pads. "Later."

He subvoked to his car, *Pull up on Madison just before 123rd*. He jogged over and told the other assistant coach he had to leave. Twenty yards further, the head coach looked up from the padded thud of offensive linemen blocking pass rushers. "Let me guess," he said to Stone. "Work needs you?"

"Afraid so."

"You'll make the game on Saturday?"

108 meant an agent dead on an operation.

"Tricky negotiation on the far side of a wormhole. Plan on me being gone."

He strode away from the field and between the gray stone pillars flanking the park's gate on the Madison side near 123rd. Cars whispered uptown, headlights on under the overcast sky.

Claws scratched the sidewalk and collar tags jingled. Brown eyes bulged in a stout Boston terrier's black and white face. No leash. Every three steps, the dog angled its head up and left, mark of a gene-tech'd

and conditioned urge to seek commands from its mistress.

The dog's owner had a pale heart-shaped face between the up-turned collar of her black leather kneecoat and the cultured gray fur trim of her red bucket hat. Stone flicked his gaze up and down her lean form, then looked past her down Madison. He shook his left forearm and his watch slid past the cuff of his blue tracksuit. Platinum bezel and hands, silicon wafer face, a half-carat diamond marking twelve o'clock. Only a woman would notice how expensive it was from five yards away.

Three-forty-five. Her soles clacked closer and a floral perfume trickled into his nose. He took a closer look at her. A snowflake fell in front of her crisp cheekbones and narrow nose. She tucked blond tips of hair under her hat and her gaze met his.

Pretty, but a thousand women as pretty arrived in the city every day, dreaming their social justice degrees from flyover-state public universities and second-tier Ivies prepared them to change the world.

Stone smiled weakly and looked through her, down Madison. She sniffed in a breath. The dog trotted between its mistress and Stone and made a low growl.

Moments later, a sleek black coupe with tinted windows, its faces as sharp as a supermodel's cheekbones, parked itself at the curb. A faint snick and the coupe's doors popped open. He grabbed the handle and pulled too firmly for the pneumatic assist to help him.

Inside, Stone eased back on the horseshoe-shaped leather seat. "UNICA," he said. "Priority one."

The coupe accelerated smoothly and cut across three lanes to turn east on 123rd. Small, blocky cars in front of him slid left and right to the curb. Another right turn and the coupe headed downtown on Lexington. Stone's car weaved in and out of traffic and all the lights turned green.

Spanish Harlem gave way to the Upper East Side. The highrises here stood taller, with stone faces and architectural curlicues at street level. In the upper 60s Stone caught a glimpse of the Korean hot dog stand in front of his apartment building. His coupe accelerated, pushing him back against the cushions. His mouth watered thinking of a hot dog with kimchi.

No telling what the locals ate on New Moravia.

The snow flurried more heavily here. He would wake to a dirty slush if he remained in the city till morning. South of 59th, logos of UN agencies and NGOs marked a building or two on every block. Pedestrians wore the native costumes of two hundred countries, tailored and adapted to New York chic, and strode through the concrete canyons as if they worked at the most important jobs in the galaxy.

Stone's lower face flexed in a smile that failed to reach his eyes. Let them imagine they mattered. Delusions of importance kept them out of his hair.

At first glance, UNICA headquarters looked like any other of the thousand skyscrapers occupied by the agencies and organizations that governed mankind. UNICA's eighty-story highrise filled the middle of a block in the mid 50s between Lexington and the FDR. Concrete bollards, and Czech hedgehogs like a giant's steel jacks, lined the sidewalk. A sign perpendicular to the sidewalk between the parking garage entrance and exit bore a dusting of snow. On the sign, four multiracial hands clasped one another, superimposed over the UN flag. Fine print below the image read *United Nations Interagency Coordination Authority*.

The gate bobbed up. Stone's coupe entered the garage.

Eight minutes later, he strode from the elevator on the 27th floor and entered the office of the most powerful man alive.

Essentially all six billion survivors of the Time of Troubles assumed the Secretary-General governed the world. He or she appeared on Worldforum, after all, when time came to call on the US to send soldiers to enforce a resolution, and the US President always complied. Even the vast majority of UN and NGO workers trodding the nearby streets assumed the same.

A few thousand people, more perceptive of the invisible ebbs and flows of power behind the public show, might understand the head of UNICA wielded far more power. The bland bureaucratic label—UN Interagency Coordination Authority—hid the fact that every major decision by the UN's agencies and the major NGOs required the assent of UNICA Director Kroebel, high in his opulent corner office facing Central Park from the skyscraper's penthouse.

Stone and a dozen other people knew Director Kroebel took his orders from UNICA's assistant director of operational planning. Gray.

The ceiling-height door stood six inches open, showing a swathe of bookcases and windows. Stone rapped his knuckles on the manufactured wood.

Gray's voice boomed through the opening. "Come in."

Stone entered and shut the door behind him.

In profile at a standing workstation, Gray peered through reading glasses down his long nose at text scrolling up one of three monitors. Too mature a man for new-fangled transcranial nerve induction technologies, or at least that's what he wanted his few subordinates to think.

Gaze locked on his monitors, Gray raised his right hand, a patrol leader commanding his men to halt. "I need a moment." He angled his head at another monitor. Checking the time. "Pour us each a drink."

A table of cherry wood and gold inlay. Whisky lurked in a decanter, next to a stack of clean glasses. Stone lifted the decanter's hefty glass stopper, poured. The peaty smell evoked his father, numbing himself as he dissolved over the years into his worn, brown leather recliner. He stoppered the decanter and cracked open a bottle of sparkling water for himself. Stone held his hissing, mineral-scented water near his nose, then slipped between visitor seats and set the whisky on Gray's second, sitting-height desk, near an embedded touchscreen facing an empty ergonomic chair.

The text window winked out. "Enough of that," Gray said. He pivoted a quarter turn, revealing his broad shoulders, firm chest, and narrow waist. His blue tie, properly dimpled, arched away from his starched white shirt. Under his high forehead, his gray eyes, source of his code name, took in Stone's blue tracksuit. "Any future Giants players on your team?"

"Don't bet on it."

"You know I never bet. Sit, and tell me about New Moravia." Gray extended his index finger straight up. "No searches."

"I didn't search the web about that colony when I drove downtown. Why would I now?"

Gray's eyes narrowed. "You are a very good operative, Stone. If

you kept up with analyst reports, you could be a great one.”

He said that every time. Stone eased into a seat. “New Moravia is the forty-second and most recent extrasolar colony to accede to the Dubai Convention. Two, three months back, ITB—” The UN’s Interstellar Transport Bureau. “—sited the Earth end of the wormhole somewhere in Texas. I’ve run out of facts.”

“Speculations, then?”

Stone squinted past Gray at a painting of two racing sailboats on the wall. Blurred lines and peach-colored dollops of faces filled the painting with excitement. Fifteen years of visits to Gray’s office, and Stone still didn’t know if Gray sailed every weekend, or hated the ocean and wanted to misdirect his few visitors.

His gaze met Gray’s eyes. “I’ll guess the New Moravians left Earth from Eastern Europe.” Moravia, Moldova, the little map blobs only mattered if they held a wormhole mouth.

“You’re six thousand miles off. The colony’s founders were Czech Texans. They established the colony on explicitly ethnic grounds.”

“Yes, and?” Stone drank. Sparkling water fizzed across his tongue. “Most colonies are monoethnic—”

“The New Moravian charter limits immigration to people who genetically are at least 25% Czech and at least 75% white. Here’s the full text.” Gray touched the tips of his index and middle fingers to the screen embedded in his desk, then flicked them forward.

A bong sounded in Stone’s ears. A text notification of the received file popped into his vision, then faded.

“Seventy-five percent white.” Those thousand women coming to the city with social justice degrees would shake with outrage. Utter a few well-practiced words and in fifteen minutes they would climb into his bed to punish those distant racists. “Yet New Moravia acceded to the Dubai Convention anyway.”

Gray lifted his whisky glass. “ITB’s quite skilled at persuading colony worlds that granting 10% of their habitable land surfaces to the UN for new settlement is in their best interests. The standard ploys worked on New Moravia. ITB sold the colony’s business leaders on new employees and customers. It promised the governor and other elected politicians consulting jobs after they leave office. One legislator

had enough principle to raise the charter's immigration terms. ITB told him the land grant, by law, would belong to the UN, so New Moravia's charter would not apply. They assuaged him further by inviting him to UN headquarters to provide New Moravian input on any settlement plans."

Stone drank more sparkling water. A hundred governments in the underdeveloped world sought dumping grounds for their undesirables—quarrelsome religious and ethnic minorities, unemployed college graduates, excess males arising from sex-selection technologies. Anything to forestall a repeat of the Time of Troubles. ITB's wormhole network made vast landscapes, dozens of light years away in real space, reachable in a few days of travel across Earth. ITB might bring New Moravia's representative to meet a few ambassadors in the Secretariat building, but it would do the colonist no good. Bureaucrats in a dozen UN agencies would decide the fate of his world.

"The New Moravians will be in for a shock," Stone said, "when they find out what they signed up for."

Gray sipped, then set down his whisky with a resonant thump. "They already know."