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Opening Extract from...

The Arbitrator

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Published by Matador

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The Arbitrator

MAX NOWAZ



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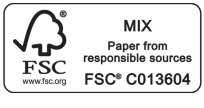
ISBN 978 1785892 134

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
Typeset in 11pt Aldine401 BT by Troubador Publishing Ltd, Leicester, UK



Matador is an imprint of Troubador Publishing Ltd



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everybody concerned and especially:

My family and friends for their great support and encouragement.

My writing group whose criticisms and suggestions were invaluable.

CHAPTER ONE

The prisoner lay in his cell dreaming of good times. He had been rotting there for a long time, and the good times came when he was like this, drugged and semi-conscious.

Somebody kicked him, he thought, but it didn't hurt too much.

"Get up you lazy bastard. The governor wants a word with you," said a guard.

He opened his eyes and smiled. There was another guard standing near the cell door in anticipation of any trouble. The prisoner smiled at him, too.

Now what can the governor want from me? He wondered. His dishevelled form seemed incapable of coherent thought. "It's nice of him to remember me," he said aloud, trying to concentrate.

"Surprising he's got any time for a worthless shit like you," said the first guard.

"I once used to be a very important person," the prisoner said feebly.

"I still am," the guard laughed. "Now get, up you fucking junkie, unless you want a real good kicking."

"Thanks for your pity," said the prisoner. He hauled himself up with effort and set off between them, the drugged smile still on his face.

* * *

The Arbitrator lay on 'the bubble', as the contraption was fondly called, floating on a cushion of air. He needed to relax; he was tired from the exertions of the last few days, what with the rebellion and capturing the leaders. Normally he would have been in peak condition, but he had been ravaged by years of abuse. His once handsome face, which had always looked young for his age, was now haggard, and his usually well-built body was now badly out of condition.

The Arbitrator, despite his fatigue, was in an imperious mood. Things had gone very smoothly and he had everything under control, which was surprising given how much could have gone wrong. It had been quite difficult when he had first arrived; the planet had been in turmoil with a rebellion in full swing. The natives, it seemed, did not much care for the autocratic form of government run by the interplanetary arm of the EPA, the Earth Policy Administration.

His mission had been to deal with the uprising in Pirrus, a sparsely populated planet in a system a good many light years from Earth. It was a backward planet in his estimation, but nevertheless it was now his, to do with as he wished, as long as he delivered. He was there to fix things as Earth wanted them.

Now 'Arbitrator' was a strange title; maybe 'Overlord' or even 'Governor' would have been more apt. The term Arbitrator implied that he would arbitrate between Earth and the natives, but in reality he was there to follow an agenda dictated by the EPA and there was not much sense of justice in it at all. However, the Earth government liked the title: it was considered respectable.

When the planet was first pacified it had taken only three hours, which was about right. This time it had taken him three weeks and he was slightly peeved about it. After all, was he not one of the most capable administrators the EPA ever had? Brown, his real name, had been in the colonisation business

for some time. In his 153 years of life he had seen quite a lot, but perhaps he was losing his touch after his long stretch in the wilderness.

He lay back, disappointed. His quarters were not lavish and almost spartan, although it was highly functional, with the latest developments in technology, matching the vast complex that was the EPA headquarters in Pirrus.

"Bring me a soft drink!" Brown shouted. "Damn these drugs, they're killing me. I need to get back to Earth and get off them," he muttered to himself.

He had been trying to give up his long-standing drug addiction for a while, but it had not worked out. The solution to his addiction lay on Earth and he needed desperately to finish the job and return there as soon as possible. Time was running out for him. He had been due for his second life renewal when he turned 150, but lacked the funds for the procedure. He was broke after having blown all his money on a get mega rich quick scheme on another planet.

A mandroid brought his soft drink, made from some local fruit. He preferred natural food to artificially prepared ones. The taste of the fruit reminded him of mangoes. This was the fruit that was toxic to Earth humans. The juice had to be carefully prepared before it could be drunk. The locals, naturally, were immune to it.

"Any journalists bothering us about the executions tomorrow?" Brown asked the mandroid.

"No, sir," it said.

"Good." He hated journalists, even if there were only a few here.

In fact, there were hardly any humans from Earth here. Most of them were EPA employees who worked for him. Besides them, the only others were on the planet on business. As yet, the vast number of settlers expected had not materialised.

He lay back and sipped some of the juice. It felt good, the remnants of the fruit's toxins gave him a mild buzz, but it didn't assuage the gnawing hole inside.

He reached for a prepared hypo and injected himself with the drug. The concoction included a parasite that attached itself to both the nervous system and brain. He had picked up the habit during the last ten years and had tried to shake it for every one of them. But it could only be cured by a full renewal. Time was of the essence: his next renewal was already three years overdue. Who knew how long he could last without it?

There was to be an execution the next day. Perhaps with that out of the way he could depart for Earth? He was still just within the limit, even if he was cutting it a bit fine. His thought process was interrupted by a mandroid.

"One of the native girls wants to see you," it said. "Shall we allow her in? She is at the reception." Its voice sounded human and if one was not aware, it was difficult to tell otherwise.

"Who is she?" He was disinterested. The drug was beginning to take effect.

"Claims to be the daughter of one of the men you're going to execute tomorrow. I think the one called Zalamus, sir."

Now that was mildly interesting. The mandroid had said '*I think*'. They were getting too damned like humans. "Why does she want to see me?"

"She wants a pardon for her father. She thinks you might grant it if she can speak with you."

"Quite possibly," he said sarcastically. "But I am not interested, so tell her to go."

The mandroid went away.

Brown sank into a sweet reverie as the parasite took hold of his nervous system.

Was it a few minutes later? It was too damned soon, anyway, when the mandroid returned.

"Sir, she says she insists on seeing you and will not leave."

"She does, does she?" he laughed. He was getting higher.

"Okay, bring her in." He felt like having some amusement. "Screen her first."

It was unnecessary for him to ask the mandroid to do so, as it was going to be done anyway. They always sent the natives through a scanner to check for concealed weapons.

The girl entered. She was tall and slim, and her pale blue skin glistened in the artificial light. Red hair flowed over her shoulders. Even through his high he could see she was beautiful. The girl was dressed in traditional native attire, but of very high -quality material. It hugged the contours of her body perfectly, obviously an item that was only meant to fit her and which projected her beauty even further.

She came up to him and stood silently.

"You want to see me?" he asked, his face moist with sweat, the drug rampaging through his mind.

"Yes, Your Excellency," she said in Earth Speak 1, the compulsory language the natives were taught. "I want to plead for my father's life and that of the other people. Please let them go."

"And the reason I should do it?" he laughed, trying to hide his symptoms.

"Because it does not serve any purpose. They're not the leaders. You know they are powerless to act against you if you let them go."

"Is that true?" Brown was a bit surprised, but didn't want to show it. "So who are the ones I should execute?"

"They have disappeared, I give you my word," she said. "You only have the front men."

"Sorry," he said. He was indeed sorry. It seemed the revolution wasn't quite as over as he had assumed earlier. "The execution will go ahead to send a message to others not to follow them.

These are the small details one must attend to when suppressing rebellion."

Brown was disappointed. The real leaders of the rebellion were still unaccounted for then. There was also the question of the suspected foreign powers that were backing them. That would explain the continued reports of landings of unidentified spacecraft.

"Just small details to you!" she said. "You're talking about the lives of several people who are not even the actual leaders of the rebellion."

"They shouldn't have tried it," he smiled. "It was doomed to failure."

"How can you be so callous? You know you do not have to kill them," she cried. "Did you never have rebellion in the history of Earth?"

"Yes," he said. "And they were always put down ruthlessly." He had been going to add, "Unless they succeeded," but even in his altered state realised that would make him look vulnerable. "Would your father have spared me if he had won?" he said instead.

"You would have survived, yes. They would let you negotiate terms of surrender. They are just people, and we are fighting for a just cause."

"And we're fighting for our standard of living." It wasn't completely true, he was fighting for his own standard of living.

"You represent criminals who have taken away everything, including our way of life."

"You ought to be more careful," he said. He raised himself on his cushion of air, but slowly so that his head didn't float off over the room. "You could be arrested for incitement. As it is, most of you natives are doing very well," he smiled. "We have really let you get on with your lifestyle while improving it, since we took over a hundred and fifty years ago."

"I don't care." She started crying. How he hated it when they did that. "Please save my father and my fiancé," she pleaded. "They are not the leaders of the rebellion."

"Fiancé as well?" he eyed her. "Who is it?"

"Zedan."

"Zedan? Ah yes. He and your father, they're close to the leadership." He tapped the side of his nose and pointed at her.

"They are just ordinary men," she pleaded. "Caught up in the situation, please let them go, I beg you."

For a moment her pleading eyes nearly softened him, but only for a moment. She excited him. Something about her fire and vulnerability cut through the drug and reminded him how lonely he was. He had already wondered whether it was really necessary to have them killed, but he had dismissed it. He was killing them to teach others a lesson and keep them under control. It was an EPA protocol to make it expensive for any local population to kill any Earth human. Natives had to pay for it with lives. The official face of the EPA, however, was humanitarian. The killings took place discreetly, unless there had been a direct open challenge as in this case.

These were just a few worthless lives, paying the price of an unsuccessful revolution. He disliked unsuccessful people, though there was already another plan forming in his mind.

"I beg you," she pleaded again.

"What's your name?"

"My…?" She looked bewildered. "Gina."

"Well Gina, if I let them go, what do I get out of it?" he asked suddenly, almost regretting it for a moment.

"I don't know what I could do for you."

"I'll make a bargain with you." He wanted her now, but he was still playing with her.

"What sort of a bargain?" she asked cautiously.

"One life for you," he said. "You have to choose. Your father, or your fiancé."

"Oh God," she was disgusted. "You cannot really be serious."

"Just as I thought," he smiled. "Self-interest only, you're not really interested in saving them."

Gina stood silent, her eyes blazed with hatred and she turned to go. He laughed, which made her turn towards him again.

"How can I trust you?" she asked.

"You will just have to take the chance, I'm afraid."

"Alright I agree," she said.

He raised his eyebrows. This was getting interesting. "You haven't made your choice, you know," he taunted. "Your father, or your future husband?"

Her head was bent for a moment. "My father," she said slowly.

She stood there in front of him and he looked her over from top to bottom of her exquisite form.

"How old are you, Gina?" he asked.

"Twenty-six," she said. Just over twenty-eight in Earth years.

"Do you know how old I am? A hundred and forty of your years, but biologically I'm almost as young as you are. Once we also had short lives, but that was a long time ago." In fact his calculation was not quite correct, but she got the message.

"Haven't you got a wife back home?" she was desperate.

"No. Not anymore." He laughed. Brown had been a bachelor for the last twenty-five years. After his third wife he had got a bit fed up with married life.

She did not say anything, but she stood there. He eyed her again.

"That's the bargain," he said. "Go and get decontaminated."

"What do you mean?" she asked. This was the final insult.

"It won't take a moment, the mandroid will take you. You'll just be cleaned up. One of these precautions I have to take."

★★★

When she returned, she was naked and her blue skin blushed to a light yellow with shame. He was waiting for her on the bubble.

"Don't you have any privacy?" she asked. "All these people are watching us."

"They are all machines," he said. "They don't feel this sort of emotion. Come here."

She obeyed without any resistance. "Make sure you keep your promise."

"Don't worry," he said and pulled her down under him. He could feel her whole body cringe in the anticipation of things to come and felt guilty again for a moment, but the urge was overwhelming.

He needed a break from the tension of the last few days and though he was violating his own long-held beliefs, there was nobody there to judge him. He was also under the full influence of the drug now and it had indeed been a very long time.

Afterwards she said nothing. She looked away, yellow in shame, disgusted with herself. After a few minutes the colour darkened through a rather fetching green, to a fine blue.

"I want you to come back again," he said.

"No," she sat up. "That was not part of the bargain. I will never let you touch me again. I will kill myself before that."

"Calm down," he said. "I will release your fiancé if you do."

"My fiancé? I can never go back to him now," she was almost crying.

"Don't be silly," he said. "Just because you've been with me? Anyway, you will be saving his life, if you do come back to me. Don't you want to do that?"

Bright yellow patches appeared on her face. "I haven't *been* with you."

"I will let all of them go," he said. "If you come back just

a few more times, think of the service you will be doing your people." The other plan had formed in his mind already.

She did not say anything. She seemed on the verge of crying out against him, but controlled herself with difficulty.

"I suppose your silence means you agree?"

"You know I can't refuse your proposal. But the shame I feel."

"Why?" he said "Am I not good?" In his chemical haze he imagined that his pride was genuinely hurt.

"Tell me one thing," she said. "Are all the Earth people as ruthless as you are?"

"Only the few in power," he said. "The others don't get much of a chance. Perhaps I'm being too honest?" Had he said that out loud? He tried to focus, but the parasite was loosening his tongue as much as his mind.

"How do you manage to keep control?" she asked.

"We have all the advantages over people who are not ruthless," he smiled. "Anyway it is an unfortunate choice of words. We have merely done away with the restricting inhibition of moral justice. Once we believed in gods and other such superstition, and derived our power from them. But we became wiser and realised that it was access to power itself that decided who had a right to justice and who had not. So we learned to deal with each other more equitably. But you are in an inferior position. The law is different for you."

"So we are justified in our struggle against you," she said angrily. "You hold power away from us deliberately."

"Maybe," he said. "But you don't have a chance in a billion of succeeding. Why do you think I am letting these people go? Because they can do nothing, I can have them back whenever I feel like it."

"You are a monster." She could have killed him then.

"Careful," Brown could see the hatred in her eyes. He

admired her guts. "You are supposed to address me as 'Your Excellency'. I am really trying in my own way to tell you the truth, and that is why you think I am such a bad man. This will be our little secret."

★★★

After she had gone, he called a mandroid and ordered the release of the prisoners. The mandroid was a bit perplexed at this decision, but did as it was ordered.

They're getting too damned human, he thought again.

He ordered the security system to delete any record of the girl's visit, which relaxed him. He couldn't stop thinking about the girl, her values and those of the people of Pirrus. How different they were, yet it was the similarities that struck him the most.

They had strong customs, barbarous in Earth terms, of course. Although now they were stamped with a certain Earthiness: the mark of the civilised. Some brilliant administrator had even divided the year up to resemble the Earth months, only they had weeks containing eight days. Such problems were easily overcome, after all one could not resort to the calendar followed by these people. The eighth day was called Sunday Plus One, which perhaps didn't mark out the brilliance of the previous administrator at all. At least the weekend had been extended by another day. Brown felt slightly amused by it all, which could only be down to the drug.

The mandroid would be returning later to inject him with a second drug to calm him down and to kill the parasites, otherwise the effect of the first drug would be quite overwhelming. He was perspiring profusely and his heart rate was manic. Unfortunately the second drug wasn't wholly effective. While it would calm his heart and bring him down, some parasites would survive and

send out their defence pheromones looking for other parasites to help defend them. That's what caused the habit. They were eating him slowly, but he didn't care. For now he just wanted to submerge himself under their influence.

Brown realised he could not afford to be soft. There was too much pressure on him to earn the money needed for his renewal. That is why he had accepted a commission to this godforsaken backwater of a planet in the first place, not that he had much choice in the matter. With his past record they had head-hunted him and this was his last chance of survival: he had to be brutal. He needed to sort matters out quickly, collect his very large bonus and be back on Earth for his second renewal. It was touch and go whether he would make it in time, so he did not have the luxury of feeling guilty.

That was really why he had released the prisoners. He needed a peace deal quickly and showing mercy was probably the best way. But he also had an ulterior motive for releasing the prisoners. He wanted them to lead him to the real perpetrators of the rebellion. He lay back on the bubble, overwhelmed by the drug's rage.

Being magnanimous in victory usually worked, but to keep abreast of the situation he had to pump the girl for all she knew. Was there a pang of remorse for his actions in his mind? Possibly, but what choice did he have? If he wanted to survive, he had no room for weakness.