

An epic adventure

The Polymorph

MAX NOWAZ



The
Polymorph
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To friends and family who have read *The Polymorph* and commented on it.

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CHAPTER 1

A young woman was coming up to see him. Her gait was neither too fast nor too slow but measured in a manner that seemed to confirm a businesslike approach. She wasn't dressed in the ship's uniform, but in an attire vastly superior to others around. Her dress was royal purple with gold motifs as if to emphasise her status. Brown thought she was pretty, even when she looked serious. Her blonde hair was tied up in a neat bun, and her sparkling eyes oozed enthusiasm. It was clear to Brown that she was fairly high up in the pecking order.

"Your Excellency Arbitrator Brown," she addressed him formally, taking him by surprise at the use of his title.

"I'm Marika," she continued, "Field Agent, Public Relations for returning dignitaries. I have been personally assigned to you."

"In what capacity?" Brown asked.

"To see we meet all the standards required for your needs and comfort on this trip. Special orders from the EPA as you have decided to return on a cruise ship instead of normal military transport. Is everything in order?"

"Everything seems to be fine. I decided to have a little break on my way back to Earth. It has been quite intense the past few months on Pirrus," said Brown, smiling at her. "Nice to meet you."

"Good," she smiled back, "I was worried you wouldn't approve."

"Do I have a choice?" Brown's eyes quizzed her, but he was smiling. "I suppose you're my official minder. Well, the EPA must be worried about something," he shrugged resignedly, but really he didn't care. What a change, he thought, from only a few months ago when he had been languishing in a prison cell on Earth.

It seemed to him the EPA, or the Earth Policy Administration, weren't taking any chances. They wanted him on a short leash to stop him going AWOL on them, but he still hoped she wouldn't be able to jeopardise his plans to do exactly that. He was on the lookout, and if the chance presented itself, he was going to be off on a little detour of his own during his cruise back to Earth. Either way, it was going to be an interesting trip.

Brown and Marika made their way to the dock reception area after completing formalities and passing through security. She looked stunning in the golden-brown dress that complemented her blonde hair and athletic figure. It made Brown wonder if it would be a breach of protocol if he tried to seduce her. He decided against any such complications. He needed to concentrate; he wanted to focus on his main goal. He was there on the space station on his own secret mission and was worried how dangerous it might be.

Brown was on edge about his impending meeting with his long-time friend who was based on the space station. He was not quite sure what his friend's reaction would be to Marika, who had insisted on coming along. Though Brown had met Marika a few days ago, so far she had been fairly tight-lipped about her role. All he knew about her was that she had been assigned by Earth to accompany him during the voyage.

The space station *Outer Reach* was built on a very large, arrested asteroid and was made up of a series of large bubbles of self-renewing polymers, several metres thick that cut out harmful radiation and could withstand small meteorite strikes. The polymer glass also lightened and darkened to resemble night and day. The bubbles were joined together by arms jutting out from the asteroid. The bubbles were also connected by several circular travel-ways, joining one arm to another and through tunnels in the asteroid.

The space station was on a geo-stationary orbit around the single planet in the local solar system. The planet had two moons and was in the process of being terra-formed by Earth for future use. The two moons, however, caused havoc with the tides on the planet.

Brown did not have any problem with the low artificial gravity on the station, provided by it slowly rotating around itself. He knew the whole concept had been a gargantuan undertaking on Earth's part to have an ever-present gigantic base so far out in a distant solar system. From there it could dominate the surrounding space, with its military-industrial complex, directly accessible to spaceships.

Brett was already waiting for them on the other side of control as Brown and Marika came out of processing. He was a large, well-built man, who looked younger than Brown even though he was actually slightly older. He was also slightly taller than Brown, who was of medium height. *He must have been through regeneration*

recently, thought Brown.

“He looks very young,” commented Marika.

“He earns enough,” laughed Brown. “As you probably know, it’s possible now for people to augment their lifespan many times over by going through a process of regeneration, available only to people of Earth origin. The process isn’t cheap, but as long as one can afford to pay for it, it is possible to do so approximately every seventy-five years and be young again.”

“How about you?” she asked.

“I’m worried about the downside. The government usually relieves the people undergoing the process of most of their accumulated wealth to stop them from exerting undue influence on society. People also have a tendency to commit suicide from boredom after existing for more than 300 years,” answered Brown. He didn’t want to answer the question directly.

“Maybe you don’t need regeneration,” Marika answered. There was a cryptic tone in her voice. “Your friend looks like he can handle himself, he seems almost a bit sinister, if you ask me. Did you have problems dealing with him in your past?”

“There are always problems, but I’m very well trained.”

Owing to his extensive superior training, Brown had always been able to outmatch Brett physically, but now he was not so sure. He was still recovering from the ravages of a severe drug addiction. It had been in the process of killing him towards the end of his tenth year in prison; just prior to being plucked out of there and sent to Pirrus to put down a revolution.

“It looks like you’re doing well for yourself, Brett,” said Brown, when introductions were over.

Brett replied that looks could be deceptive; he had lost a whole lot of money going through regeneration recently. He was supposed to have been compulsorily retired for ten years, but they had extended his contract for a further five years. An exception because they needed him, however his retirement would start the following year.

“Well, at least you’ll have a few more tons of spare cash to play with after this contract. Are you going to go back to Earth next year?” asked Brown.

“Well, I was actually thinking of going to Levita, as you did a few years ago,” replied Brett. “You said you were having a great time there and then I didn’t hear anything from you.”

“You need to be very careful there; things didn’t go very well for me. I got

relieved of my money.”

“And now you’re back again doing what you do best.” Brett’s laugh was a little sharp.

“What’s that?” asked Marika, intrigued.

“Smashing people up,” said Brett. He arched his eyebrows as if to emphasise the humour in the rancorous defaming statement.

“It wasn’t like that this time,” protested Brown, a little surprised.

“Oh, no? Tell that to the Baccrans. They’re being battered back to the Stone Age as we speak.” Brett broke into a wicked smile.

Brown protested that the Baccrans had taken a gamble against Earth and it hadn’t paid off, so they were paying for it now. *This meeting seems to have got off on the wrong foot*, thought Brown.

“It is always the same, though. When Earth smashes another lot up, they always happen to be bad guys,” said Brett, with deliberate sarcasm in his voice, but then changed to a softer tone. He suggested that as they were there to have a good time they should go and have a few drinks or would Brown like to get high?

Would Brett remember any of the coded signals from all those years ago that they had devised? Brown could hardly remember them himself. No, he would probably have to be blunt, but he would have to let Brett know somehow that he needed to see him alone. However, he had decided to try the signals first.

“Just been through a very rough patch so I’m off drugs at the moment,” shrugged Brown.

“Not like the good old days, then?” smiled Brett.

They had been on opposite sides of a conflict, more than twenty-five years ago, on one of the colonies seeking independence from Earth. It was an old, familiar story; Brown had been sent to crush the rebellion. It was, as always, the inevitable first standard reaction from EPA, the Earth Policy Administration.

Brown had met Brett at a parley, in a negotiation to settle matters, while hostilities carried on. Brown had managed to turn Brett, and that’s when they had developed set coded signals to communicate with each other.

Things had worked out quite well at first, and Brown had been able to destabilise the revolution by working with inside knowledge and pre-empting and arresting the key figures. Nevertheless, in the end, the other side had found out that Brett was working for him, and Brown had to mount a rescue mission to save Brett’s life.

They had been friends ever since. Once the hostilities had ended, Brown had offered him resettlement on Earth.

“You two look like you’ve lived a little,” said Marika.

“You don’t know the half of it, or what you’re taking on with this one, sister,” agreed Brett.

“I have a lot to learn, it seems,” said Marika.

When they had settled in a bar, Marika asked Brett what he actually did on the *Outer Reach* space station.

Brett seemed evasive. He told her that he was in charge of procuring materials for particular manufacturing projects that people were involved in at present. He was sorry that he couldn’t give her any further details.

Marika nodded that that was quite okay, but then asked Brett why he wanted to settle on Levita. Brett explained that due to a eugenics programme in the past, the women in Levita were particularly beautiful.

“They have killed off all the people who were not beautiful,” smiled Brett, his eyebrows arched up again. It seemed like his trademark expression when dabbling in gallows humour.

“You’re joking,” exclaimed Marika. She looked shocked.

“No, it’s perfectly true. Apparently, the girls there like men from Earth because we’re a bit ugly compared to the men there. Ask Jim. He was there,” smiled Brett.

“And the Earth’s government is going to allow you to go there? Aren’t we getting ready to have war against them soon?” asked Brown.

“I don’t think it’s going to happen,” said Brett. He sounded confident. “In any case, who says I need the government’s permission to go there. There’s no such requirement at present.”

“Just be very careful, so you don’t get swindled,” said Brown.

“I’ll bear it in mind,” said Brett.

The rest of the evening passed fairly smoothly, and just before they separated, Brett tapped Brown’s arm, just when he was thinking of bringing up the matter again.

Brett told Brown that if he was looking for some entertainment, he should go to Rita’s the next day and ask for Maria. Around two in the afternoon was quite a good time. Brown informed him that Marika would be there to keep an eye on him.

“Is she your girlfriend?”

“She’s my minder,” Brown smiled and looked resigned.

Marika looked quite surprised by Brown's frankness about their relationship.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"The place is an exotic whorehouse," laughed Brett.

Marika seemed slightly shocked and said that she would leave the two of them alone to chat about it. With a noticeable look of disgust on her face, she excused herself so that she could visit the restroom. The two men found themselves alone. There had been no need for the coded signal after all.

Brett remarked that she seemed a bit touchy for a minder. He still remembered the old signal and would have everything arranged. She wouldn't be able to follow Brown into the interior. He could give her the slip then.

"I wish there was some other way," said Brown.

"I'm afraid at such short notice that's all I can come up with," shrugged Brett.

When Marika came back, they parted company from Brett and headed for the ship. Brown asked Marika what her impression of Brett was.

"I thought he was rather hostile towards you," commented Marika. "Can you trust him?"

"You think so?" Brown tried to act surprised, but in reality, he was also thinking the same. "Well, he told me of a good place to check out though. I'd like to go there tomorrow afternoon," Brown said again. He wondered why Marika had brought up the matter of trust between him and Brett. It began to worry him.

"Where is Rita's?" asked Marika; she had recovered her composure.

"It's on the other side of town."

"Is it really a brothel?"

"It's an exotic whorehouse." Brown wanted to put her off going with him.

"I didn't think you were interested in that sort of stuff."

"I've changed my mind. Brett told me how great this place is, so I don't want to miss out. I'm unlikely to come back this way again very soon."

"I see. I'll still have to come with you," insisted Marika.

"You're very welcome to, but you'll have to wait in the lobby. You're not coming into the room with me unless you want to join in," laughed Brown.

"The lobby should be fine," said Marika, a little tersely.

They didn't talk very much on the way back and said goodnight when they reached their cabins. Brown sensed that Marika was not too happy with his decision earlier but was tight-lipped about it. He, however, needed to go through with another meeting with Brett.

CHAPTER 2

Brown and Marika made their way to Rita's. They noticed there were free gliders available for their use. These were scooter-type vehicles, but without wheels. They levitated magnetically and travelled at low speeds. There were faster shuttles also available, all free of charge to the public.

Brown was not quite sure about what to expect at Rita's, given Brett's slightly hostile attitude towards him. In the end, he put it down to Brett having a gruff sort of nature, as he recalled from his association with him in the past. Even so, he needed to see Brett if he wanted to find the information he was looking for.

Brown was desperate to find out more about the situation on Levita. Brett would be more up to date with that, especially if he was thinking of settling over there. Brown was also sure that Brett would be able to give him some contacts on Earth because of his business links there; people who could help him find out things and provide services he required when he was back on Earth.

Brown knew a big problem with the space station was getting past security. Normally one needed clearance to visit most parts of the space-city, let alone the other parts of the station complex, though there was a tourist sector that was readily accessible. The whole structure was a big manufacturing hub for Earth and was also a place where ships were built and serviced, including warships. As such, it was full of space docks.

Whilst there were some people who lived and eventually died at the place, most were contract workers. They lived under basic conditions to earn tax-free income and thereafter went back home. There was a lot of strategic information that could be gleaned on the station and lots of contacts forged with people from different parts of the galaxy.

Brown had done his homework on the station. He knew that after Earth, this was the most secure place in the galaxy. It was rumoured that the whole station could be surrounded by a force field if attacked and it was also rumoured that another such station was under development in another distant part of the galaxy. Earth was planning to dominate proceedings for a very long time.

"Don't forget the captain has requested that you be present at the gala reception

dinner for all passengers tonight. He would like you to join him at his table.”

“That’s kind of him,” said Brown. *High honours indeed*, he thought.

“It seems you’ve caught the public’s imagination. The success of your latest mission is really big news back on Earth, and you have been pronounced a hero of Earth.” Marika smiled in a congenial fashion. Her aquamarine eyes sparkled with excitement as she brushed her dark blonde hair from her face. She looked eager to please him, but Brown wanted to avoid temptation. It was annoying that she was so damned attractive.

“It was just a job, but I’m glad I could complete it successfully.” Brown tried to be modest.

“I’ll try to arrange things, so you have a good cruise.”

“That’s good,” replied Brown. The trip was going to take around three weeks, and he could do with a little distraction. He wanted to take his mind off Gina, the girl he had left behind on the planet Pirrus, and the sad reality hit him again that the relationship was over.

“The captain would personally like to hear about your exploits from you. It’s not very often that they have a living legend travelling with them.”

“Will you be present at the captain’s table yourself?” asked Brown.

“Unfortunately I’m not of sufficient rank to warrant a seat there. The table is normally filled with dignitaries and celebs; however, I’ll be at hand at a nearby table,” sighed Marika.

“That’s a shame. I was looking forward to having a chat with you. I’ve hardly had a chance to talk to you so far, and there’s so much catching up to do.” Brown looked disappointed.

“Oh, there’ll be plenty of opportunity for that later on. There’s also going to be music and dancing,” Marika reassured him.

“In that case, you must have a dance with me. I used to be a good dancer, but I’m badly out of practice.” In truth, he had been an excellent dancer, courtesy of his last wife, who had been an avid participator and had managed to convince him to take it up.

“I’m sure you’ll catch on again very quickly. I’ll look forward to that,” said Marika. It was interesting, almost strange, that she was almost extra nice, even though she didn’t approve of his visit to Rita’s.

“Tell me, just out of interest, what are your exact duties?” Brown slipped the question in, trying to catch Marika off guard, but she was equal to the situation.

“To look after your comforts primarily, though I have some other general duties as well,” Marika answered without being ruffled even slightly. She was smiling.

Brown wondered how far that word ‘comforts’ would stretch. He was eager to find out more about her.

“Have you been in the cruise business long?” he asked.

“No, this is my first trip, and normally it’s not part of my remit. I was specially assigned, much to my surprise, when they found out that you wanted to travel back to Earth on a cruise ship.”

“Yes, I wanted to have a change from the normal military transport. It has been a very hard few months, and I needed time to reflect on things instead of starting my debriefing immediately. So, they sent you to keep an eye on me?”

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that. Right now, you’ve become a precious asset, but you have a bit of a history of straying.” Marika smiled; she seemed to be enjoying the conversation.

“To keep me out of trouble, I see,” Brown laughed.

“Primarily to make sure that you didn’t go off to Levita. Relations are very strained with them at present and almost at a breaking point,” shrugged Marika.

“So you know about my exploits on Levita?” asked Brown.

“All I know is that you killed a few people there and landed in jail on Earth for it, though ostensibly for tax evasion.”

“You’re very well informed. Does that affect your opinion of me?”

“Not a lot. I’m sure you had good reasons for doing what you did, and you paid for it. I’ll try to make sure that I don’t cross you the wrong way.”

“Very diplomatic,” laughed Brown. “Does everybody else know about this?”

“No, only I’m privy to this information on this ship.”

“Good,” said Brown. *Maybe she doesn’t know everything*, he thought.

They had reached the lobby at Rita’s.

“Until later then,” said Marika.

“Until later,” replied Brown.

Marika made herself comfortable in the lobby. She seemed to be accepting things quite stoically and didn’t make a fuss as Brown went off with Maria, a buxom redhead, to another level.

“Has Brett been in touch with you?” Brown asked Maria.

“Yes, I have his address here. I’ll show you the back way out, but first, we need to settle my fees,” Maria smiled in a businesslike fashion.

“Brett didn’t mention any fees.” Brown was a bit surprised.

“Well, a girl’s got to make a living. While I’m pretending to be with you, I won’t be earning any money.”

She had a point. Brown paid up with a smile even though it wasn’t cheap. After leaving the building, Brown jumped on a glider on a different street and made his way to the address given to him. His pass, provided to him by Brett, automatically allowed him to cross the semi-permeable barrier that separated the port area from the rest of the city, without raising any alarms. However, he noticed that there were also two men who were following him. They had been loitering on the street near the back door of Rita’s and jumped on gliders at the same time as Brown. He made a mental note of the riders.

Much to Brown’s relief, one rider veered off pretty soon while the other carried on behind him. He then also suddenly veered off in the opposite direction, when Brown was joined by a third man. Brown had a sneaking suspicion that this man looked like the first man in different clothing. It was quite easy to alter ones clothing, without actually having to change, especially the colour. This time Brown made a good mental note of the man.

A few minutes later, the third man veered off, and Brown was joined by a fourth man, who, Brown was sure, resembled the second man in different clothing also. They were definitely keeping tabs on him, but had made no moves to apprehend him or take him out.

Brown knew he was in trouble. He wasn’t armed, so how was he going to defend himself if or when they made a move. However, the fourth man also veered off as he neared Brett’s address. It was a medium-sized glass and aluminium building. Brown pressed the buzzer on the video link.

Brett’s face appeared on the screen. “Come on up, buddy,” said Brett, “third floor.”

Brown took the elevator to the third floor. His sixth sense was tingling; something was not quite right. This was a sense he had developed over years of combat experience, a form of subliminal assessment, enhanced recognition of patterns missed by almost all people in their focus for acute details. It was an ability to extrapolate and join the gaps in abstract information to reach a conclusion for evasive action in threatening circumstances.

Brown got out of the elevator and pressed the intercom button next to the door to the office suite. The doors swung open with a buzz, and he entered into a lobby area,

but there was nobody there.

“I’m in the office straight ahead of you,” announced Brett’s disembodied voice.

Very strange, thought Brown, as he pushed the door open and entered the office room. He walked towards the desk behind which Brett was seated.

“Really great to see you again,” guffawed Brett as his eyebrows arched up. “It’s a company holiday, so nobody’s...,” Brett was saying, as he reached towards a drawer. Brown vaulted the desk in one bound and kicked him on the chin. He was unconscious before he touched the floor and never got a chance to finish his sentence. *Yes, he was back*, thought Brown, *that was more like his old self again*. The regeneration was taking effect.

Brown checked the drawer, and indeed Brett had been reaching for a gun. He took it out, and as he looked up at a monitor screen, he saw the two men who had been following him earlier, enter the office building.

Brown checked the charge setting on the gun and set it to maximum, in case the two men were mandroids. He propped Brett up on the chair and swivelled it around, so it faced the opposite direction to the door. He then moved away from the desk, slid down to the floor and took up a firing position.

He saw the two men on the monitor, silently enter the lobby and they were moving straight towards Brett’s office. Brown waited silently. The two men pushed the door open and entered the office almost together. Brown shot them both before they had time to react. They had been too confident of their position.

The men crumpled to the floor; they had big holes in them, but what Brown saw next amazed him. They were healing fast; the men were mandroids. Brown ran up and shot the first one through an eye at very close range, and as he was lining up the second one, it reached out and caught his leg. Brown just managed to squeeze the charge off before being flipped over. The mandroid was trying to sit up, but collapsed again with its brain fried, just like the other one.

Brett was beginning to stir when Brown looked at him, so he altered the setting of the gun and gave Brett a low charge. Brett fell back into the chair; he would be out for quite a while. Brown was now fairly certain that Brett had invited him into a trap, but why? Somebody wanted to get hold of him, and Brett had been out to facilitate that, but they had wanted him alive, or he would be dead by now.

Brown went through Brett’s pocket and found a personal manocom. He took out his own specialist device and began copying all the information in it. It was easy to

do for his device easily found the access code in Brett's one. He then opened up Brett's computer, again breaking the code, started copying all the files he could access into his manocom, his own personal communicator.

As he was finishing, the street buzzer sounded, and Brown looked up and saw it was Marika. She had somehow managed to locate him. Brown told her to wait; he would be out soon. He did not want her to find out what was going on, but he was surprised by the tenacity of the girl. He shut the computer down and put back Brett's communicator into Brett's pocket.

Brown looked for the controls of the monitor so he could delete any recordings of him, but could not find any, so he fried the monitor with a shot. He thought of killing Brett but decided it was better to let him live.

Brett was most likely to hush up what had happened, rather than let the company security or the local authorities get involved. Failure was probably not an option in his job. Brown wiped the gun and closed Brett's limp fingers around it then resting it on his lap, made his way down to the street.

Marika looked angry, but Brown managed to calm her down.

"I'm sorry, but I had to meet my friend alone," said Brown. "After all, I didn't agree to have you as my minder, did I? How did you find me?"

She told him that she had bugged him the day before and had heard everything when she had gone to the restroom. A tracking device was in his food that morning, but he needn't worry; he would pass the tracker out by the next day. When she had seen that he was on the move, she had gone to Maria and forced her to give the address. She already had security clearance to enter the zone.

"Let's go," said Brown. He was impressed by her doggedness. "We shouldn't hang around here for too long. What time is the captain expecting us? I don't have anything to wear." *There is now going to be no diversionary trip to Levita anytime soon*, thought Brown.

Marika informed him that a new tuxedo had been left for him in his room. It should be a perfect fit as he had been scanned when he had boarded the ship. He should let her know if there were any problems. She also gave Brown another personal manocom that he could use to contact her at any time directly, and she was clear that she meant at any time. It had an encrypted delivery system which was hard to crack. Brown couldn't help thinking that somehow Marika seemed happier and eager to please him.

“What other personal services do you offer?” asked Brown.

“Not what you’re thinking of,” she laughed, “but I can arrange for someone to visit you if you wish it.”

Brown laughed and said that wouldn’t be necessary. She was definitely testing Brown. She was playing with him.

“I’ll leave you now then. I will see you later at the reception,” said Marika, bringing his attention back to the present.

“I’ll look forward to it,” nodded Brown. “Oh, I hope they’re not expecting me to make a speech.”

“Not unless you want to. But I’m sure it would be very interesting.”

“Well, you haven’t heard me make a speech, but I’ll try to spare you that dubious pleasure,” said Brown.

Marika was waiting for him at the entrance to a very large hall. She looked even better out of her work clothes, in a formal aquamarine gown, which matched her eyes.

Brown smiled as he greeted Marika and complimented her on her choice of the gown. They were then shown to the captain’s table, where she introduced him to the captain. He was a rather portly man, who looked older than Brown, but Brown guessed that he was probably much younger. The man sported a fashionable beard and seemed quite jovial.

“Ah, our famous guest. Your Excellency, it’s such a pleasure to have you on board for this trip.” The captain extended a large hand. “Captain Grant, at your service.”

“It’s my great pleasure to meet you, sir,” Brown returned the compliment. “But please, call me Jim. After all, I’m on holiday.”

The captain stated that he would try to make his holiday as memorable as possible. He reiterated that Marika had been specially assigned to Brown by the EPA. She had informed him of this already and accordingly they had arranged for her to sit next to Brown at his table. She had already been allocated the cabin next to Brown earlier when the ship had docked.

“That’s very kind of you. This is a surprise as I wasn’t expecting a fanfare.”

“I have it on high authority that the fanfare will really start when you get back to Earth. Meanwhile, we can only make sure that you do not want for anything on this trip.”

It seemed to Brown that the captain was well aware of the importance of looking after him. Brown wondered why the EPA had suddenly decided to go the extra mile to pamper him. He had already done the job they had asked him to do, a task from which they had not expected him to survive. They had been well aware of how bad his health was when they sent him to Pirrus. They were not expecting him to return after completing his mission there, the gravity of which they had also underestimated.

Marika said that she had been greatly surprised about her being moved to better accommodation, next to Brown, as well as by her upgrade to the captain's table and thanked him profusely. Some other minor celebrity had no doubt been pushed aside to make way for her. Brown was glad to have her next to him, especially with the captain on the other side of him. A little gong sounded, a signal for people to take up their places, and then the first drinks were served.

"Thanks for moving me to this table," she said again. "I appreciate it greatly."

"Think nothing of it," said Brown, though he had nothing to do with it. *Why disappoint her,* he thought, *let her believe what she thinks.*

The dinner proceeded in a grand manner, with more drinks and sumptuous food and a lot of banter. At the end of the meal, the captain stood up to announce the dos and don'ts of the trip and to thank the passengers for being on it. However, the next announcement took Brown by surprise.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the captain, "we are also favoured by the presence of a very distinguished guest, who single-handedly saved one of the gems of the EPA, the planet Pirrus, from falling into the hands of the Lizards from Baccra. This is His Excellency, James T. Brown, who is travelling with us."

A terrific ripple of applause burst out all around the hall. Brown noted sardonically that there seemed to be a great many patriotic souls present on the cruise; people who had an inherent dislike for lizards, even though it was extremely unlikely that they had actually encountered anybody from Baccra, the home planet of the Lizard people. Brown was beginning to feel a little sorry for them, knowing what was unfolding and how ruthless Earth could be in pursuing its goals. The propaganda machine was in full swing to justify all actions taken by the EPA against Baccra.

"Do you think it was a good idea?" he asked Marika. "Now, everybody knows who I am and what I look like."

“Don’t worry too much,” she assured him. “I’m sure you’re safe from any attack on the ship. What does the T stand for? They didn’t inform me.”

“It stands for ‘Terrible’,” smiled Brown.

“Shouldn’t that be ‘The Terrible’?” laughed Marika.

Brown had already given the captain a reduced version of events on Pirrus, leaving out the sensitive bits. He had no inclination to repeat the whole story again but could not refuse to get up to deliver a speech. He kept it short, saying the whole thing was still top secret. Luckily, the captain took his hint and did not press him any further.

The function carried on, the liquor flowed freely along with different barbiturates, and then the dancing started in earnest. The recent events on Pirrus were still fresh in his mind and preoccupied him. Brown was finding it hard to relax when Marika asked him to dance. It was a tango.

Somehow, the Argentine tango had survived the centuries, like bingo and golf, and was still popular.

“I haven’t done any dancing in a very long time,” protested Brown.

“But you have danced the tango before?”

“Yes, of course,” said Brown. It was a lifetime ago, as far as he was concerned. It was before Pirrus, before Levita when he was still married to his last wife. She had been a dance enthusiast, and he had been forced to keep up. He had learnt well.

Brown took to the floor and danced very hesitatingly at first. The close-hold was exhilarating, and her perfume reminded him of the past and almost gave him a high. He found the vapours mixed with her perspiration almost intoxicating. The girl was obviously profuse with her pheromones. He moved in for a closer grip, and she didn’t object.

“So, why did they really send you?” he asked her, catching her by surprise. “Who do you report to?”

Marika assured him that there was nothing really sinister going on. They just wanted her to keep an eye on him when the ship docked at ports on its way to Earth. She was just supposed to go around with him, to see who he met and to make sure he didn’t disappear to another world.

“Why would I do that? This is like coercion, pretty as you are.”

“The EPA seems to be worried about your connection with Levita, to tell the truth,” said Marika. “They told me not to discuss it, but I don’t see any harm in it. I prefer to be as honest with you as I can be.”