



THE WAY BACK

BY PAUL CORNELL

CHAPTER ONE | BLAKE

ROJ BLAKE WAS CERTAIN. His colleagues in the Company's tech department would second-guess themselves, put things to the group to decide, cautiously try to make every decision someone else's fault, because they were afraid of the power structure above them. Blake, however – he would look at a circuit, put it in the slot and watch as the wall of whatever accommodation unit they were working on lit up. He was proud of that carefree certainty.

'No problem,' he would say, as the others gazed at him on his way out, slightly in awe and slightly afraid of this man who was sure to attract official notice. But he never seemed to.

Every now and then, in one of the Company's bars, someone, usually a teenager, would ask him if he was *the* Roj Blake – sometimes in wonder, sometimes with anger. He would quickly tell them who he was, which was nothing to do with whoever this famous Blake was, and they would be puzzled for a few moments – but only for a few moments. Then they'd all go back to talking about the latest talent show.

Nobody needed the kind of stress that puzzlement brought with it. The world of the Dome of London was designed to minimise tension like that, and allow them all to lead peaceful, productive lives with lots of leisure and lots of entertainment, even if the food wasn't that great. Still, the food being rubbish was the source of a lot of excellent British humour. That sort of comedy wasn't just allowed, but encouraged.

'Mustn't grumble, eh?' his work colleagues said to Blake. The vast majority of the pale white faces he passed in the cosy, musical corridors of the city had smiles on them.

But this evening, Blake had a small problem. It had all begun a couple of weeks back, after he'd stepped in when someone else's work caught fire. He'd shut that panel down, but the flames had caught the arm of his jacket and ruined it. Which meant he had had to get another one from the Company Store, and that had put him into debt with them, and that would take him a couple of months to work off.

Blake liked the chewiness of the protein bars you could get if you had money for more than basic rations. They were not the subject of comedy. They were a speciality in London. The dome actually exported them to the other cities – even to the planets – and Blake just fancied one, damn it. So he had decided it was time to do what he always did when he needed a bit more cash, or a chat about whatever stress he was going through: book a call to his big brother Shal and get a loan and a calming conversation.

He had tried to do that using his watch, which had been a gift from Shal – top of the range, with a personalised voice assistant. But this time there had been some sort of a problem, way beyond the usual bureaucracy about off-planet calls. Three requests in a row had come back with "recipient not known", which couldn't be right. He'd complained to his voice assistant and was still waiting for a response from the Communications branch of the Admin.

Then, several days ago, when he'd been wandering along the corridor back to his room as usual, pleasantly buzzed even from ration-level drink, a young woman had caught up with him.

'Roj Blake?' she'd said. 'It's great I ran into you. It's about your family.'

'Oh, are you someone official?'

'Garta Ravella.' She'd pointed to her badge, which indicated she was indeed from Admin. 'Could you please keep this appointment? I'm just sharing the details with your watch. Sub 43 on the Northside, lowest level, in exactly fifty-two hours, following purple route, then red. And you aren't to eat or drink for thirty-six hours before the meeting, because I'm an official and I'm about to say this word: *kyiv*.'

Blake had felt relieved that his problem was getting sorted out, and of course accepted the rings he'd have to jump through to get some news about what was going on. He'd returned to his room and got some sleep, happy and still absolutely certain.

That certainty had declined somewhat the next day. Every time he'd reached for his food rations while working on a circuit, he chided himself. He'd been told not to eat. Not drinking was harder to deal with. He enviously watched his colleagues going to the water fountain. Still, he could do it and he would. That attitude, that certainty, was who he was.

So that was why, finally, this evening, without fuss, he'd taken the loop around the dome, found the maintenance door he'd been told to find, and followed first the purple stairs, then the red ones, down past level thirty-eight, and had finally stepped into a barely illuminated corridor that was bizarrely cold.

This was all quite the adventure, but now his throat was hurting and he was feeling ridiculously stressed for some reason. He just wanted to make this appointment, hear about whatever was going on with his brother and sister, and get home. That was his small problem in a nutshell. But his problems were about to get much bigger.

'Roj.' Ravella stepped out from the shadows. 'Did you have any trouble?'

She was quite attractive, he realised. That wasn't something he was used to noticing. That was odd. 'No.'

'And eating and drinking... you've managed to do without? How do you feel?'

He couldn't help but let his annoyance at what now seemed a ridiculous requirement show. Why on earth had he agreed to that? 'Hungry and thirsty.'

'Nothing else?'

She seemed to want something from him that he didn't know how to provide. Had there been something flirtatious about the way she'd said that? Oh no, was that what this was? Did she think he was an Alpha Grade, with all their ridiculous romances and the nonsense that went with them? 'Is this some kind of... practical joke?'

She took a moment, then seemed to decide to take a risk. 'All our food and drink is treated with suppressants. Going without for a day and a half, they should be wearing off.'

What, that urban myth? It was so weird to hear it coming from someone in Admin. It seemed to him that he'd heard lots of talk about that, but he couldn't remember which show it had been on. He sighed. 'Not that again.'

From the darkness stepped a young man whose Hydroponics Section badge identified him as Dal Richie. He kissed Ravella quickly on the cheek, which confused Blake still further.

'Blake,' he said, 'so your brother and sister settled on the Outer Planets, correct? Can you name which planet?'

What, was this a test? He'd heard about such surveys of citizen loyalty. But it still all seemed very odd. 'Ziegler Five.'

'You hear from them much?'

'I get a video call a couple of times a year. Look, what is this? I was told you had some news about them.'

Richie looked apologetic. 'No, not me. The man we're going to meet. He especially asked us to contact you so he could tell you in person. He was on Ziegler Five a few months ago.'

'Right. Fine. Where is he?'

They looked at each other and then back to him, as if they were nervous about whatever it was they were going to say. 'Waiting for us,' said Ravella finally. 'Outside.'

'Outside?!' Blake felt like he was in some sort of dream. This official appointment was turning out to be the strangest he'd ever experienced. If it wasn't for his years of friendship with Ravella, when they'd ... *kyiv*... whatever that was, or was it anything at all? Was it even a word? Anyway, if it wasn't for the fact that he completely trusted her in every way, because of how much he respected her authority, he'd have just turned around and gone home.

'Don't worry,' said this new arrival, Richie. 'It's not all that bad. The air's fresh, though it smells different.'

Blake couldn't help but be incredulous that this was actually part of an official plan. 'You realise going outside is a Category Four crime?'

'We do know the law,' said Richie.

'Yes,' said Ravella, 'so whatever you see tonight you keep silent about.'

Which should have made up Blake's mind on the matter, but he was now so uncertain about this, like he'd become about so many things in the last hour or so. How could that be? Nobody could blame him for obeying senior officials, could they?

'Let's get on with it, then,' he said finally.

Richie gave him a look that suggested pride in a slow student. He took something from his pack and set it down beside a nearby hatchway, opening up terminals on either side of it and attaching leads to them.

'What are you doing?' asked Blake. Because surely they would have the key code? Wouldn't they?

'Picking the lock,' called Richie.

Blake was about to ask several pointed questions about the man's evident pride in this shameful work... and perhaps about himself too, considering the weird little moment of pleasure he'd had at hearing those words... when he realised that Ravella had turned, and was looking back the way they'd come. 'What is it?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing.' She turned back. 'Oh, let's just fix your watch.' She moved her own wrist close to his and there was a reassuring beep. 'Now it won't notice you've left the dome, either.'

'You see,' called Richie, 'if you open the door, it registers on the computer. These are circuit integrators. Now you could steal this entire section of wall and the machine would cheerfully ignore you. Ready?'

Before Blake could answer, Richie twirled a rotary handle and the hatch sprang open.

From outside came a blast of air that was more delicious, more exciting, more frightening, than anything Blake was used to. The smell of it brought back... he didn't know what it was, but it felt like excitement and fulfilment and passion. He knew that he wanted to be – that somehow, perhaps in dreams, he already had been – part of a world that tasted like that.

Ravella stepped close to Blake and looked him in the eye. 'When we return, if you report anything to the authorities, you'll find yourself implicated more deeply than you imagine.'

Blake desperately wanted to protest, but he also now desperately wanted, with some part of him that he didn't understand, to get out into that world beyond the hatch. Before these two could stop him, before he could even stop himself, he shouldered past them and jumped out into the darkness.

Perhaps he didn't know what was going on, but moment to moment he was still himself, he was still certain.

He landed on a concrete apron. Beyond it, lit from the hatch behind him, he could see... grass, growing wildly over the hillocks and troughs of a natural landscape, the sort of thing he'd only seen in shows and games, where this sort of environment always meant immediate danger. Here, this time, because of that intoxicating smell, he only felt excitement and... freedom, when, perplexingly, he'd always felt he was free before.

He stepped onto the grass like it was his natural habitat. There was a tree line over there. There was the forest. He wanted to run to it. He wanted to duck into it and hide from... his pursuers?

He had no pursuers. He just had his band of... friends... his two... no, there should be more than two. But here they were, just the two, catching up. 'Look behind you,' said Ravella.

Blake turned and looked. Above them loomed the enormous grey bulk of the dome of London, the home of hundreds of millions of people. The hemisphere was dotted with thousands of lights, tiny points of illumination for technical hatches, not a single window amongst them. Blake could almost feel the gravity of it, the shape that blotted out the world beneath the perfectly clear night sky.

That sky.

He kept looking, higher and higher.

That sky alone awed and humbled him. He almost couldn't look at the sweep of the Milky Way. He felt like he would fall into it, and that the fall would be good. If being out here felt exciting, the sky above felt even wilder, which was ridiculous, because that wasn't how anyone felt about space. 'I've never seen it before,' he whispered. 'Not from the outside.'

Ravella looked for a moment like she was going to argue, but evidently decided against it. 'What do you think?'

Blake's voice was a whisper. 'Everyone could be out here in the wilds. Doesn't anybody know that? I was always told the environmental damage had left the world devastated. Criminals are sentenced to exile out here, they're sentenced to exile up there in space -'

'There *was* environmental disaster,' said Richie, 'for over a century. When humans retreated to the cities and to other worlds, nature started to heal.'

'And both those forms of exile,' added Ravella, 'are also forms of escape.' She looked at Richie happily, then back to Blake. 'There's something else to show you. About a mile out.'

'About my family?'

'When we get there.'

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