

# ANCESTRAL DREAMS

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The Return

Ian Martyn

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About The Author

Also by Ian Martyn

*For Nora, a generous person in every sense of the word.*

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# ONE

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Fantastic. Bloody fantastic, Danjay thought, scanning the growing scene of smoke, dust and devastation. Ghosts of buildings surrounded him; the glass, polymer and concrete that had once clothed them littering the ground. If he'd been given the choice between staying here or going to hell, it would have needed some serious thought.

A projectile pinged off the pockmarked wall to his left. He ducked.

'Shit, Agreb,' Danjay said. 'Where's the gunships and the armoured skiffs? If they don't arrive soon we're all goners.'

'No gun ships,' Agreb replied. 'They say officially we're "not here".'

'And the skiffs?'

'On their way. But they're in C sector. Fifteen minutes.'

'Hell,' Danjay said. 'We don't have fifteen minutes.' Another chunk of masonry hit the ground. He flinched. 'If we can be here

unofficially, so can they. We're running out of men and time's critical for the injured.'

Jakan and a bunch of his fanatical zealots had taken advantage of local unrest to kick out the regional sector command. So, they said, just go in with a small unit and take back control, some fucking just! Getting in was the easy part. We got all the way in and ran into this. As if they knew we were coming. Same as a number of recent operations. Intelligence leaks like an ageing orbital scrap collector.

A single crisp white snowflake landed on his glove contrasting with the cloying grey dust that coated everything and everyone. He glanced skyward to the smashed dome. Hard to believe this had once been a half decent place to live. Torn and twisted girders clawed at the dimming twilight. His helmet display told him it was minus three and falling.

Sparkles from the building opposite caught the edge of his vision. They'd dropped the shield. 'Incoming,' Danjay yelled.

A dull thud from a launcher shuddered through the ground. A plasma bolt slammed into the wall in front of him. A sharp flash of electric blue light overloaded his eyes. They reacted, clearing the glowing red curtain of after-images in time for him to watch half the structure collapse, stealing two of his soldiers with it. Something else Intelligence had got wrong, plasma bolts. Where the hell had they got those from?

More fine grey dust and debris floated down, adding another layer on to the already indistinguishable figures around him. Danjay's suit reacted, flicking up the visor, feeding in filtered air. After a few seconds he overrode it, he wanted to taste the battle.

‘Medics, see what you can do for those two,’ Danjay shouted, resisting the urge to rush over himself.

‘Sir!’

This is all fucking stupid, Danjay thought in the unexpected lull. It’s a complete and utter bloody mess. He kicked out at the rubble nearest him, his suit preventing a broken foot. Damn it, he screamed inwardly, I’m watching men, my men, get killed and injured and for what? We’re trying to restore order on some godforsaken little planet that nobody gives a shit about. No one cares that the conglomerates are exploiting the place and the people along with it. Those lazy self-serving bastards in the legislature can’t be bothered to do anything that might help the poor sods in places like this. So I’m given what’s left of the Ninth brigade, bugger all supplies and told to get on with it.

‘More incoming,’ a voice announced in his ear, jolting him back.

He heard screeching overhead, accompanied by the crackle of static and heated air. Another bolt burrowed itself into a pile of rubble. The ground-shaking explosion rattled his teeth. His peripheral vision registered a teetering top section of a wall. Flinging himself to his left he avoided being buried by the lethal lumps of concrete crashing down next to him. His suit hardened in strategic places, protecting him as he rolled over more jagged wreckage. Stumbling to his feet he surveyed the scene of ever-increasing destruction once again.

‘Mizon,’ Danjay said. ‘See what you can do about that launch post. If this continues we won’t even have five minutes.’ Part of his mind immediately regretted the order as Mizon and three of his

unit leapt from cover. Being right was scant consolation as he watched them gallop across the open space between two craters filled with stagnant water, the remains of ornamental fountains.

‘Hit the bastards,’ he heard Mizon scream. All four of them opened up, spraying a murderous arc of mixed beam and projectile fire. The launch post replied in kind, as if to some lethal protocol of good manners.

One centaur stumbled, a back leg giving way. ‘Medic!’ Danjay shouted. How many more must he condemn?

‘Ah, hell,’ Danjay muttered to himself as he and the three men closest to him dashed forward unleashing a barrage of covering projectile fire before jumping feet first into the nearest mud-filled crater. His hormcon system regulated the adrenaline threatening to flood through his body. The right amount heightened senses, too much fogged rationality. Slithering to a stop in the putrid sludge at the bottom of the hole he came face to face with a mutilated body. Half the face was missing. A lopsided grin and one dull clouded eye stared back at him. He clawed his way back to the lip of the crater; it was nothing he hadn't seen before. Following the progress of the three remaining centaurs, Danjay gripped the handle of his weapon with white knuckles, willing the enemy fire to miss.

Reaching the relative cover of another ruined shell of a building, the centaurs readied the rocket launcher with practice ground precision and fired. The missile struck the shield wall of the launch post in a wave of noise and light, its energy absorbed and dissipated. Before the ripples subsided, the follow-up punched

through the temporary weakness. Danjay heard the shouts and agonised cries from inside the building. He gave a grim smile.

He then watched, stomach cramped tight, as the centaurs galloped back across the debris and body-strewn open ground. He allowed hope to give way to relief as he followed their unerring surefooted progress, carrying them closer to safety. All three leapt together into the position being defended by the main unit. Miraculously, only one was wounded and that just a minor gash to the flank. Danjay breathed again.

An anguished cry from the launch post dragged his attention back to the scene in front of him. A large section of the building shivered as if being shaken by some invisible giant. Collapsing, it took down the plasma cannon and several rebels with it. His satisfaction was short-lived as more Jakanites sprinted from the heavily-armoured command centre in a suicidal dash to retrieve the now battered weapon. Danjay's men opened up a wicked field of fire, scything down half the enemy within seconds, filling the air with blood and the smell of charred flesh. He gripped the trigger with all his strength; each scream, each crumpled body lying in the dirt meant one less enemy trying to kill him and his men. But there were too many of them. As he changed magazines more Jakanites emerged from behind the smoking rubble, oblivious to the danger. Some fell to the now sporadic fire as he and his men conserved their dwindling supply of ammunition.

'Back,' shouted Danjay, realising the situation was hopeless. He shoved the two men out ahead of him. Breaking cover it was their turn to be raked by gunfire. Projectiles ricocheted around them accompanied by the smoke and steam of beam weapons,

thankfully missing their targets, striking rubble and mud. The man in front of Danjay was hurled off his feet, twisting sideways before landing face-down in watery sludge. Wisps of smoke tinged with the smell of cooked meat floated up from the shoulder of his suit. Danjay grabbed the man's collar, dragging him the last few yards.

‘Take him,’ Danjay called on reaching their forward position. Hands stretched out, pulling the semi-conscious form away from the immediate firing line, boots ploughing furrows in the filth. Controlling his own ragged breathing, Danjay studied their precarious position and the men with him. They were all the same; faces, hair and suits coated in a fine layer of grey, making them look like wraiths in the fading light. As they returned his gaze, the weight of expectation he saw in their eyes almost pushed him to his knees. They were trusting him to get them out of this. He focused on the unmistakable too-slim figure of Agreb. ‘Where are those damned skiffs?’

‘Five minutes.’

‘Shit,’ Danjay groaned, staggering from another bone-shaking, deafening explosion. Luckily, no one was in the way this time. For a second he was distracted by shafts of light through the freshly-opened gap, making rainbows in the rising plumes of dust. ‘Keep them off the roof,’ he said on open frequency, glancing at his half-retracted visor display, praying for any signs of their transport. ‘And keep them from getting behind us. If they take down those skiffs none of us are getting out of here.’

A voice burst through the heavy static. ‘Two beam projectors out.’ The display highlighted Dayton. ‘And running low on projectile ammunition, sir.’

‘Five minutes, Sergeant, five minutes. But keep some to cover the retreat. When we show our heads they’ll chuck everything at us.’

From the armoured building a PA system hummed then crackled into life. ‘You’re as good as dead, Danjay,’ came a raw, distorted voice. ‘I’m immortal, you know that. Why fight it?’

Hell, thought Danjay, Jakan even knew who was facing him. What was intelligence doing, working in reverse gear? ‘You’re mortal, Jakan,’ Danjay called back, before wondering if he could be heard. ‘You’ll die, you have my word.’

‘Empty threats, Major.’ Jakan could hear him alright. ‘From where I sit you’re the one who’s about to die. You’ve tried to kill me before and I’m still here. The gods are on my side, Danjay. The side of the righteous.’

Danjay didn’t believe in gods or even God, but sector was doing its best to give Jakan the advantage. How many times must they underestimate him? How many times will they let him off the hook? Jakan’s name was becoming almost mythical, a rallying cry to every bunch of nutters in this quadrant of the galaxy. ‘You might not believe it,’ Jakan continued, now in full flow, ‘but I will mourn your death as I mourn all deaths of the oppressed. As a slave to Sector and the Sectorium you are more oppressed than my followers here.’

Keep him talking, Danjay thought. Every second he talks is a second they’re not firing. ‘You must spend a lot of time mourning, Jakan. The amount of death you deal in.’

‘But deaths are necessary if we are to free ourselves from the shackles of those who would build empires at the expense of the people. We fight for freedom, Major.

‘Freedom for what?’ Danjay yelled back. ‘To starve? To be butchered by someone like you? To die?’

‘Yes, freedom to die.’ Jakan's voice cracked with rising anger and fervour. ‘But we already have that. We embrace it gladly if that's what it takes. I'm now extending that freedom to you and your men, Major. So make peace with whatever deity you answer to. I hope he'll forgive your spirit and not condemn it to hell.’

Jakan announced the end of their conversation with a barrage of plasma bolts and projectiles, clawing down stone and concrete, flinging jagged and lethal shrapnel in all directions. Danjay wondered how anyone's hell could be worse than this.

‘Make sure those suits are working,’ Danjay called. So much for keeping him talking. The only saving grace was that whipped up into a frenzy the Jakanites didn't seem to care much about aiming. They were just firing.

‘Skiffs,’ Agreb announced. ‘Behind us now.’

‘Right, send Jakan everything we have with my personal greetings,’ Danjay ordered. ‘And let's get the hell out of here.’ Glancing back over his shoulder, the first craft was only metres off the ground, sending more debris and dust billowing into air that already clogged nose and throat. Again overriding the closing visor, Danjay coughed and spat what felt and tasted like mud. ‘Agreb, your squad first. Mizon, your boys next. We'll cover first then you cover us from that last wall. Go, go!’

Peering into the murk and chaos Danjay tried to keep track of what was happening. The place was alive with light, noise and concussions that shook the ground. At least it also hampered the Jakanites, he reasoned, obscuring his men who were now running for their lives. The visor was closing again and this time Danjay allowed it to seal him in. Just before it shut he caught a whiff of burning cable. The sound of distorted music cut through the confusion as a speaker in the wrecked building came to life, one last surreal touch to add to a devil's idea of a good party. The suit pumped oxygen-rich filtered air; his tired, aching muscles greedily soaking up as much as they could before he needed them again. Stumbling half-blinded towards the final cover, a butterfly landed beside him, flapping its iridescent blue green wings. Where in a God's name had that come from?

Danjay looked on, teeth grinding, mind screaming with frustration as men were hit by the random fire. Comrades grabbed them by shirts, belts or limbs and ignoring screams of protest dragged them to the hovering skiffs. The crafts' shields flared and crackled as they deflected projectile and beam fire.

'Now,' Danjay called. 'Those shields can only take so much.'

'Major' Mizon shouted as he reached and leapt aboard the nearest skiff.

'Go boys, go,' Danjay roared into the helmet, leaping out himself, legs pumping as hard as his body could force them, over the cratered, pitted and rubble-strewn open ground. Glimpsing a sudden flash to his left he used every ounce of recovered energy and every enhanced nerve in his body, swerving and throwing

himself sideways. A split second later the ground erupted, throwing viscous mud, concrete and twisted metal in all directions.

His midriff intercepted something heavy and sharp. He heard his ribs crack before feeling the sharp stab in his chest. The blast swept his legs from under him and he was staring through a gap in the fog of smoke and dust at a patch of purple sky studded with twinkling stars. That vision of calm disappeared, replaced by a red mist sweeping across his eyes, the agony exploding in his brain. His body was screaming at his brain to do something. His bio-enhanced systems intercepted the messages, the pain subsided, his vision clearing to a pink haze.

Danjay's mind puzzled over the sight of men almost stopped in the action of running. A detached and functioning part of his brain was telling his consciousness that this was wrong. But his consciousness ignored it and instead marvelled at the sensation. He was flying, spiralling through the air. The detached part cut the link to the conscious part, let it go. It was now fighting against narrowing vision, staring down a lengthening dark tube. Silence filled his ears. He watched with only mild interest the receding horror of the battleground. People moving in a strange slow-motion dance, twisting and turning. Expressions of shock and hatred, soundless screaming. Danjay floated above it all, an observer. Somewhere at the back of his head, his mind was still crying for attention, 'This is not right'. He shut it off, it was too hard, far too hard to concentrate... vision blurred, the tunnel and the light at the end getting smaller, smaller, why?... relief... where?... what?...

Agreb was helping a soldier into the skiff when he felt as much as heard the thudding explosion thirty metres away. He looked up to see Danjay's body, like just another piece of debris, tumbling through the air. Using the soldier for leverage, pulling the man violently into the skiff, he leapt out, landing ten metres from the hovering craft. As his feet touched the ground he heard Mizon bellow a threat to personally blow the pilot's head off if he moved. Agreb covered the remaining twenty metres in seconds, sliding to the ground alongside Danjay's stricken form, heedless of personal danger. He feared the worse.

He let out the breath he'd been holding. Danjay's suit was in one piece and working. Reacting as best it could to such a devastating impact it had held itself and the mess that was Danjay's broken body together. The status panel indicated that he was alive, just.

Agreb heard a rattle of gunfire behind him. Turning he saw the welcome sight of Mizon's bulk skidding to a halt, throwing up his own personal dust cloud. In one swift movement Mizon tossed the gun to Agreb, scooped up Danjay and, hooves scrabbling for traction in the rubble, accelerated back to the skiff.

Agreb fired off a quick farewell volley before following the fleeing centaur. Hearing a cry from the skiff, it took all his extraordinary reactions and practised agility to prevent himself becoming another casualty, leaping over the flying debris from a well-aimed grenade. His suit protected him from the small pieces of shrapnel that did find their target. Arriving at the skiff at the same time as the centaur, both threw themselves into the now

rising hold, their impact cushioned by the men filling the crowded space.

Agreb shoved Danjay into a resus bag, speed taking precedence over care. Looking up he could see the concern etched into the grime-covered faces of the men around him. Catching Mizon's eye, Agreb shrugged. They had done all they could.

Danjay's bio-nanotech systems, despite being swamped by the scale of the damage, had already bought him precious minutes, prioritising emergency repair, shutting down escaping blood flow, redirecting it where possible through intact vessels to the head. They closed off all redundant nervous information going to the brain. The nanomachines that had been circulating dormant in his body sprang into life, multiplying, manufacturing shunts, preventing blood flowing to the arteries where his legs had been turned to pulp. Then they concentrated on preserving the brain, spinal column and vital organs. They slowed his metabolism, reducing his core temperature, sending him into a deep coma. He was now in the hibernation of last resort, conserving the little resources that still remained. The resus bag hacked into the suit, first pumping in oxygen-rich air, then replacing it with the viscous fluid which made physical breathing unnecessary. By some miracle the heart was undamaged, and the hole in the major pulmonary artery had been sealed. All the systems you hoped you would never have to call on, together with the immediate reaction of his friends, had saved his life.

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Jakan watched, gun dangling from the tips of his fingers, as the skiffs lifted from the ground before accelerating and disappearing

over the horizon. The men around him were cheering and firing shots into the air. Jakan walked away and leant against a splintered door frame. Weariness threatened to reduce him to tears.

Neel stood next to him. 'We've won,' he said.

Jakan gazed, unfocused, towards the ground. He shook his head. 'The battle but not the war. They'll be back. Next time with more men and more guns.'

Neel knew Jakan was right. 'The creature is gone,' he added.

'I know.' Jakan had known the instant it had left. The constant tingling in the back of his mind had ceased. He had grown so used to it that he only become conscious of it again when it disappeared.

'So what do we do now?' Neel asked.

'You and me, we leave. As for the others,' Jakan shrugged 'it's up to them.'

'Where are we going?'

'Away, anywhere.' Jakan lifted his head, pushing the fatigue into a temporary closet, and smiled at the other man, his mood lifting. 'Live to fight another day, eh?' he added, patting Neel on the shoulder as he strolled past him towards the room where he kept his few meagre possessions. He motioned Neel to follow. Closing the door behind them, he slumped into the one crude uncomfortable polymer chair. The self-moulding had long since ceased to function. The back was too short and the lumbar support too low for Jakan's frame. He could already feel the tension building across his shoulders.

He leant forward, resting his elbows on his knees, rubbing his temples with his fingertips, trying to ease the dull ache that was

developing in the empty space vacated by that creature. Neel was looking at him.

‘Will it return?’ he asked.

‘Yes, but not soon,’ Jakan said. ‘At least not by our standards. This was not the right time, apparently. Next time there will be more of them and we’ll be stronger.’

‘More of them,’ Neel echoed, shaking his head as he took in the daunting prospect. ‘One was terrible enough.’

Jakan smiled and nodded. ‘I know, but they’re our best hope. When they’ve helped us deliver a system, we must be strong enough to take it from them, for ourselves.’

‘Of course,’ Neel replied, although Jakan caught the rapid blinking and recognised doubt in his bloodshot eyes. Jakan hoped that his prediction would prove to be correct when the time came. He had to remind himself of why he was doing this. It was a mantra, a meditation to give him strength, stoking the fires of determination. No sacrifice was too great. ‘I’m going to share something with you, Neel, something I’ve never told anyone else.’

Neel looked surprised. ‘I’m honoured,’ he said, a puzzled look on his face, unsure why Jakan had decided to confide in him. In truth, Jakan wasn’t sure either. The creature knew, of course. It knew all his secrets, including some he didn’t even know he had. It prised them from him like so much else. Perhaps that’s why he felt the need to share one with another human being.

‘How old are you?’ Jakan asked.

‘Er, nearly a hundred and seven standards.’

Jakan nodded. ‘Do you know how old I am?’

‘No.’

‘No, of course not, why would you? These days with the treatments you can't even make a guess. I am over thirteen hundred standards, maybe getting on for thirteen-fifty. I can't remember the exact number; is that sad?’

Neel failed to prevent the disbelief lining his face before starting to answer.

Jakan took pity on the man. ‘Don't worry, that's more of a rhetorical question. I was one of the first to take the treatment; unwittingly as it turned out.’ Jakan paused as he reflected. ‘As old as Methuselah.’

‘Sorry?’

‘An old Earth saying.’

Neel perched on the edge of the bed. As Jakan swivelled towards him he glanced round at the crude accommodation. ‘This room reminds me of the hovel I grew up in all those years ago on Earth,’ he said. ‘Except it was worse. Hard to imagine, isn't it?’ he added, chuckling without humour. ‘You know, when I wake sometimes I can still smell the filth and hear the rats scratching away under the floor.’ Jakan tapped the side of his head. ‘It's as if it's been hardwired into my brain, always there. My kid sister's youth was stolen by a violent pimp before she was fifteen. My mother was dying from the latest wasting disease to sweep the planet, all for the want of simple drugs we couldn't afford. The oh-so-mighty conglomerates owned half the Earth's sixteen billion population and virtually all the wealth. The other half were like us.’ Jakan laughed. ‘If anyone wants to know what hell really looks like they should come to me. We and eight billion other

people experienced it.’ He paused, reliving the horror. Neel waited.

Shaking his head, Jakan continued. ‘Anyway, one night I was wandering through a rich district looking for opportunities and trying to avoid the private shit lickers who guarded it when this guy got out of a cab, pissed. First I ignored him, he was too far away. Then the stupid bastard left his door open. I don’t know why it didn’t close, but it meant the alarm systems would be disabled for a while. No one else was around so I sprinted over. When I arrived, the fat overdressed arsehole was sitting, swaying backwards and forwards, looking at this pack of pills in his hands as if praying for divine guidance. Instead he got me.’

Jakan pulled himself back and focused on Neel, who shuffled on the old thin mattress. ‘Why am I doing this?’ he thought. ‘Ah, what the hell, I’ve started so I’ll finish, as they used to say.’ He started talking again. ‘So, to cut it short, I smacked him one, grabbed the pills, his wallet and fancy jewellery, then legged it, knowing the systems would’ve registered the violence and sounded an alarm somewhere. Back in the slums I stopped to get my breath and on impulse popped two of the twenty or so pills. In those days pills were pills and I reckoned they must be good pills if he had them. It was only when I got back to our very own shit-hole that I read the packet. The treatment had been all over the news for the previous few months, but of course only the seriously rich could afford it. It turns out the guy was some Pharma fat cat. I was one of the first. It was impossible to believe back then. This small oblong bit of plastic contained immortality, or as near as dammit. It was written on the front in black and white, as if it was

a simple headache cure. Take one twice a day for ten days and live for ever, or words to that effect. Needless to say, I took the rest. And that was it, ageing switched off. Click.'

'What then?' Neel asked.

'Hmm, then I watched my sister die, followed by my mother two weeks later.'

'Shit,' Neel said before he could stop himself.

'Shit indeed. So I torched the building. Some people didn't get out, but at least their suffering was short.' Jakan stopped, his eyes were burning and his brain was throbbing to a slow rhythm. With a deep sigh and supporting his head with one hand, he continued. 'The first expansion was starting and I went with it. I stole the identity of some low-grade engineer. Ha, stole his clothes as well. Since then I've had many names and lives. I felt, with all the galaxy to choose from, there must be a better life somewhere. But it's happening again, all the old mistakes. History it seems teaches us nothing. The conglomerates, aided by the blood-sucking politicians, are now even bigger, even greedier and more powerful. So I found my purpose, found out why I was given that break all those hundreds of standards ago.'

He stood up, weary beyond belief, clutching the desk for support and waved Neel towards the door. 'Someone has to stop them.'

As the door closed he lay down on the bed, exhausted, listening to his own breathing. Clasp the pendant around his neck, he could feel it pulsing in time with his headache. Gripping it harder, so the edges dug into his palm, the beat slowed and his head eased allowing his limbs to relax. Before sleep overcame him, it crossed

his mind that he may be swapping one hell for another. He had shared that creature's mind. He had stared into the abyss. But when the time came they would deal with them as well..., they must.

## T W O

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To Mizon, the trip out of system seemed to creep by second by tedious second, as did the trip into Orion V and the Alexander Torus that orbited the system's dominant gas giant. The Alexander Torus was Byzantine's main administrative and security headquarters. More importantly for Danjay, it also housed the best medical facilities in the sector.

Mizon spent much of his time aboard ship pacing the corridors, often getting in the way of the rest the soldiers who had left Kwasang with them. His morose expression meant that most of those he met on these excursions left him alone. The best he could bring himself to do was grunt at them as he passed. As on numerous occasions, his aimless meanderings brought him to the door of the medical bay. He hesitated, taking a deep breath, before pressing his stubby fingers to the panel. The doors slid back.

Agreb was already there. Mizon thought he could see concern behind the elf's glowing crimson eyes. Others may have noticed

little difference, but for centaurs, facial expressions were as important as words.

Mizon stood opposite Agreb; Danjay's recumbent form still encased in the resus bag between them. 'Well?' he said.

'No change,' Agreb replied.

Mizon sighed, he needn't have asked. The monitors could have been broken for all the change they had recorded since they first brought him in. They showed there was life and some minimal flickering brain activity. The medtech was keeping him suspended in deep coma status until they reached the Torus. His injuries were far beyond the treatment capabilities of even this ship's sophisticated facilities. He wasn't getting any better, but at least he wasn't getting any worse.

'Docking in one hour,' the ship announced.

'Better get our stuff,' Mizon said.

Agreb nodded. 'I'll get Danjay's.' Both seemed reluctant to leave.

Within minutes of the airlocks opening, medical staff were whisking Danjay away. Mizon and Agreb followed, only to be told to wait in an anteroom while Danjay and the others continued on deep into the heart of the unit. Mizon resumed his pacing. He knew it might be annoying but hell, as a centaur he couldn't 'sit', and he had to do something. He wandered out of the room, mooching around, looking in other rooms before being shoed away from one by medical staff. He returned with a hot drink, which he set down on the table, then let go cold before going out and getting another.

He flicked through the information screen several times, fingers punching at the pad before switching it off again. His mind just refused to calm down. It was galloping around inside his head like an adolescent on the plains, leaving all sorts of distressing thoughts behind it. He glanced across at Agreb wondering about the elf as he had done so many times before. How did he do it? He was sitting there, motionless, like some cold grey sculpture with those big globular red eyes staring in front of him. When he'd asked him in the past, Agreb had replied 'meditation' in a flat emotionless tone, as if that explained everything. Mizon had a sudden impulse to go across and wave his hand in front of the elf's face, and if that didn't work, jump up and down.

As if sensing Mizon's agitation, Agreb looked up, 'What?' he asked.

'Nothing,' Mizon replied, like a sulky child. How did he do that? He knew elves transmitted some level of emotion to each other telepathically, so perhaps he was picking up on his. 'Hell', Mizon thought, 'I'm probably leaking emotion all over the place. The elf must be awash with it.' Before Mizon's musings could go any further, Danjay's immediate superior, Commander Riker from sector command, strode in, followed by one of the medical staff who had greeted them on the ship.

Agreb stood and Mizon joined him.

'This is Colonel Gargallo,' Riker said. 'He's in charge of this medical unit.' Then turning to the colonel, he added: 'And these are Captains Agreb and Mizon. They've been with the major a long time. They're the ones who saved his life on Kwasang.'

‘Well, gentlemen,’ said Colonel Gargallo. ‘As Commander Riker says, the major has your prompt action together with his own nanotech and the resus bag to thank for keeping him alive. You’ll be pleased to know that he should make a full recovery.’

Mizon puffed out a loud sigh. The colonel looked at Agreb. There was no reaction so he continued. ‘He’s in surgery now for emergency repair work to the spinal column. Some of the major organs are also damaged and we will have to grow him a new liver. At the same time we’ll prepare his body for the restoration tank. There’s enough healthy nervous tissue in the remains of the legs for them to be successfully budded and regrown. The nerves in the left arm, however, were so badly damaged that full regrowth won’t be possible. When he’s sufficiently recovered we’ll graft on a bioprosthetic; the artificial nerves will grow up his arm and integrate into his body’s own systems. After a while, he’ll hardly be able to tell the difference.’

‘How long will it all take?’ Mizon asked.

‘Can’t be precise,’ Colonel Gargallo said. ‘After surgery he’ll need some time to recover before we immerse him. He’ll then be taken down near the centre of the Torus to about point two G, which is the optimum for regrowth. How long that takes depends on him and how much “help” his body needs. Then he’ll need time for the graft to fully integrate, so...’

‘So?’ Mizon interrupted, trying hard, but unsuccessfully, to suppress the colours of impatience flickering across his face.

If the doctor picked up on Mizon’s broadcasted feelings he chose to ignore them. ‘So my guess is a couple of weeks, then six months in the tank. He should be conscious in six-and-a-half,

maybe seven months. Another three for the graft to fully take. During that time he'll be having full nano and gross mechanical physio on the legs to get them functional. After that, it's good old workouts. So all in all he should be somewhere near physically recovered in say, twelve to eighteen months.'

Mizon was about to comment further when Agreb said: 'Thank you, Colonel.' Mizon then limited his response to a grunt.

The colonel's eyes opened a little wider before giving them a distracted curt smile. 'Well, I must leave you,' he said. Turning on his heels he saluted to Commander Riker and departed.

Commander Riker seemed about to speak, then hesitated. 'You two can go and find your quarters,' he said.

The commander's hesitation was not lost on Mizon. 'Great, so what now?' he grumbled to Agreb as the door opened.

'I want to see the pair of you in my office first thing,' Riker called after them.

'There you go,' Agreb said to Mizon.

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'What are you calling me for?' Colonel Gargallo asked, bursting through the tank units' doors, white coat flapping behind him. 'I was with Commander Riker.'

'Sorry, Colonel. We finished up the surgery and we tried again to remove that thing from around his neck. But every time we do, he starts to surface.'

'Rubbish. That's impossible, he's been out for a week.' The colonel walked over and studied the body on the table. Everything was as it should be. The tank suit covered the lower half. The ridged tubes would monitor and guide his growing legs. A mask

over his mouth and nose kept the supplies of fluid going to his lungs before emersion. He could see the bruising down the left side of Danjay's serene face was already turning yellow, evidence of the resus bag's accelerated healing effects.

A pendant was attached to the 'thing' around Danjay's neck, and it lay on his chest just above a fresh neat scar. The colonel put his hand out, hesitating before touching the peculiar metal and stone object. Alarms sounded. The monitors were registering a surge in brain activity, conscious brain activity. The colonel jerked his hand back as if he'd been physically stung. The activity subsided back to acceptable levels.

'What the...?' the colonel said, beads of sweat springing out on his forehead.

'That's what we mean,' the surgeon said.

The colonel reached towards the pendant again, a few centimetres at a time. Ten centimetres away he paused and wiggled his fingers before closing in on the object. A centimetre to go he paused again, hand hovering. Glancing back to the screens he could see that the activity levels were rising again. He pulled back and the sensors returned to normal. Colonel Gargallo stood up, still staring in disbelief at the recumbent figure and the crude unprepossessing pendant the man seemed unwilling, even in deep coma, to be parted from. How could he know or sense what was happening? The colonel wiped his brow before running his hand through his damp hair.

'Leave it,' he said. 'Suit him up.'

'But Colonel it's against...'

‘To hell with what it's against,’ the colonel shouted. ‘Do you want to risk it?’

‘No, sir.’

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Commander Riker stared out of the window, stomach churning, knowing that in a few minutes the station's rotation would replace the empty blackness of space and its pinprick stars with the boiling firmament of the gas giant. He gripped the desk. He could appreciate the magnificence and beauty of that view, the weather fronts and storms racing across its surface painting their ever-changing swirling patterns. However, he could never quite rid himself of the disconcerting feeling they were falling into it.

‘Captains Agreb and Mizon are here,’ his desk announced. He shrugged and turned his attention away from the view as the doors opened.

He had first met Agreb and Mizon more than twenty standards before. It was not unknown for elves and centaurs to be attached to sections, although it was becoming increasingly rare for elves. It was, however, unusual to have both stay for a protracted period in one small unit. Standing in front of him, side by side, it occurred to Riker just how incongruous it seemed that they were together.

He knew, like most people, that the ‘seeders’ had laid a basic plan for the development of much of the intelligent life in this galaxy, but evolution had still had its influence. Agreb was only slightly taller than the average man, but too thin by human standards. It was not just a lack of meat on the frame, it was the frame itself. Body, legs and arms looked as if they might snap in a

stiff breeze, contradicting the exceptional physical strength Riker knew the elf possessed. The limbs were also disproportionately long compared to the torso, the hands reaching to knee level. It was a frame honed by a long ancestry of tree dwelling. The face had a simple slit for a mouth and the nostrils were hardly visible. However, dominating that elongated triangular grey green face were the large dark red and seemingly unblinking eyes. Riker knew they did blink, an almost invisible fine nictitating membrane swept from one side to the other and then back every few seconds. Knowing that was no help, however. He still had to consciously avoid entering into a stare-out.

By contrast Mizon's ancestors had developed in a plains' environment on a planet with nearly twice Earth-standard gravity. The result was a stocky body with four short powerful legs, the tight bunched muscles straining against skin and short hairs. The torso rose as high again from the top of the body with arms at approximately shoulder position. The head was attached directly to the torso with no discernable neck. To compensate for a lack of head rotation the eyes were placed above the short snout at an angle that allowed them both forward binocular vision as well a peripheral field of nearly two hundred and seventy degrees. The face patches that were a key element of centaur communication were currently fading between neutral and faint yellow, indicating slight unease, although Riker was no expert.

Riker motioned Agreb to a chair. The elf declined. Sitting was not a concept that applied to centaurs. 'Good of you to come,' Riker said, knowing full well he had given them an order. 'As you know the Ninth is being disbanded and most of the men

reassigned. I guess it's up to you what you want to do next.' Both had the rank of captain under Danjay, but there was no official attachment and they were free to leave whenever they wished.

The elf's features gave nothing away. The centaur's face patches were flickering slight variations of brown. Clearly he was making an effort to control his feelings.

'We have discussed the situation and we wish...' Agreb hesitated, 'to stay.' Mizon nodded his agreement.

Riker was not surprised by the answer, but it did give him the problem of what to do with them. In one sense they were an asset. The value of having these two on his staff went beyond their own, not inconsiderable, abilities. Also, the links it gave him had proved valuable more than once. However, placing them in another unit was not that simple. Their rank would normally put them in charge of units of men. Men who didn't know them, unlike the Ninth, might not take to that idea. Added to that, they were oddballs, misfits. In Danjay and each other, they'd found kindred spirits. For whatever reasons, none of them quite slotted into their own cultures.

They were a unique team that meshed and compensated for each other. Danjay was in many ways a maverick who definitely, often maddeningly, did things his own way. But there was no denying he was a leader. Men would follow him with unquestioning loyalty. If he had had more Danjays then the situation on Kwasang would have been resolved far sooner. Agreb's logical and taciturn introspection provided a thoughtful and moderating influence on both Danjay's and Mizon's wilder ideas. Mizon lived on emotion and had a zest for life. He had an

irrepressible spirit, which could lift even the dark moods Danjay was prone to.

However, Danjay was out of action for at least one or two standards. After that, what his mental state would be, and how long that would need to recover was anybody's guess. So what to do with these two?

Walking behind the desk Riker glanced out at the view. He regretted it and flinched, the gas giant was now filling the window. With a conscious effort to appear casual he touched the desk panel and the window darkened behind him. He drummed his fingers on the screen, finally deciding to run with the proposition he had been considering before they came in.

Mizon's face patches were showing increasing variations, indicating the centaur's growing agitation. Agreb's face remained impassive, of course. 'Hmm, I do have something for you that could also involve Danjay when he's fully recovered,' said Riker. He paused, neither Agreb nor Mizon spoke, although Mizon's colours were lightening. 'As you know, out here at the edge we have some, how shall I put it, colourful characters. Also, the regular law is thinly spread and, let's be generous, at times not always as effective as it might be. So I find myself in need of a small team to go after specific targets of my choosing.'

'And we're to be that team?' Mizon interrupted.

'Possibly,' Riker replied.

'Bounty hunters,' Agreb said.

'Yes and no,' Riker continued. 'Similar skills, different motivation. As I said, they will be targets of my choosing. Think about it and get back to me in twenty-four hours.'

‘Sounds good to me,’ Mizon said, before glancing at Agreb. ‘OK, we’ll think about it,’ he added grinning, his colour patches lightening further.

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On the day Agreb and Mizon set off on the first clean-up mission Riker had found for them, Danjay’s inert and broken body was taken deep into the centre of the Torus. Suspended from the wires and tubes which would supply all his needs for the next six months, he was lowered into the yellowy viscous fluid of the restoration tank. If his mind had been able to register it, on contact with the restorative liquid he would have felt tingling where his missing legs had been. A newly acquired battery of nano-machines, together with those that had saved his life, was activated and programmed. First they decoded the blueprint stored in his DNA and then set to work rebuilding bone, nerve, muscle, tendon and skin.

Deep in his sedated brain, in the core of his unconscious mind, a kernel of awareness refused to succumb to the cocktail of sedatives that was flowing through his bloodstream. While the rest of his mind and body slumbered without interference from the conscious, it watched. Then discovering its independence, it built walls and defences. Finally, when it felt strong enough, unopposed, it came out to play, fusing dreams with memories and memories with dreams.

Ranath shivered and wished he’d worn another layer under his freshly-bleached robe. Gazing at the eastern horizon, a deep orange stain was growing in the night sky above the dark silhouette of hills in the distance. The sun’s great fires were renewed and

returning to the world. He touched the pendant around his neck in thanks. His grandfather had said it was a gift of great power from the god that had appeared in this circle and lain with his mother the summer before he was born.

The rich ochre glow expanded as he watched, the sky brightening, driving the darkness away. He glanced back over his shoulder. Hadran, the moon goddess, continued to shine like a petulant, defiant ghost. But she already knew that her time this day was nearly done. Ranath contemplated the circle of stones in front of him. He wondered about the back-breaking effort his ancestors must have undertaken in fetching these monumental blocks from beyond the wooded hills. Many of the stones had been ferried across the capricious northern seas, on rafts constructed from the greatest of trees to be found in the sacred forest. Werfen, the fickle god of those waters, had extracted his toll both in terms of stones and lives lost.

The sun continued to announce its mid-summer arrival. On his signal, priests prostrated themselves, praying and performing the sacred rites. Ranath welcomed the tension in his gut, the anticipation, as the first rays crested the eastern horizon turning the far hills a burnished bronze. The naked, cleansed and prepared slave girl, drugged with hemp, lay across the altar. Taking a deep breath he raised the dagger in anticipation. In the blink of an eye, a golden spear of light lanced between the welcome stones striking the head of the young girl. With a cry of exaltation he plunged the razor-sharp blade into her neck. He watched a thick bubbling red line channel down the waiting groove in the middle of the stone to be collected in a priceless gold-decorated bronze vessel. His heart

was racing. Licking his lips, tasting the blood that had splattered across his face, he raised his arms to the heavens, adding his own final pleading prayer that the gods might hear them. But as he clutched the bloody knife across his chest and lowered his gaze to the circle, the gods refused them yet again. He felt his beating heart slow. Unbidden, his eyelids fluttered down as emotional weariness replaced the previous euphoria and an overwhelming sinking feeling settled in his heart.

Opening his eyes all was darkness; this couldn't be. The sinking feeling became a physical sensation. He was drowning. Panic rose, gripping his throat. He couldn't breathe. Perhaps the gods were punishing him. He struggled, trying to cry out, but his body refused to respond. Cloying viscous fluid was all around him, filling his mouth and nose. He gave one last silent prayer. He must surely be dying.

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Raucous alarms were reaching their crescendo as Colonel Gargallo rushed into the resuscitation control room. The technician seated at the panels was wide-eyed and frantic, scanning the information streaming across them.

‘What the hell's going on?’ Colonel Gargallo shouted over the mind-numbing din. ‘And shut that bloody noise off.’

The technician's shaking hands flicked into the image and, mercifully, near silence returned.

‘Thank God for that,’ the colonel said, leaning over the man's shoulder. ‘That can't be happening.’

‘It is, sir. It’s no malfunction.’ The technician rotated the data so that the colonel could see the full picture. ‘The man in tank five is coming round.’

‘That’s Major Danjay.’ The colonel’s eyes widened as he watched the sensor levels shift through orange and into the red. ‘Double the sedation.’

‘Sir, isn’t that dangerous?’

‘A damn sight less dangerous than him regaining consciousness,’ Colonel Gargallo replied, bringing up a visual on tank five.

Danjay’s thrashing form appeared, as if possessed by some manic demon. The technician almost jumped out of his chair before complying with the colonel’s order. After a few seconds the frantic movements subsided. Finally the body sank back down, hanging limp from the tubes and wires as if nothing had happened.

The colonel placed a shaking hand on the technician’s shoulders, watching as if expecting a repeat display at any moment. ‘I want twenty-four-hour surveillance on him,’ he said prodding at the data. ‘You leave the room, you take a monitor with you. You go for a piss, you get someone else in here.’

‘Sir.’

The colonel wandered back to his office. He bunched his fists tight, shoving them into the pockets of his coat, trying to stop his hands from shaking. Dimming the lights in his office, he sat down, repeating a relaxation mantra to himself. When his breathing had steadied he thought about the major in tank five. It was unheard of, impossible. No one ever regained consciousness in the tanks. Added to that, he’d only been in the tank for two months and

regeneration was almost complete, another month would do it. Some variation was to be expected, usually dependent on the level of trauma to the remaining tissue, but this was ridiculous. He flipped through Danjay's file again, as he had on numerous occasions, in case he had missed something. But there was nothing that could explain this. Danjay's record showed various enhancements to his sight and the nervous and respiratory systems. But nothing out of the ordinary for a soldier of his rank. Nothing that might account for what this man was doing.

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Three months later Commander Riker sat at his desk, keeping the disturbing view behind him. 'Well, Major,' he greeted Danjay, noting the unusual rolling gait. 'I'm glad to see you've nearly recovered. And in record time I believe.'

'Yes, thanks,' Danjay said. 'Well, almost recovered. The legs are getting there, although they're five centimetres longer, which is a bit bizarre.'

'Lucky you,' Riker said, raising an eyebrow. Before Danjay's spell in the tank, he had only come up to just above his shoulder.

'And the arm still feels like it belongs to someone else,' Danjay continued, flexing it for Riker's benefit. 'Which can get messy at meal times.'

Riker studied Danjay. The man looked different in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on. But then, after all he had been through, what did he expect? 'Our good Colonel Gargallo wanted to keep you in bit longer.'

'I know. And I appreciate all they did for me. But I was going crazy in there. I can do all the physio just as well for myself.'

‘Sure,’ Riker said and then changed the subject. ‘I take it Agreb and Mizon have told you the Ninth have gone and what I offered them?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well?’

‘I’ll take it.’

‘I could find you something else, something here,’ Riker added, knowing full well that a desk job would be last thing Danjay wanted.

Danjay smiled, knowing the game Riker was playing. ‘Come on, you don’t want me hanging around here any more than I want to be here.’

‘OK,’ Riker said, returning the smile. ‘Agreb and Mizon should be back here in the next few weeks. I’m sure the doctors can keep you busy until then.’

Danjay looked pained as he rocked towards the door. As it closed behind him, Riker continued to stare. There was definitely something different.

Also by Ian Martyn

Project Noah