

Dark Diamond: Chapter 2

Matheson

Matheson stepped out of his tent, dumped his pack by his feet, and peered down at the marks in the dirt. Some were still visible, though the hail storm in the night had obliterated the rest. Slicer tracks. They'd come visiting to grind whatever version of eating apparatus they had – that being dependent on what stage of slicer they were – against the open cell monofabric of his tent. They weren't much of a threat to him, having little chance of penetrating the fabric, but they'd interrupted his sleep, and he liked his sleep. He decided he'd have some target practise on the pests today as he continued with his associates towards the 'Farm'. He looked around.

Jurgen, their guide, was out of his tent and shrugging on his pack. The other three tents of the Brice brothers and sister were still closed. Ricardo, the golem, had yet to return from his nightly perambulations. And Nightshade, the spider drone, was squatting on the roof of their ATV, gazing off towards the horizon. Matheson turned back to his own tent, opened the flap to check he had left nothing inside, then stepped back, tapping the correct control on the flimsy console by the flap. With a hissing sound, the dome-shaped tent released air from its open-cell foam and steadily collapsed. As it did so, micro-fibre memory mesh began to fold it, and fold it again, until finally it became a small block that could fit into the palm of his hand, flimsy screen on top. He slid it into a pocket in his pack, then picked that up and walked over to Jurgen who was already collapsing his own tent.

'So today we should reach the boundary of the farm,' said Matheson.

'Weather permitting,' said Jurgen, looking up at the sky.

'No such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing.'

'That's alright for you to say,' said Jurgen, eyeing the high-tech power armour Matheson wore. 'If the hail comes again, I can always just give you directions to the pass.'
Jurgen shrugged.

'And I pay you the rest of your fee?'

'Of course.'

'No, you get us to the pass and I pay you there, as agreed.'

Matheson turned away. The Brices were up now, all efficiency and readiness as they collapsed their tents and ran weapons checks. Sheen Brice, the sister, didn't look much different from her brothers. All three were heavily boosted, extremely tough, and the best

bounty hunters in the sector. Matheson augged in, running his own weapons check as he slung on his pack. His multigun was strapped onto the back of it at the moment, and he saw no need to unlimber it until they were closer – his gas-system pulsegun and flack pistol would be enough to deal with any sleers or droons that might come after them. Gazing into the distance, he wished he could have used a gravcar to take them beyond the pass but, apparently, their target at the farm had detection gear, a couple of particle cannons and a missile launcher. Airspace over the farm was a no-fly zone, as agreed by the authorities of this world they were on, Cull.

‘I still don’t get why they’re so complacent about us being here,’ said Ulnar Brice, stepping up beside him. ‘The machine has citizenship – you’d think the authorities would protect it.’

‘That’s because it can protect itself better than the police of Cull,’ said Ricardo, casting his voice from a distance as he walked towards the encampment. ‘You’ve seen how they are here: low tech projectile weapons.’

‘But as a matter of policy?’ said Ulnar.

‘It told them it needs no protection.’ Ricardo had broken into a run, his cast voice dopplering oddly. Finally he arrived by them. ‘As I understand it, the thing rather likes all the attempts to collect on the Polity bounty that’s been placed on its head. It is after all a killer.’

Matheson grimaced. There’d been numerous attempts to bring the machine in, either whole or in bits – the bounty specified that either way would garner payment, though the more intact the thing was, the more money that’d be forthcoming. And the bounty had recently gone up... Whatever. The machine, the fucking machine, would be returned to the Polity in bits because this was personal. Because this was *the* machine. Matheson remembered the day when his mother had told him his father was dead, after trying to collect on a bounty for a separatist terrorist called Arian Pelter. Growing up, he’d trained himself for the same profession, but by the time he was ready, Arian Pelter was long dead. He’d found out about the machine, though – how it had killed fifteen bounty hunters, including his father. It had torn off his head.

Matheson learned his profession properly and gained deep experience over more than a century. He forgot about the machine until, in his hundred and seventieth year, ennui hit. He survived it, barely, but only because he remembered his past and decided to make the machine an end goal to give him purpose. Coming out of ennui, he learned that bounty hunters with higher resources than him had tried and failed to get to it, and realized he wasn’t ready. But now a series of profitable successes had provided the equipment they wore and

carried, and wealth enough to employ a war drone and the Brices. What had once been a distant purpose enabling him to survive had become present reality.

Matheson now eyed Ricardo, clamping down on his growing dislike. They'd worked together for many years and he had trusted the golem more than he did most other such machines, which wasn't a high bar. This was because Ricardo was a human mind loaded to a golem chassis. But over the last year, during two previous hunts, the man-golem, who'd always been precise about necessary precautions, had begun to make them burdensome. Almost certainly this was because the high-value target prior to those two hunts had nearly done for Ricardo, with a particle cannon demounted from a warship. Matheson then speculated on Ricardo in comparison to the machine they were going after now. He knew that with their new equipment he and the Brices could bring Ricardo down, and his chassis was a modern series. However, the machine at the farm had been altered and adapted. It'd been loaded with a murder tape to break its Polity programming, armoured in some fashion, and was rumoured to have integrated some form of alien technology, though the last seemed highly unlikely.

'We all ready then?' he asked, looking around.

Jurgen gestured across the gritty ground and they set out. Where they'd used the ATV previously it had been a flat plain, but ahead stretched a rockscape with buttes of multi-coloured rock jutting up here and there. This area lay athwart the jagged peaks where the supposed pass ran through, though they'd never been able to obtain satellite imagery or even a map. At the end of this, just behind those peaks, was a small plateau upon which lay the farm. It was inaccessible by any other way on foot – apparently the machine had blocked off other routes. Matheson had considered climbing gear, but didn't fancy getting caught on a steep face by his supposed prey. Grav harnesses weren't an option, since the machine had ways of detecting grav disturbances. The thing had laid out its game and he would play by its rules only so far.

'Hey, Nightshade! You going to sit there all day?'

The spider drone turned and observed him with glittery red eyes. Matheson felt a brief primal shudder at the sight of this three-metre long spider, seemingly fashioned of grey iron, scrambling down off the ATV and after them. But Nightshade seemed okay. His contract had been open, and many other bounty hunters had used him and recommended him. That spider body was loaded with good weaponry. Matheson nodded to himself. They had the edge, with a man-golem, a spider war drone, state-of-the-art power armour and weapons, and the EM disruptor shells for their multiguns which should bring down any damned rogue machine.

And they had an ace in the hole too, which Matheson had strictly ordered the others never to discuss within Jurgen's hearing.

They trudged throughout the morning between rocks, along rough stream beds and past hills and buttes. A sleer came out of a hole at the base of one of the buttes and started to head towards them. The nightmare thing vaguely resembled a scorpion, was as big as the spider drone, and had an excess of manipulators to the fore. Before Matheson could even reach down to his flack pistol, Sheen had nailed it with her laser carbine. In a cloud of smoke and fire it retreated, body segments revolving independently. It never reached its burrow, just falling apart with those segments rolling away like burning tyres.

'Save your ammo,' said Will Brice.

He had a point. All of them but Jurgen, Ricardo and Nightshade wore power armour, and one good solid kick would be enough to deter the creatures.

Jurgen next led them to a stream winding down from the mountains. They moved alongside this, below layered sandstone cliffs that grew steadily taller. The sandstone path here seemed quite worn and, where it went up over fallen slabs, steps had been carved. Matheson caught hold of the Jurgen's shoulder and gestured to steps lying ahead.

'This looks well used,' he said, suspicions arising about where they might be being led. 'I thought the machine kept itself isolated.'

'He does, generally, but he's running a farm. He grows biotech stuff up there and sells it. Traders from the city or the plains come up here.'

'And they have no problems?' Matheson didn't like how Jurgen referred to the thing as 'he'.

'They're not coming to collect on the bounty.'

'Ah, so it's a peaceable machine usually, just defending its agrarian idyll?'

'He likes his sport,' Jurgen replied, heading for the steps.

The path wound steadily higher and the declivity the stream had cut steadily narrowed. Ahead, stretching across between the two cliff faces, he saw a tree trunk lodged in place. There were ropes hanging from this, most of them flapping loose but one still holding a body up there by the neck.

'This is as far as I go,' said Jurgen. 'The edge of the plateau is a further four hundred meters up.'

On the sandstone slabs below the tree trunk lay remains that had obviously, at one time, been suspended above. There were headless skeletons clad in body armour, and skulls scattered around, lodged in crevices. Sheen climbed up onto a rock to inspect some of these.

‘Polity commando kit,’ she called down. ‘Maybe twenty or more years old.’ She held up a skull with a helmet still in place.

‘Army surplus,’ said Will. ‘You can buy it anywhere.’

‘So, will you transfer my payment?’ said Jurgen.

Now, Matheson felt, it was time to start playing the game his way. He had no doubt that Jurgen had some kind of deal running with the machine up above. He led the hunters here, doubtless assessing their capabilities, then sent some kind of report. It was time to remove him from the equation. He reached down and drew his weapon, but Nightshade had moved close and now reared up. A hissing crackle raised dust from Jurgen’s clothing and he shuddered, going down on his knees with a baffled expression. The spider drone caught him and laid him down on his side. It had effectively saved his life by hitting him with a load of stun beads.

‘You’re too kind,’ said Matheson.

‘The police here may turn a blind eye to bounty hunters going after the machine, but maybe not to the murder of one of their citizens. Let’s keep this clean.’

Matheson holstered his pulsegun. Nightshade was right, but he still didn’t like the spider drone’s inclination towards morality. That had been in the reports from others who hired him. Apparently, he only killed those who directly attacked him or were, not to put too fine a point on it, bad people. It bothered Matheson that he might well fall into the latter category.

‘This does not look good,’ said Ricardo from up on the rock where he’d joined Sheen. ‘If these guys were wearing army surplus, it seems they obtained a standardized batch for them all to wear. They were all boosted, auged and had other cybernetic enhancements too.’ He held up the bones of an arm held together with gristle and ligaments, and a joint motor at the elbow. ‘And look at this.’

He dropped the arm and picked up something else, then tossed it down to them. Will stepped in to catch the item and swung round brandishing it. It was a heavy carbine of some kind.

‘ECS high-power laser carbine with side slug launchers and EMP viral warfare facility,’ he said. ‘We ain’t in Kansas anymore, Toto.’

It was an expression Will had used a couple of times before, like when he’d learned what their mission would be here, and when he’d seen the ship Matheson had bought following their last big bounty. Matheson reminded himself now, as he had on those previous occasions, to look up the phrase, since he had no idea what the man was talking about.

Another object spiralled down from the rock and thumped in sandy dust. Matheson stepped forwards, stooped, and picked it up. A small flat gun – a pulsegun of a familiar design. This was the kind of weapon legendarily carried by Polity agents. He discarded it. You could buy them anywhere.

‘I suggest a reassessment,’ said Ricardo, jumping down from the rock and landing lightly. ‘We need more information.’

Matheson stared at him, his growing dislike abruptly grounding in reality and finding justification. In a golem chassis, Ricardo had super strength, speed and durability, but inside that chassis he was still a man. In retrospect Matheson realized that the precautionary approach which had made Ricardo so useful arose out of cowardice. He saw in an instant how Ricardo had always tried to put his fears across logically, in terms of the mission, but really he was craven. Oh he would happily rip off the head of a victim, but any hint of danger to himself and that ‘reassessment’ would come out. Matheson grimaced at his twenty-twenty hindsight, as he saw the logic of this fear which had led the man to install himself in a golem chassis in the first place.

‘We need no more information,’ said Matheson. ‘There’s a killing machine up there with a huge bounty on its head and we’re going to collect.’ He looked around at the others. ‘Close up visors and initiate the ‘ware.’

He watched as the Brices closed their visors and worked their wrist controls. Shimmering lines appeared at the tops of their heads and traversed down their bodies, seemingly erasing them from existence. He turned to Ricardo, who shrugged, then disappeared in the same manner. Ricardo didn’t wear armour but had the same chameleonware installed in his body. This was their big edge – on top of their superb armour and weapons. He looked around for Nightshade, but the spider drone had already disappeared, then closed down his own visor. As soon as it snicked home all the others reappeared to him. Their ‘ware was linked so they could see each other, since being invisible to each other would almost certainly result in some friendly fire incidents.

‘Where’s Nightshade?’ asked Will over com.

‘Scouting ahead,’ the spider drone replied. ‘More casualties up here – you need to come and have a look. Ricardo might not be far off the mark.’

Matheson felt a stab of anger, but suppressed it. None of them knew about his father and how he’d died, and he didn’t want to start showing any behaviour they might consider irrational. But no matter what did lie ahead, they were going to the farm. He waved an arm at the others and led the way up.

Here and there along the path lay wreckage. Two grav platforms rested against the cliff face like huge discarded coins, weaponry still mounted on them. On one a corpse was draped over what looked like a particle cannon. Another pile of wreckage at the foot of a cliff, after a long scar through the sandstone, looked like the remains of an armoured gravcar. Then ahead he saw Nightshade, standing in front of something crumpled below steps which led upwards beside a waterfall.

‘I think I knew him,’ said the spider drone. ‘His name was Plunder – veteran of the war like me.’

This wreck of a war drone was the usual nightmare rendition of something nasty and insect-like. It had a short flat body at the back, from which protruded a barbed sting. From its thorax six legs had protruded, some of which it had lost, and the rest bent and broken. Its head had been birdlike from what he could see remaining of it. As he drew closer, he noticed a large hole – big enough to drop a man through – had been burned right through its body.

Nightshade turned and looked at them. ‘So, we’ve had what looked like a unit of Polity commandos here, a Polity agent, grav-mounted weapons and now a war drone. Perhaps this machine we are hunting is even more dangerous than we supposed.’

The Brices were looking at Matheson and waiting for his response. Ricardo was gazing at the ruined drone with an odd lost expression.

‘This is staged,’ Matheson said finally. ‘No way did the machine take all of these out at once. As I understand it from Jurgen, the machine allows people up here to the farm to collect its crops. It probably doesn’t react unless attacked.’ He gestured at the drone and back down the pass. ‘I’d bet these didn’t come here all together but separately, over many years. Then, after they were killed, the machine put them here.’ He pointed to the war drone. ‘That probably made the mistake of flying in. Jurgen tried to imply the machine likes killing bounty hunters, but putting these here indicates otherwise – it’s trying to turn us back.’

‘This is not a good idea,’ said Ricardo.

‘Shut the fuck up, you coward,’ said Matheson.

‘Oh, a coward am I?’ Ricardo enquired.

‘Yes, and it’s become more obvious ever since you were beamed.’

‘A coward,’ Ricardo repeated. He gazed at Matheson for a long moment, then abruptly swung around and began walking back the way they’d come. Matheson stared at him, not quite believing what he was seeing.

‘Where the hell are you going?’

Ricardo just kept walking.

Matheson felt the rage surge up, drew his flack pistol, and began firing. Ricardo stumbled as shells slammed into his back, but they couldn't do much damage to his golem chassis. Abruptly he jerked into fast motion and went dodging and weaving down the pass. Matheson lowered his weapon. Pointless exercise.

He turned to the others. 'Anyone else want to run?'

'We're good,' said Will. 'If it all turns to shit, doesn't necessarily mean we'll end up dead – we'll just have to get out, fast.'

'Nightshade?' Matheson asked.

No expression to read there – just those glittery red eyes. 'War drones don't make the mistake of flying straight into heavy weapons.'

'How many disenfranchised war drones have you known of that chose a way out?' asked Matheson.

'He has a point,' said Sheen. 'Probably decided to go down in flames.'

'Okay,' said Nightshade. 'But I am not suicidal and if this does turn to shit, I'm gone.'

'So, we continue,' said Matheson, heading for the steps up the side of the waterfall.

The last stretch before the upper plateau consisted mostly of these steps. Matheson felt himself boiling inside, but his certainty had drained away. Yes, it seemed likely the dead had been positioned there as a deterrent but fuck, a war drone brought down? Anyway, Will was right. They had their chameleonware and they had their weapons. If things got too hot up above, they could lay down a lot of fire and flee. At least then he'd have more of an idea what he faced and be able to return better prepared.

After two longish climbs they came to a short length of steps up to clear sky. Matheson unhooked his multigun from his pack, extended the support arm from his suit, and fitted it into place, plugging in the power lead and ammo feeds from the pack. Targeting and weapons selection came up in his head-up display. The Brices did the same and they auged together, running a final weapons check. Nightshade opened two hatches in his back end and protruded a pair of miniguns, while other hatches slid open on the war drone's body too. They were ready for the final climb. Matheson waved a hand and led the way up.

From the last few steps the vista opened out ahead of them. The plateau wasn't huge – just two or three miles across. The scene was bucolic, with neat fields laid out between fences, around a farm house that seemed transplanted from some ancient age on Earth. He took in the scene, looking for the machine, then his gaze fell upon a nearby flat rock, raised like a dais directly in the path. Lying on this, like some exhibit in a sculpture museum, was an object. It consisted of a thick mass of glassy and metallic fibres, some seemingly frayed,

ribbons of a variety of materials, grey and black nodes like seeds, and thin ribbed wires of some black substance. It had been tied into a knot about two feet across, with the two ends of the mass protruding for a few feet on either side.

‘Oh, I see,’ said Nightshade.

Matheson heard a sound and turned to see that Nightshade had retracted his cannons and was now closing up his other lethal hatches.

‘What do you see?’ said Matheson.

‘That Ricardo made the right call, and this is where we turn around and go home.’

‘Talk some fucking sense, drone.’

With one forelimb Nightshade indicated the knotted mass. ‘That is a Mobius AI, and it’s not looking too good, is it?’

‘You’re fucking with us,’ said Will.

‘Bye bye,’ said Nightshade, and turned around to head back down the steps.

Matheson wanted to fire on the thing, just like he had on Ricardo, but you didn’t open fire on a war drone – their reactions could be instantly lethal. He watched him disappear out of sight.

‘What now?’ asked Sheen. ‘We had some serious edge when we came up here and it’s now looking increasingly blunt.’

‘Look,’ said Will, pointing.

A figure had stood up, out in the fields. It was humanoid and obviously quite tall, wearing a long kaki coat and a wide-brimmed hat. Even at this distance, Matheson could see the brassy metal of its face and hands.

‘The machine – Mr Crane,’ he said, aiming his multigun and lining the figure up in the crosshairs.