

MINERAN CONFLICT

(Due early 2017)

CHAPTER ONE

Sam had his back to the dirty block cinder wall and watched as the shadows of those on the other side played across the rectangle of sunlight that streamed through the doorway. He was listening intently to the conversations and was secretly excited and dismayed at the same time, as he hadn't expected to find so many here. Judging by the names he could hear being called out Sam was certainly outnumbered and physically outmatched. He recognised a few of the names from the files he had read prior to this assignment and knew that, even with the strength-enhancing abilities of his BEE suit, he wouldn't be able to hold his own in a one-to-one confrontation. These guys were bigger, faster and stronger than him, and more importantly, they had survived this long because they were professionals.

Sam looked at the concrete stairway leading down to the first floor of the engineering unit, the updraft bringing fresh air in from outside and hopefully an advanced warning of a strange scent if a patrolling guard decided to enter the building. It would take too long for any backup to arrive and if he left it any longer, he ran the risk of being discovered or the meeting ending.

Sam wasn't in the movies; he could not enter the room and demand that they raise their hands, well appendages, of various sorts, and surrender. That would inevitably lead to a fist fight, after one of the perpetrators knocked his gun to one side. Rule number one of villainy was to fight dirty and he couldn't expect anyone on this planet to understand or abide by the Marquess of Queensberry rule book. Now was not a time for chivalry, foolishness or bravery, he had a critical mission and failure would have dire consequences. With a wicked grin, he took out his secret weapon from his pocket. Nikomedes had designed it to Sam's specification and proving that the Mineran did have a sense of humour, had vaguely fashioned it after the 1920s MK II grenade. Sam pushed the safety slide up and sideways in an L shape to uncover the activation fingerprint reader that was located at the top of the palm-sized pineapple. Placing his thumb to activate the device, he waited for the ever so discreet vibration to indicate it was ready to throw. Sam had specifically instructed Nik that he didn't want lights, beeps, pins, clasps or anything that might alert his quarry.

He tossed the grenade through the doorway, shuffled sideways a few feet and put his fingers in his ears. The hand-grenade moved in a slow, gentle arc from Sam's toss. Within milliseconds the on-board computer analysed its trajectory, the room's dimensions, contents and placement of all organic matter. It calculated the precise time to explode to cause maximum

impact to all organic lifeforms. Milliseconds before exploding, it ejected thousands of micro beads in a pattern that it had governed to be the most potent to pepper the room's inhabitants. The blast from the explosion was immense; it carried the minuscule spherical objects out in front of the blast wave and threw everything around like leaves in an autumn wind. Sam was surprised at how quiet the grenade was, he felt rather than heard the explosion. Peeking around the door frame, he saw the sun covered floor had become peppered by the fluorescent green balls as the dye expanded. Finally, the room settled back down as the last of the flung items crashed to the floor. Stepping through the door, Sam surveyed the carnage and with a quiet chuckle, he muttered to himself about how Nik had done a wonderful job. Seven bodies lay strewn and inert across the room. Sam walked up to each in turn and shot them in any exposed flesh that he could see. It was overkill he knew, but it was better to play safe with these guys. The green gel that the grenade had thrown out was designed to humanely incapacitate up to ninety-eight per cent of all known life forms. The problem arose when you encountered the remaining two per cent or came across a species that could metabolise the chemical composition quicker than anticipated. Sam's tranquilliser gun was programmed to recognise all of the Sphere's species, adapt the payload and thus guarantee the subject remain unconscious for at least an hour.

He stood back to review the scene. As he had requested, the gel balls had concentrated in the area where the victims had been positioned, but more importantly, the grenade had also spread a fine mesh of gel across the remainder of the room. As long as there was a complete fluorescent green mesh covering everything, Sam could rest assured that no one had moved, i.e. that he hadn't found one of the two per cent who might now be lurking somewhere to clobber him.

He stealthily looked out of the dirty windows to ensure the patrolling guards had not been alerted. Thankfully their perimeter was far enough away for the maelstrom not to have been heard. Sam removed the other present he had received from Nik and proceeded to process each of the seven bodies in turn. Laying them on their sides, he pulled their arms behind their backs and sprayed the foaming compound from the canister around their wrists and hands. The foam was visually not too dissimilar to builders' foam, although this version set hard as a diamond and it could only be dissolved with the correct sequence of enzymes. Even with the added strength of the BEE suit, it would be unable to break out the polymer, so as a precaution, Sam had insisted the BEE suit absorb a small amount of the enzyme in case he became entangled in the foam himself. He performed the same encapsulating process on their legs and then effectively hog-tied them with a strand going from arms to legs; these were ruthless and unbelievably robust entities after all.

As Sam dragged the last body in line with the rest, he heard a loud thud behind him. Whipping around with his pistol drawn he saw a patrol guard slumped on the floor of the doorway. He looked back to the window and noticed a three-inch circular hole in the glazing, 'She says "you're welcome", Sam,' the voice vibrated through his body until it hit his auditory canal to mimic sound vibrations for Sam to hear.

Putting his middle finger in his ear he said, 'Tell her thank you.'

Apate was half a mile away on one of the rooftops and had covered his back with her usual precision. To avoid the noise of the glass shattering which would, of course, raise an alarm, she was using a precursor laser on her silent MPAR sniper rifle. The on-board system analysed the glass composition, calculated the distance, the dissipation radius and the energy required to dissolve the glass ahead of the bullet. This left an elegant hole in the glass and a body on the floor; it also meant Sam would have to buy Apate dinner as he had now lost their private wager.

Replacing his finger in his ear, which was an unnecessary habit he had picked up from Reb when he was speaking to his controller, he proclaimed: 'Room's clear!'

'She says "you know they are going to be annoyed when they come round".' The vocal vibrations were now only emanating down his wrist and into his ear; this was much more pleasant than feeling his whole body vibrate when his controller spoke through his suit. They had come to an agreement, in that his collar would gently vibrate to indicate that non-urgent communication was required.

He looked at the bodies trussed up on the floor, five of which were similar in build to his own, trim but muscular and of average height. The other two were massive brutes, their eyes wrapping around to their temples which gave them a much wider angle of view and also helped to define them as either Fleelrok or Fleelrak from the Fleelks'is's solar system. Both races had a common distant ancestry who colonised the system a millennia or so ago, but for some reason that Sam couldn't remember, their home world had died, orphaning the two planets with limited and dwindling resources.

Over time, as irreplaceable parts wore out, they lost the capability of space flight and became isolated. Eventually, evolution on the separate planets had altered them to a form better suited to their environments.

The Fleelrak'is, being nearer the sun, is quite arid and suffers from violent dust storms for six months of the year. This caused the inhabitants to develop a particulate filtering system similar to gills under their arms, a third and fourth set of eyelids and for some reason, their genital moved from their lower legs to their inner thighs. Sam was not intrigued enough to investigate further, as either race was more than a match for him in unarmed combat.

Returning to a familiar figure on the floor he decided to add extra foam to encase the whole of the man's legs, 'That's because you were not meant to be here, Reb,' he said out loud, not that anyone besides his controller could hear him. He put his finger in his ear for the final time and stated, 'I am standing down, training scenario complete.'

He sat down behind the desk and put his feet on the polished wooden top. He could understand his friends and colleagues travelling from Earth back to planet Minera wishing to attend his passing-out training scenario. What he hadn't expected was for some of them to participate. If he hadn't come up with the idea of the grenade, it would have been him on the floor trussed up like a hog. The lesson, this time, was to never underestimate what is around the corner, 'Boing Flip boys,' he thought to himself, 'Boing Flip.'

Sam pondered that it was unusual that Emliton and the doctor hadn't come to see him. He'd seen a lot of them over his intensive twelve-month training regime and had come to consider them, along with Erebos, Nikomedes, Captain Sophus, Alcaeus & Xenophon, as trusted friends and mentors. For some reason they had all taken a personal interest in his development and continued to support him while he was away from Earth, often training him far beyond the required training syllabus and in their own time. All bar Em and the doc had arrived yesterday for the ceremony tomorrow, although thank goodness the doc hadn't been in the room as he was definitely immune to the grenade's gel.

Feeling his collar buzz, he fingered his ear. 'Pat says if you don't wipe that smug look off your face she will shoot you with a tranquilliser as well.'

How could he have forgotten Apate, she most of all had carried him through all of this. When the universe seemed to overwhelm him with its monsters, she always showed him the beauty it contained, often just by being there herself. He looked out of the window towards a tall warehouse in the distance and smiled with genuine affection. She would shoot too he thought, just before he plunged into unconsciousness and slipped off the chair.