



Micronauts Book 2

Steve Lyons

MICRONAUTS®
THE TIME TRAVELER
TRILOGY

Book 2

STEVE LYONS

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PROLOGUE

I do not know when I first saw the Time Traveler.

He has been a part of my landscape for as long as I remember. People talk about how he appeared in the sky without warning, centuries ago. I think that must have been before I was born. I must have seen him for the first time when I arrived in Micropolis. Sometimes, I wish I could remember when that was, although I don't know why it should matter.

The city was built around the Time Traveler, taking him for its heart. Towards its center, the buildings become lower, allowing him to be seen by as many citizens as possible. The Baron himself will allow no new construction that would block the Time Traveler from too many eyes. He is regarded as an icon,

a guardian angel, almost a deity. I have never understood why. But I can see him from my own small window, floating above us, and I have spent many nighttime hours standing, as I stand now, staring at him. Staring without seeing.

The Time Traveler is illuminated by spotlights, which shine up from the roof of the palace. He wears a red containment suit, augmented by a silver chestplate on which sits a triangular control panel. He ought to reflect the light, but he does not. It shines through him, just as airships can drift straight through the phantasmal figure without affecting him.

The Time Traveler's expression is concealed by a blank silver mask, but his head is thrown back, his arms bent and his fists clenched as if he is screaming. I can identify with his pain, because I am screaming, too, inside. Sometimes, I think he is trying to tell me something. But then, I am told, this is a common delusion. The voices I can hear are in my own head.

My focus shortens, and I regard my faint reflection in the window. My face, like that of the Time Traveler, is hidden. I wear a scarlet helmet with a domed top, a square jaw and a pair of flat, angular fins, which strike upward from my ears like antlers. Its metallic surface is smooth, featureless. I can see out of the helmet, but nobody can see in to me.

I cannot remember what my face looks like. I stare into the glass, as if I might be rewarded with the suggestion of an eye or a mouth or a lock of hair, but there is nothing. I feel claustrophobic and uncomfortably aware of my own breathing hot on my cheeks. I long to tear the helmet from my head, but I know I must not, even if I could. I fight down the urge, as I have fought it down before, but I have been feeling it more frequently of late.

I take three steps back to inspect my full image. Lately, I have pondered the significance of my armor. My arms and legs are clad in black; the harder metal over my chest is the same red shade as my helmet. Additional protection is provided by a bulky silver shoulder harness, and armbands which I can use as shields. Heavy silver boots complete the ensemble. In the streets of the city, I am often feared and shunned. I have come to understand that people feel threatened by me, and I believe I can see why. I am over two meters tall, broad-shouldered, and the form-fitting black parts of the armor betray muscles that are well-toned through toil. My face-concealing helmet lends me a grim demeanor. I look like a warrior. I think I may have *been* a warrior, once. I think the armor might have meant something to somebody, somewhere. But I am a warrior with no war to fight. A warrior with no people, no weapon, no cause. An outsider in a city of outsiders.

I do not know who I am.

I look through my ghost image to the Time Traveler again. The greatest scientists of our galaxy, they say, have been unable to unwrap his mystery. They cannot explain his presence over our city. All they can say for sure is that his origins lie in our future. They believe that his timeline runs in the opposite direction to ours, that he is living his life backwards, always travelling into the past. I empathize with him. For me, too, the past is an undiscovered country. Days in the city collapse into one in my memory, each indistinguishable from the next. I might have spent a month or a year or a decade here—and before Micropolis, there is nothing. I wonder what the Time Traveler will see in the years that have become lost to me. And, sometimes, I wonder what he *has* seen, what changes he has witnessed to this world during his long journey, but that is less important. I have already glimpsed my future, and I know my life will never change. I will not leave this place. I have seen how it ends.

The voices in my head tell me that I was once somebody else. And, for the first time, they attach a name to that person. Or is it a title? A rank? I stiffen, and my eyes widen in surprise and hope. I think I may be on the verge of a breakthrough, about to realize something fundamental about my life and my place in the universe. But there is nothing more.

For several minutes, I continue to search for that knowledge. I turn my new name—my *old* name—over in my thoughts, examining it from all angles until it loses meaning. No longer sure that I did not simply imagine the name, I surrender with a despairing sigh.

I lie down on my bed—my hard, flat pallet. I sleep on my back, staring at the cracked ceiling, because it is the only way I *can* sleep in the armor. The lights of Micropolis bleed through the window and splash across the tiny room with its peeling wallpaper and its empty shelves. The apartment is the regulation size for a single occupant, and it holds the regulation contents: one bed, one chair, one closet. I have added nothing to it. It does not look like a home, nor have I ever considered it one. I close my eyes to it, but the light continues to shine through my eyelids. Still, it is dark inside my mind, and I can let go of my anxieties as sleep draws me into its welcome embrace.

Sometimes, at night, I convince myself that life is complicated. It is not. We work to maintain the System, and the System works to maintain us. It is the System that gives structure and meaning to a life that is otherwise unstructured and meaningless. I must sleep now, so that in a few hours' time, I can report for my duties, refreshed and able to serve. That is my place, and I need nothing more. I accept that—and yet, I remain unsettled. My dreams are of a better world, but they do not tell me how such a world could ever be.

I wish Persephone were here. I know what she would say: She would tell me that my dreams, too, come from the System. She would blame the wasted hours inside it for my false hopes, for blurring the distinction between fantasy and reality. I wish she had been able to stay the night. She can always make things seem clearer. If Persephone were with me, the voices would not trouble me so. They would not call to me from the back of my mind.

If Persephone were here, I would not long to enter the System again.

When I sleep at last, my dreams are filled with unpleasant thoughts and emotions. I awake feeling weary and plagued by dread. I fear that, now they have been roused, these nagging thoughts will never subside, never leave me alone. And I fear that they portend something momentous, that they are trying to drive me toward a terrible fate. Perhaps the very fate that I witnessed so long ago. Maybe it is time, at last.

My name is Kel Nanissar. However, I think—no, I am convinced—that I was once also called Acroyear. My story has already been told. But I will fight it.

CHAPTER ONE

»Good morning, Citizen Nanissar.«

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»Good morning, Citizen Nanissar.«

“All right,” I snap, tiredness rumbling in my chest and making my voice even deeper than normal. “I can hear you. I’m awake.” I swing my legs over the side of the pallet and rest my feet on the floor. I breathe deeply, fuelling myself. It is rare that I sleep this late—late enough to be roused by the irritating, birdlike voice of the System. I have suffered too many disturbed nights recently. Too many tired mornings.

»Good news, Citizen Nanissar. A scheme to expand the northern quarter of Micropolis is proceeding

ahead of schedule, thanks to the dedication of our building workers.«

I lever myself to my feet, stride to my window, and throw back the threadbare curtain. I harbor the faint hope that daylight might energize me—but the daylight of Micropolis is harsh and unnatural, and it saps at my soul.

»It has been eighteen days since you last interfaced with the System.«

“I know.” The city is waking, blinking sleep from its eyes, and its roadways are already congested. Hundreds of thousands of vehicles battle with Micropolis’s famous gridlock, barely outstripping the shuffling pedestrians as they grind toward their destinations. Between the smaller cars, bio-engineered Terraphants plod along on tree-trunk legs, dragging their passenger compartments behind them on caterpillar tracks. Their long, angular heads search impatiently for paths through the traffic. Some mount the sidewalks, scattering lines of workers at the food dispensaries; others simply climb and roll over the vehicles in front of them, to the annoyance of their pilots. The angry blaring of horns merges with the growling of engines and the clanking rhythm of the dark factories. Their black towers belch smoke into a sickly yellow sky, obscuring the suns. The Time Traveler still floats up there, above the jagged skyline, but he is no more than a silhouette now. Lost among the fat, round blimps that look as if they should not fly at all—the toys of the rich—he seems a long way away.

»It is suggested that, following your work period, you attend a plug-in center. This recommendation is made for your own wellbeing.”

I have no need of food or water. My armor sustains me. Therefore, I need not visit a dispensary. I meditate instead, finding my center, girding myself for another long day. As I step into the dreary corridor outside my door, however, I reflect that I am still not ready. I concentrate and bring Persephone’s face to mind, recalling her voice, her scent. I may see her this evening, I hope. That possibility bolsters my spirit.

Five people wait in the lobby—I recognize the faces of my neighbors, although I do not know their names—but none of them dare follow me into the elevator when it arrives. As usual, the long ride down to the street will be a lonely one.

“Wait! Wait! Hold the doors, someone.”

The metal doors have started to rattle shut, but they are blocked by a new arrival. He is flushed from running, and a grin illuminates his face as he squeezes into the compartment beside me. I expect the grin to fade when he sees me. I expect him to back away, to say that he will take the next car, but he does not. We descend with a squeal of protesting gears. My fellow passenger wipes his forehead on his sleeve and looks up at me.

“Thanks, pal,” he says, although I did nothing. “I needed that. I’m running late, and you can wait all day for one of these things sometimes. Well, I guess you know that—you live here, right?” He expects an answer from me, so I give a noncommittal grunt. Small talk is not a particular skill of mine.

He stands a good deal shorter than me: a bipedal mammal with opposable thumbs on his two hands. His single head contains two eyes, one nose and a mouth. A common form of life in this galaxy: he could belong to any of at least eight races, including—maybe—mine. He is fair-skinned—his cheeks are smeared white with sun block – and he has dark brown hair, cut short but a little unruly. He is young, barely more than an adolescent. I have not seen him before. He cannot have spent long in Micropolis, because he does not exhibit the characteristic slump of its residents. His green eyes sparkle with intelligence, confidence and humor, where soon they will be hollow with defeat. However, he wears standard issue coveralls, mauve with faun trim—a size too large for him—and I see a regulation System port at the base of his skull.

“Ryan,” he says, extending his right hand. I don’t know what he expects me to do with it. “My name, I mean. It’s Ryan. Ryan Archer. I’m your new neighbor. You’re in 4904, right? I just moved in down the hall.” Another short pause, before he prompts: “And you are?”

“My name is…” Illogically, I hesitate for an instant. “Kel Nanissar.”

“Cool. Well, I guess I know where to go now if I need a cup of sugar.” I look down at him, uncomprehending. “Sugar?”

“Um…never mind. So, where do you come from, Kel? I mean, I know you live in Micropolis, but… well, nobody’s actually *from* Micropolis, are they? Not really.”

“I do not know,” I say stiffly. I turn away, my posture rigid, my fists clenched at my sides. Fortunately, he takes the hint, and we complete our journey in silence.

The noise of the city attacks my ears as I stride out of my concrete tower. Ryan Archer has stopped in the foyer to don his smog mask, which gives me the opportunity I need to leave him behind. A thin green haze of exhaust fumes hangs in the air—the clear plastic smog masks are essential outdoor wear for oxygen-breathers—but my helmet automatically filters out pollutants. The air that I breathe is sterile, and it tastes stale.

The heat, unmitigated by the apartment building’s feeble air-conditioning, is fierce. It pricks sweat from my face. I can hardly breathe in this helmet. The System often reports on the Baron’s plans to repair the holes in the ozone layer, to create a more temperate climate, but it offers no tangible progress toward this goal.

The sidewalks are as crowded as the roadways: a teeming mass of pink-skinned, blue-skinned, green-skinned citizens struggling along on two legs, four legs, tentacles or other pseudopodia. It is said that all the known races, and more beside, are represented in Micropolis. That is how it earned its name: the city is a microcosm of our galaxy. I only hope that this is not true. There ought to be something better, somewhere.

People tend to move out of my path as soon as their heads or eyestalks or sensory antennae turn toward me. Most days, I can make the journey to my workplace in good time. Today, however, I become aware of an obstruction ahead of me. I hear screams, even over the sounds of the traffic and the factories. I see that the vehicles beside me have ground to a complete halt. And people are running towards me, falling over each other, spilling out into the road and taking their chances with the snapping jaws of territorial Terraphants. They brush past me—a few even try to push me aside—in their haste to escape from something that scares them even more than I do. I brace myself and push against the tide, struggling toward the source of the disturbance. I do not know why I do this.

»You are heading in the wrong direction,« trills the voice of the System as I pass an information point.
»Your work period begins in eighteen point two minutes.«

I see it at last. The creature is as tall as I am, even squatting as it is on eight legs. I have not seen its like before. Its elongated red body is splayed across the roofs of seven or eight vehicles, some of which groan and crumple as it thrashes about in confused anger. A segmented tail arcs over its back, a thin stinger at its tip glistening with poison. Every few seconds, the creature targets a fleeing pedestrian and that tail lashes out. Its victims fall, howling in pain. They don’t get up again. As I fight to get closer, a Terraphant beneath the creature rears and kicks upward with its hooves, spilling three passengers. The creature twists around, its head jerking toward its attacker, and powerful claws tear out the Terraphant’s throat in an instant. Two passengers are struck down by the tail as they scramble to get away.

There must have been another time break—where else could the creature have come from? It must be a product of some distant future, or more likely of an equally distant past: It looks like something the Pharoids might have bred in their time.

The breaks are becoming more frequent. Some people blame the Time Traveler; others believe that his presence is merely a symptom of them. But the creature can know nothing of this. It only knows that it was plucked from its desert home—brown sand still cascades from its broad back—and set down in a world of noise and chaos. It's frightened. It wants to be left alone, but this overpopulated city offers it nowhere to run. I know how it feels.

The only way to end this, to stop the killing, is to kill the creature. Life isn't fair.

A space opens in front of me, and I run into it and take a flying leap onto the creature's back. I don't know how I can hurt it through its red chitin shell; for now, my only aim is to draw its attention. It lets out a roar and bucks, stealing my footing. I fall backward, almost rolling off the creature altogether. That segmented tail grows larger in my vision, plummeting toward my chest, and I throw up an arm to protect my face. The stinger glances off my silver armband, my shield. It was being driven with enough force, I fear, to penetrate the thinner armor beneath. I barely have time to compose myself before the tail stabs down again, and I squirm out of its path. I hope the creature might sting itself, but it does not. While I am off-balance, however, it does succeed in throwing me.

The long drop to the ground gives me time to somersault and land on my feet. But I can sense the creature looming over me from behind, its claws snapping at my head, and I throw myself backwards, falling between two vehicles under its belly.

What am I doing?

The question hits me like cold water. I am staring up at a circling airship, and for a moment I imagine that I'm inside the fat vehicle, looking down on myself, shocked by what I see. What makes me think I can fight this monster? Why do I even consider it my responsibility? Not so long ago, I think, I would have ignored the situation, taken an alternative route. I would have behaved like everybody else, keeping my head down, minding my own business. It is tempting to believe that I acted on instinct—but these instincts are alien to me.

The creature is shuffling around on the roofs of the stalled vehicles, trying to get into position to strike at me with its claws or tail. Its mouth hovers over me, small, sharp teeth framing the entrance to the black pit of its throat. My right hand touches something on the ground, and my fingers close around it. It is a long shard of metal, no doubt torn from a vehicle. It feels good in my grasp. Like a sword.

And instinct takes over again. I raise myself on my left elbow, wrapped in an unnatural calm because I can see what needs to be done and I know now that I can do it. And I know why. These people need me. They need a hero. They need Acroyear.

I thrust upward with the makeshift weapon, and plunge it into the roof of the creature's mouth. It screams, its head snapping up and away from me, taking my "sword" away with it. I feel for more debris, and find another sharp fragment. I leap to my feet and run, stooped, one hand raised, scoring a line along the creature's soft underside. Its black blood rains down on my hunched shoulders.

I emerge from beneath it, and it flings itself at me. I duck between its claws, and land a shattering blow that knocks out many of its teeth. It flops onto the sidewalk, now mercifully empty. It is desperate to escape from me. I almost wish I could let it—but the greatest kindness I can extend to the creature now is to end this quickly. Unfortunately, without a real sword, I cannot offer much in the way of finesse.

I spring onto its back again, and hammer at its head with combined fists. As the creature loses its orientation—and, slowly, its life—its flailing tail threatens me less. It surrenders, at last, its eight legs

giving way, hitting the ground with a wet thump.

I can hear distant voices, but I pay them no heed; anyway, the voices in my head are louder. They shout their approval of my actions, goading me on.

Blood wells from between the plates of the creature's natural armor. My gloves are sticky. I stare at them, turning my hands over in front of my eyes, as my adrenaline rush subsides and a cold, gray, confusing reality sets in again.

A burst of concentrated fire ignites the air at my ear. A warning shot. I look up, and I see them—dully, as if through a lifting fog. The Harrowers: the Baron's law enforcers.

They have come from all directions, looking like clones in their black armor, their eyes covered by helmets that seem opaque from the outside. The armor steals their identities. They surround me, their blasters leveled at me. I know how they think. They have arrived too late to deal with the creature, so they will stamp their authority upon the only person left to feel it. The voices tell me to fight them, but I know how foolish that would be.

"Last warning, Citizen Nanissar!" bellows the Harrower's spokesman. "Come down from the Scorpote, and keep your hands where we can see them."

I oblige, slipping down the side of the dead creature to land on the sidewalk, my hands reaching for the yellow sky. "On your knees, Nanissar. That's right. Now, lie on your front. Keep those arms straight. Palms up. Head down." It seems futile to protest that I have done nothing wrong, that I did the Harrowers' job for them. This feels all too familiar.

Four of them run up behind me, pressing my face into the grimy paving stones, wrenching my arms behind my back and securing my wrists into a locking clamp. I could throw them all with a shrug, but their blasters are aimed at my head, and they would only call for reinforcements. I cannot win this battle. I know that, as surely as I know that I must have played out this scene a hundred times before, though I have no memory of it.

"Thought you'd learned your lesson, Nanissar. Thought you were a model citizen these days. Looks like you need reminding who runs this city, huh?"

I'm not resisting. They drive their shock batons into my back anyway. My armor protects me from the impacts, but not from the charges. Waves of pain snap through me, making my muscles seize up and my eyes roll into their sockets. A resentful spirit inside me screams: *I didn't do anything wrong!* But I am no longer in control of my voice, or my body.

"Some great warrior! Some hero! You ask me, we should put him out of his misery. We could blame the Scorpote." Hollow words. The Harrowers would not dare defy their leader. Anyway, that is not how it ends for me. So, they can beat me, shock me, torture me as much as they like; send me slip, sliding, tumbling into darkness. I won't die yet.

I am losing consciousness. And the last thing I see, as my eyes close, is a face. A citizen, watching from behind the line of Harrowers. One of the few who is not still running.

Ryan Archer.

They chained me to the wall of an isolation cell, narrower than I am tall. Its floor is filthy, crusted with old blood. The only window is barred and set into the door, leading into a dark corridor. My wrists are still manacled, my bonds arranged so that I can neither sit nor stand up fully. I am weary. In between visits by Harrowers with shock batons, I have tried to meditate: a tactic in which I feel well-practiced. For blissful minutes at a time, I have shut out my surroundings, taken refuge inside myself. I am

disconcerted, however, by the fact that I recognize so little of what I see in there.

I hear footsteps—the heavy tread of boots approaching the cells. Harrowers. The acoustics of the dingy corridor give warning of their approach: time to anticipate their arrival, time to become afraid. Five of them, I think. That is more than usual. They're marching in step. More on their minds, this time, than random brutality. A black-helmeted face through the bars; the rattling of keys in the lock. The voice of the Harrower Captain.

“On your feet, Nanissar! Straighten up!”

He knows I cannot do that. He strikes me in the stomach with his shock baton before I can even try. My spine tries to tighten, but my chains resist it. The whiplash pain makes me grit my teeth. I will not give them the satisfaction of crying out.

“You're privileged. The Baron himself has left his palace to speak with you.”

He is standing in the doorway, flanked by Harrower guards, arms folded, head cocked slightly, regarding me with a sardonic smile. I am surprised by the strength of the conflicting emotions that grip me. He is the ruler of Micropolis, the man by whose grace I am allowed to live and work here. He has made this city safe and self-sufficient. I owe him everything.

I would happily close my fingers around his throat and choke the life out of him.

He is Baron Maruunus Ki. A middle-aged man, but still in good shape. The crown of his head is bald, but black hair forms a lustrous curtain down its back, to his shoulders. A thick moustache curls over his top lip, drooping almost to his chin. His green battle suit increases his apparent bulk, lending him a presence, and an air of authority, that might not otherwise be evident. Ivory horns protrude from his elbows, knees and shoulders, faintly reminiscent—perhaps deliberately so—of the horns worn by the galactic Emperors of old.

“I'm disappointed,” rumbles Ki in his baritone voice. His expression belies his words. His lips twitch eagerly at the prospect of renewing an old game of which I am only just beginning to recall the rules. “I never thought we would be here again.”

I maintain a sullen silence.

“The Baron has addressed you, dog!” snaps the Harrower Captain. Without thinking, he slaps me across the face. His knuckle-dusters, hidden under his gloves, ring against my helmet, and the blow hurts him more than it does me.

Ki steps into the cell, his escort following like a trio of obedient poodles. I brace my foot against the wall, calculating how much closer he has to come before I can reach him with a kick. “The System reports that you haven't plugged in for almost three weeks,” he says. I stare at the ground, but the Captain grabs my chin and jerks my head up.

“Been busy,” I mutter.

“Indeed. Your reports indicate that you have worked hard. Maybe too hard. Maybe you need a rest, Citizen. Maybe this would explain your recent memory lapses.”

I freeze, intrigued despite myself. What does he know about my memory?

“You seem to have forgotten what the System does for you,” says Ki, shattering my unvoiced hope. In a softer tone, he adds: “You have forgotten your future, little man.”

“I have not forgotten,” I say sharply.

“You are fortunate, Citizen Nanissar. You have a home here. Hundreds of thousands of refugees would

kill to be in your position. Our ports overflow with them: the poor, the hungry, the hopeless. Micropolis cannot grow fast enough to accommodate them all.”

He speaks the truth. I have seen them at the landing areas, ragged clothes clinging to their malnourished forms. The flotsam of the galaxy, the dispossessed, so desperate for a roof over their heads and food to eat that they will trade the only thing they have: their freedom. The Harrowers weed out the fit, the ones who might be useful, and reject the rest.

“You have shelter. You have warmth. The System protects you.”

“It did not protect us this morning.” An unexpected rush of defiance. “How many lives did the Scorpites take, before your Harrowers even reached the scene?”

Ki’s eyes smolder. “A regrettable incident. The time breaks cannot always be predicted.”

“I fought for them. I saved them. I maintained the System—and you put me in chains.”

The Baron’s reaction is typically understated. He nods quietly. “You did our city a service, that cannot be denied. I am more interested, however, in your motives for so doing.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We must put faith in the System, Citizen. If we do not, Micropolis will fall.”

“I was right to act. I saved lives—workers for your factories.”

“Nevertheless, this breakdown in trust concerns me.”

I stare at him dumbly, unsure of what I am being accused.

“You remember what I showed you, don’t you, little man? Your destiny.”

Of course I do. Not in any great detail, but in nightmare flashes. The shapes that form in smog clouds and smoke trails, and the shadows of my room at night. Wings of leather, beating in the corners of my mind. I bow my head, and Ki’s lips twist into a satisfied sneer.

“You know that nothing can change it,” he says. “The future is written. The Time Traveler has seen it. Even if you could avoid your fate, you know the cost.”

“Billions would die,” I murmur. It feels like a programmed response. “I accept that.”

“Then you accept that you can never leave Micropolis.”

“Yes.” Barely a whisper.

Ki sighs, shaking his head. “As I said, I am disappointed. When I heard you had been brought here, I thought I might have to break you all over again. I think I might have enjoyed that. A challenge, after so long.” He turns away from me, as if bored. “Give him four hours in the System,” he instructs the Harrower Captain over his shoulder, “and put a flag against his usage statistics. If Citizen Nanissar goes seven days without plugging in, he is to be referred to a reinforcement counselor.”

He sweeps out of the cell, and the Captain spits on me before marching after him.

They leave me to suffer for another two hours before they come back for me.

It is dark when the Harrowers release me. The traffic has gone, but its fumes still linger. I hear the droning of airships, and see their searchlights sweeping the sidewalks. The curfew period has almost begun, and I have to run the thirty-two blocks back home. I do not wish to be caught in violation, to be returned to that cell. I must respect the laws of the city.

I reach my building with less than a minute to spare. I stare at the familiar glass and steel doors as if I have only seen them in pictures before. The world always looks like this after the System: too solid somehow, uncompromising. Stark and monochrome, all straight lines and harsh angles. I had forgotten the yawning feeling in my stomach, the aching disappointment at returning to this. Already, I am counting the hours until I can escape again. I have not made use of my credits in some time; I could probably spend all my recreation periods for the next week in the System's embrace.

I disgust myself. This is the real world. I ought to have the strength to deal with it, to dismiss the Baron's honey-coated falsehoods. I wish I could talk to Persephone. Perhaps she is waiting for me upstairs.

It is difficult to describe how it feels to be immersed in the System—"plugged in," as the vernacular would have it. It is like dreaming. Inside the System, everything is right, everything makes sense. Life is good, and there is no problem that cannot be overcome. I feel safe, content, optimistic, even proud. In the moments after waking, I can hold on to those feelings...until I try to analyze the dream, to touch something tangible, at which point, it dissipates like smoke, leaving only ghost images and a deep sense of loss.

I put my hand on the port at the back of my neck, reacting to a phantom itch. My fingers trace the outline of the cold, hard circle. I think of the plug-in centers: rows of the pale-faced addicted, slouching in their seats, stirred only by the occasional spasm. Cables snaking from the System's terminals, jacks driven through the bone of their skulls. Their eyes milky white, drool seeping over their lower lips. It galls me that, more times than I can count, I have sacrificed my dignity to join them. This time, at least, it was not my choice. This time, I was plugged in to a private terminal in a corner of the cellblock, my shame hidden.

I saw Persephone, in my dream. I saw the System, too—at least, I saw the sprawling complex that houses its central processors. I could not help but admire its sheer scale. Our greatest achievement. Floating above it, in my disembodied state, I imagined that it looked like a gigantic sea beast. A beast that holds Micropolis in its many thin tentacles.

And I saw the Baron. He is always there, his voice almost like my own voice in the back of my head. Letting me know that he is working for me, for all of us. Widening roads, putting more funding into airbuses, increasing the System's processing power so that we can all spend more time plugged in. The idea leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Confused again. I try to empty my mind, to push my doubts away, as the elevator comes for me. But one simple fact is clearer to me than ever, and I cannot deny it: I do not want to be here. I do not want to live this life. I must escape.

And there is only one place I can go.

I hoped to find a light on in my apartment, but there is none.

For a moment, still, I allow myself to believe that she might be inside, waiting in darkness. My room never seemed so empty, never felt so small. I search for a sign, a scribbled note or a hint of her perfume in the air.

I know that there will be nothing. She did not come.

»Good morning, Citizen Nanissar.«

I have been awake for an hour. The System's voice disturbs my meditation.

Immediately, my mind returns to the closet. I have not opened it for many years. But, since last night, I have been thinking about the manuscript that lies therein, under unused bed sheets, blankets and coveralls. I have allowed its story to fade in my mind, like so much else, because I thought it would be easier. But should I not prepare myself for what must come?

»Good news, Citizen Nanissar. A rampage by a time-lost scorpote was halted by harrower forces yesterday. Casualties were minimal.«

I do not respond. Like everything else about the System, the female voice is a lie. This morning, it feels like that of an illicit lover, of whom I am ashamed. Persephone would not approve of what I did. I have betrayed her. Is that why she did not come to me last night? Maybe, somehow, she knew.

If I cannot be with her, then I want to be alone. Unfortunately, Ryan Archer emerges from his apartment as I pass his door.

“Hello again,” he says, smiling as he hurries to match my walking pace. It is rare that people smile in Micropolis; more so that they should smile at me. It occurs to me that this is something that Ryan Archer and Baron Ki have in common.

We share an elevator again. Archer does not question the fact that nobody joins us. He seems determined to fill our journey with meaningless chatter.

“So, where do you work, Kel?” he asks.

“The mines,” I say shortly.

“Yeah? Must be tough down there.”

“The System must be maintained.”

“I’m a programmer, myself,” says Archer. I did not solicit this information, nor does it interest me.

“Hey, I heard about the scorpion yesterday.”

“Scorpote.”

“It was you who killed it, right?” I do not answer him. “That was really something. You’re a hero, man. I’m living down the hall from a real, live hero.”

“We need no heroes. The System provides.”

“Guess that’s what the armor is about, huh? You in security or something?”

“It is no concern of yours.”

“Hey, no offense meant. It’s just...” Archer hesitates, as if considering the wisdom of pursuing this avenue. “I’m just curious, is all. You’re not dressed like a Harrower, and you’re not wearing coveralls like the rest of us. That some kind of uniform?”

“I told you,” I growl, “I do not know where I come from.”

“But the armor must mean something,” he prompts.

I round on him angrily, and he sees that he has gone too far. He backs away, his hands raised in front of him. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, okay? You don’t want to talk about it. That’s cool.” He is sweating. He is learning to be afraid of me, like everybody else. Is that what I want? Am I so desperate to remain alone, so frightened of my past?

“It’s—it’s just...” stammers Archer, “Just that I think I’ve seen it before. Or something like it. A friend of mine, from a long time ago. He used to wear armor like that.”

His eyes search for a reaction from me, some indication that it is safe to continue. I give him none.

“He was a hero, too,” says Archer. “A great warrior. His name was...”

A short, nervous pause.

“Acroyear.”

Something snaps inside me. Without knowing why, I have Ryan Archer by the throat. I lift him bodily and slam him into the wall of our metal box, causing it to sway on its cables. His face is white; he is trying to say something, but my thumbs press down on his windpipe.

“*Who are you?*” I snarl. “Are you a spy for Ki? Is that it? Are you testing me?”

“N-no,” he splutters. And I drop him, realizing that, if my accusation is true, I have already sealed my fate. He crumples, tears in his eyes, gasping for breath.

Behind me, the elevator doors rattle open, exposing our private disagreement to the foyer and the sidewalk beyond it. I feel eyes upon me, but I do not turn to meet them.

I lean over Archer, lowering my voice. “You can tell the Baron that my name is Kel Nanissar. I am a citizen of Micropolis. I know of no one called Acroyear. That man is dead.”

I turn on my heel and march out of the building, ignoring the people who avert their gazes and scuttle away from me. I have no time to waste on them, nor on Ryan Archer.

I must go to work.

CHAPTER TWO

I am assigned to Number Twelve Mine, in Sector Nineteen. A bowl-shaped hole has been scooped out of the ground, a winding ramp sculpted into its side. I tread carefully on the uneven stone as I descend, mindful of the absence of a handrail. The towers of Micropolis loom over me, their windows dark. Space is one of the city’s scarcest commodities—along with fuel and water—so the builders have worked as close to the edge as they were able. Some of the apartment blocks are beginning to subside, sinking into the pit.

We have driven eight descending tunnels into the hard sides of the bowl, and two shafts into its base. Some of them lead to dead ends; others meet under the streets to form a multi-layered maze of narrow passageways.

My fellow workers have begun to arrive. They exchange few words as they shuffle into the dilapidated equipment shed to collect their picks, shovels and helmets. I join them. Inflexible mining regulations require me to don the standard issue headgear on top of my own helmet; in any case, I need its integral lamp.

An electronically amplified voice summons me to Ethridge’s hut. I expected as much, as soon as the System informed him of my arrival.

The mine foreman has olive-colored skin, and vertical ridges to each side of his cranium. Two small tusks protrude from his misshapen chin. He sits behind his desk, glowering at me with tiny, sunken eyes. He wastes no time on pleasantries.

“You missed your work period yesterday,” he barks. I say nothing. My excuses would not interest him. “According to the System, you got yourself arrested for brawling.” Once, my silence would have riled him, but he has become accustomed to it. It is enough for Ethridge to know that he has power over me. “In case you’re forgetting, Nanissar, we have an energy crisis in this city,” he blusters. “I cannot afford

to have key workers go missing on me. I will, of course, be docking your credits for yesterday—and you'll work double shifts for the rest of the week, to make up the time you've lost."

A roster has been pinned to the equipment shed door. I am to work Shaft 4d: the deepest, most dangerous part of the mine. As I step into the tunnel mouth, I hear voices in my head—a familiar chorus, yet one that had been stilled since yesterday. The voices are frustrated. They ask me why I don't stand up to bullies like Ethridge. I reply that I would prefer a quiet life. Fighting, railing against authority, has never improved my lot. Anyway, my posting is of little consequence to me. Better I should work 4d than have somebody else take that burden.

When I am at the rock face, I can blot out my thoughts, lose myself in physical effort and the rhythms of the work. I can forget my cares, more completely than is possible anywhere else outside the System. Sometimes, a day can pass like minutes, speeding me closer to my final release. It is preferable to the tick-tock passage of time between the bare walls of an empty apartment. Without her.

And Ethridge is right. We must work to maintain the System.

Persephone once told me that, on other worlds, new energy sources are being explored. People have learned how to harness the power of the sun and the wind. Baron Ki could trade for that technology if he so wished—but his priorities lie elsewhere, and he is obstinate and afraid of appearing weak. He won't admit that the city, *his* city, the greatest city in existence, is not self-sufficient. His solution to the problem of dwindling fossil fuels is to force his miners to work harder. But the System consumes ever more resources, while we must dig deeper into the ground in search of smaller and smaller amounts of compressed carbon.

One day, this world will be an empty shell, its surface scoured by ultraviolet, its innards depleted. What does Ki care? He will be long dead by then. As will I.

Cold walls close in around me on three sides, shadows on the fourth. I deny my twinge of claustrophobia, focusing on the matter at hand. I sink into the rhythm, the expanding and contracting of my muscles, the rise and fall of the pick against the rock surface in front of me. Like clockwork. Tick tock, tick tock.

Absorbed as I am, I do not hear the distant siren that signals our first regulation break. It is only when I see that my co-worker has dropped his tools and sunk to the ground that I realize what time it must be. Bilan Tench is a tall, dark-skinned man with a bald head and flecks of gray in his full black beard. His shoulders are broad and his muscles well developed, but in recent months I have watched him become gradually less able to cope with the rigors of his job. He is growing old, and I suspect he has developed a fault in his respiratory system. Certainly, there is a rattle in his chest as he sits with his knees to his forehead, breathing heavily. He has removed his smog mask.

"You should stand," I say gruffly. "It would help oxygen to circulate around your body." He acknowledges the advice from the back of his throat, but he does not move. "You should also take a walk outside. This deep into the tunnels, the air is too thin."

Tench looks up at me, and attempts a grin. "You don't think I know that?" he gasps. "Problem is, we're in 4d! By the time I got to the surface, break'd be over." I stare into the absolute darkness behind us, beyond the small pool cast by our combined lights, and I cannot deny the truth of his claim.

I scowl. It is one thing to bear such treatment myself; another to see it meted out to one who cannot fight back. "Ethridge has no right assigning you here."

Tench shrugs. "I got up his nose, same as you did. He figures my yields were down. You ask me, he

just..." He breaks off to cough violently. Tears stream down his cheeks, but he tries to smile through them. "Just wants me dead, so he can put in for a replacement."

"You are not well. You should be in a medical facility."

"Can't afford to go. Kids to support. I need...need credits."

The siren sounds again, too soon, and Tench struggles to stand. I place my hand on his shoulder, holding him down. "No," I say. "You must rest."

A familiar fear fills his eyes. "I can't. Ethridge..."

"Nobody will know. I will do your share for you."

"You already do the work of three men. I can manage...my bit." Tench levers himself to his feet, and I do not stop him. I recognize and respect his pride.

He takes his pick and attacks the rock face with commendable determination but failing strength.

"Come on, Nanissar. Best get back to it. The cart'll be here soon."

"Ethridge rarely collects the yield from this tunnel," I point out.

Tench laughs bitterly. "And don't we all know it! Good old 4d, right? How much coal would you say it's given up in the past six weeks?" I look down at the rock splinters that have begun to pile around our feet. At the end of the day, we will have produced nothing, contributed nothing to the System. We will only have sent another truckload of rubble to an already brimming landfill site. "And yet," continues Tench, "Ethridge won't close it. He won't even let us use the explosives. So, we just keep on digging."

Resentment has energized him, speeding the rhythm of his work. Tench attacks the rock as if it were a hated enemy. I am about to counsel him to slow down when a section of it falls away, showering him in debris and beating up a thick cloud around us. Coughing and spluttering, Tench falls to his knees, pulling his mask into place with trembling hands.

I drop my pick and lift him, dragging his weak, unprotesting body back up the tunnel until the air becomes clearer. This time, he tacitly accepts that he cannot return to work until he is feeling better, until his breathing has stabilized—and I wait with him, despite the risk to both of us if we are caught shirking our duties. Fortunately, no System sensors have yet been installed this far underground.

"Like I said," Tench wheezes, "only reason this tunnel's still open at all...the only reason...it's where Ethridge sends people like me to die. But he won't beat me. Just have to...hang on for another five, six months, then it won't matter. They can do what they like to me. Saran, my eldest...he can work then, support the family. Just need to... hang on till then."

I look at the determined set of Tench's jaw, the defiance in his eyes, and I see the spirit of a younger, stronger man. The man he used to be. I admire him for that.

I wish I could find that spirit in myself.

She comes to me on the evening of the following day.

The overhead lights have come on at the System information points. The Time Traveler bathes in his spotlights, the only star in our polluted sky. But curfew is two hours away, and the streets are still busy. People shuffle along the sidewalks in search of distraction. Those who cannot afford to plug in look for cheaper entertainment in the sleazy nightclubs and fleapit picture houses. The former will numb their brains, drowning their thoughts in loud music and intoxicating liquors; in the latter, they will be encouraged to side with authority figures against stereotyped terrorists, whose worst crime is to

question the System. Either way, the Baron will tighten his hold on them tonight.

I trudge toward my apartment building, keeping my head down. Two days of double shifts have begun to take their toll. I am weary, longing for a release that sleep will not give me, and I find my footsteps leading me from my path. I know my destination, minutes before I admit the truth to myself.

The bright lights of the plug-in centers call to me, and I take my place amid the nightly stream of System-addicted zombies.

I hear her voice, and immediately I am ashamed of my intentions.

“Keep walking,” she says quietly. I do as she instructs, and she falls into step beside me.

“I didn’t think I would see you again,” I tell her out of the corner of my mouth.

“I had to be sure you weren’t being watched. Your fight with the Scorpites brought you the wrong kind of attention.” She has made such statements before. I have never questioned her about them. If I am honest with myself, they add to her allure. The idea that our liaisons are illicit, defying the Baron in some way, is intoxicating.

I wish I did not feel so guilty. But the System sees everything. We both know that.

“They plugged me in,” I blurt out. “I couldn’t stop them.”

“I know. That is unfortunate.” Her tone is hard, unsympathetic. “But they can’t strip you of everything you have gained. Be strong, Nanissar.”

“I do not think I can.”

“You have fought the System before. It will be easier this time.”

“I have fought it, but it still stands. How can it be beaten? There is nothing else.”

“No,” she says sternly. “That’s what the System tells you. That’s what Ki wants you to believe. The System is not perfect. It is only a machine, the Baron’s brainwashing tool.”

“He is monitoring my usage.”

She nods curtly, pursing her lips. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“I need...” I begin hesitantly. “I need to know that there is something...else.”

“Trust me.”

“I need your help.”

“I cannot give it,” she says cruelly, piercing my heart, shattering my resolve.

I stop. I turn. I cannot help it. I have to look at her.

Her jaw, behind her smog mask, has a determined set. Her eyes are a cold blue, uncompromising. “You were a hero once, Nanissar. If you can’t be that hero again, you are of no use to me.”

Persephone is like a light in a dark world. I am amazed that nobody else is staring at her, so clear is it to me that she does not belong here. She wears the standard mauve coveralls, but they are in pristine condition. Her pink skin is soft and unblemished; even her fingernails are neatly manicured. Certainly, she has never been forced to work in one of Ki’s refineries or on a production line. Her hair is long and blonde; it even smells clean. She is young, but she has the bearing of a princess.

My memories are like the drifting fragments of an iceberg, but my first meeting with her is lodged at their forefront. I had been expelled from the System, my allotted time expended. I tried to hold on, but colors slipped between my fingers, and I woke again to the drab, beige walls and hard benches of the

plug-in center. She was there, unexpectedly, at the terminal beside me but not connected. Her arched eyebrows and slightly upturned nose lent her a haughty air, and I felt at first that she regarded me with disdain.

I don't know why she helped me. She must have seen something in me, as I did in her. Something that lifts us above this place, or at least allows us to lift ourselves. It has always been clear to me that Persephone believes herself worth more than the city can give—and this is not arrogance, merely an acknowledgement of fact. To my eternal gratitude, she appears to believe the same of me, even when I don't believe it myself.

That first evening, she took me back to my room and stayed with me. I didn't want to talk, but she talked to me. I was coming down from the System—even then, I had begun to realize that it offered false hope, promises to be snatched away—and I needed something else to hold on to. She gave me the strength I lacked. She convinced me that there *was* hope, away from the System and its lies. I have yet to find it. But she can guide me to it.

“Don't leave me,” I say plaintively. “I am sorry. I will try harder.”

“I know you will,” she says. “That is not the issue, Nanissar. It is not safe for us to be together. Even before yesterday, eyes were turning toward you. It is almost time.”

“Time for what?”

“I must go.” Persephone glances up and down the street, her demeanor nervous but her eyes calculating. “You will see me again soon.”

“When?”

“Soon. Be ready.”

And she is gone, melting into the shifting pattern of mauve more easily than I imagined she could. My first instinct is to follow her, but I resist it. I do not understand why I cannot be with her, but I won't place her in danger. I trust her, and she has placed her trust in me.

One thing I *can* do for her. I turn around, presenting my back to the bright lights. Slowly, jerkily at first, I place one foot in front of the other and carry myself away from them.

I spend another evening in my small room, alone.

Ethridge comes to inspect our work. It is the first time I have seen him in Shaft 4d: he rarely ventures this deep into the mine. The fact that he is wearing an oxygen mask and a tank strapped to his back is not lost on me, nor—I see from his clenched fists—on Tench.

He arrives during second break so as not to interrupt our digging. Usually, Tench spends this time slumped against the tunnel wall, recuperating, but today he stands, refusing to show weakness. Ethridge ignores us, until he needs me to hold the end of his tape measure to the rock face. He stretches it back to the last wooden prop, muttering to himself.

“What have you been doing down here?” he grumbles. “Think you can slack off just because I can't see you? Your yields have gone through the floor!”

“There is no coal in this shaft,” I point out.

“Don't give me that. You want to know where the coal is?” Ethridge points to the end of the tunnel.

“Down there, that's where it is—and it's about time you reached it!”

I would not normally have said anything. But I see the fire in Tench's eyes; I see him tensing, ready to

start forward, and I know that he cannot afford to lose this job. “We have cleared several meters,” I protest. “We need another prop before we can go further.”

The foreman lets out a derisive snort. “So you can waste another hour of my time? Looks stable enough to me,” he says, taking a cursory glance up at the tunnel roof. He jabs an olive-skinned finger under my nose. “So, I don’t want to hear no more excuses. I sent the two of you down here in the first place because you’re more trouble’n you’re worth. By the time I knock off tonight, I want to see some real progress, or I’ll declare you both unfit.”

As soon as Ethridge has left, Tench lets out his frustration by hurling his pick at the wall.

“Six months,” he groans, “that’s all I needed. Six lousy months!”

“I have been watching you,” I say. “You are stronger than you think. You will make it.”

“Didn’t you hear? Ethridge wants us out!”

“He often makes such threats.”

“I think he means it this time. That’s why he keeps 4d open. Should have seen it before. He doesn’t have to wait for the work to kill us. He can hide behind his damn numbers, use them as an excuse to toss us out on our ears!”

“He could,” I agree thoughtfully, “but why? For all his bluster, Ethridge knows that you work hard to compensate for your failing health—and you have given him no reason to take a personal dislike to you.”

“He still sent us down here.”

“He did. But he may not have been truthful about his motives for doing so.” Tench’s leathery forehead wrinkles into a frown. I continue: “There is no coal here. Therefore, we have assumed that Ethridge has no reason to make us dig. His body language, however, suggests otherwise. He is nervous, impatient.”

“You mean...there might be something in 4d after all?”

“I think it is likely.”

“Not coal, though. Something else. Something valuable. Something that Ethridge doesn’t want to damage. That’s why he won’t risk using explosives.”

“Ethridge did not send me here as a punishment.” It is all falling into place. I feel as if I am stretching parts of my mind that have long been dormant. “To me, this shaft is the same as any other. But it is narrow. It can be worked by no more than two men. And, as you have said yourself, my armor makes me efficient. It would be a waste of the mine’s resources to assign me to an unimportant task. The System would not allow it.”

I have fired Tench’s enthusiasm, made him forget his fear. “So, what does Ethridge want?”

The echoes of the work siren reach us. “There is only one way to find out,” I suggest.

“You called me a hero.”

Persephone’s nose wrinkles attractively, as she frowns at me.

“When last we spoke. You said I had been a hero.”

She nods, understanding. “Does that surprise you?”

I think about it. “It...tells me that my dreams have substance.”

She was waiting in my room. An unexpected break from the drab routine into which I had settled, waiting for her. I do not know how long we will have together. I had to ask the question. I have been thinking about it for days. “Then you know about my past.”

“A little,” she admits. I look at her longingly. “But the past has gone, Nanissar—and the important details, you already know. You *are* a hero.”

“Once, maybe.”

Her eyes darken. Her nostrils flare. “Do you think I came to you by chance? I sought you out for a reason. I need you. I need Acroyear.”

I am disconcerted. I have not heard that name from her lips before. I am afraid of what it could mean. “The man you seek is dead,” I say quickly, turning away.

“I don’t believe that,” she says. “Acroyear was more than a man. He was the champion of a people. A force for justice, a defender of the weak, a symbol of hope. His fame spread across worlds. And, of all the men to have borne his name, you were the greatest.”

“There are others?”

“No longer. Acroyear was engineered to be the ultimate galactic warrior, but it was the heart of the man that made him a legend. Legends don’t die, Nanissar.”

“But they can lose heart.”

“I don’t have time to indulge your self-pity,” snaps Persephone.

“It is not self-pity,” I protest. “I wish it were. I wish I could be your hero, but I can’t. I am not that man any longer. Best we both accept it.”

She shakes her head stubbornly. “I have come too far to lose you.”

I feel disappointed. And betrayed? Was she only using me? “You should have made your intentions plain when first we met,” I say. “You have wasted your time and mine.”

“I don’t think so.”

“It is Acroyear you need. So, take him. Take the armor, if it is all you want from me. Give it to somebody more deserving, somebody who can use it.”

“You still have a few years left. I don’t intend to take them from you.”

“I cannot survive without the armor, true—but death may be a release.”

“I can offer a better one. Fight!”

“I have fought before. I lost. How else would I have come to this place?”

“You’re right. Ki beat you. He could have had you executed. He kept you here, instead. He wanted a trophy, an example to others. The great warrior, humbled by a greater ruler. So long as you are in chains, you lend him power and respect. Is that what you want?”

“Of course it is not!” I yell.

My surge of defiance brings a smile to her lips. “That’s why I came to you, Nanissar. Not only because you can help me, but because we can help each other.”

I want to believe her. I want to believe that I can fight the future.

“Ki has numbers on his side,” she says, “but that’s all. How that unimaginative plodder came by the barony at all, I will never know—probably because nobody else was willing to guide this festering

hellhole through its death throes.”

“Micropolis is the greatest city in the galaxy!” I cry automatically.

She gives me a pitying look. “A long time ago,” she says, “when it was the seat of Emperors. But Maruunus Ki is not worthy to lick the least of the Emperors’ boots, and Micropolis’s influence is long spent.”

I say nothing.

“I have amended your records,” says Persephone. “Should anybody check, they will be told that you are plugging in regularly. They will think you as docile as the rest.”

“And if I *want* to plug in? The System makes life easier.”

“The System keeps you in line,” she snaps. “It shows you a society in which you work for your own benefit, when in truth the only beneficiary is Ki. The System makes you believe that you need it. It tells you that you can make a contribution, but never a difference. Well, one man *can* make a difference, Nanissar—if he is the right man. We need Acroyear, now more than ever. Billions of lives depend upon him!”

And I remember what Ki showed me, the evidence of the manuscript. My sacrifice. My death, so that the downtrodden wretches of Micropolis might continue to live their half-lives. I remember what Persephone told me in the street three days ago: “*It is almost time.*”

And I know that the future cannot be fought.

»Good morning, Citizen Nanissar

.«

I am leaving for work when I see the note on my mat. Somebody must have pushed it under my door as I slept. A single piece of white paper, folded down the center. Four words, written in block capitals in thick, black fiber-tip:

YOU CAN’T TRUST HER.

The roof comes down that afternoon.

Tench saves us. Having worked the mines all his life, he is sensitive to the slightest movement of the earth, and he sees the accident before it happens. I was too deep in thought about Persephone, wondering what I will say when next I see her. Tench tackles me, trying to push me back along the shaft. I resist him at first, instinctively, and he shouts something at me. I choose to trust him. We move as dirt cascades around our ears and the air is filled with dust. The heavier fragments come next, rattling off our helmets, the tunnel shaking as boulders slam into the ground behind us.

I have heard tales of others in this situation. Few of them survive. A tunnel collapse is every miner’s nightmare, so I am told. Personally, I have always known that I will not end my days underground; my nightmares take a different shape. Still, with no hope of attaining the surface, I wonder for an instant if I might cheat my destiny after all. I might die down here.

But then, there is silence. A heavy, unnatural silence, in which I am acutely aware of the slightest creak of settling debris, and of Tench’s ragged breathing as he sinks to his knees beside me. “Thank God,” he weeps from the back of his throat, “thank God...”

Fortunately, miraculously, the fall was a small one. A warning, this time.

Still, it has taken its toll. My co-worker is clutching his left shoulder. His pupils are dilated, his teeth gritted in pain. I inspect him, and conclude that the shoulder has been dislocated.

“Too...too deep,” he babbles weakly. “Nobody...heard. Nobody is coming.”

“We are not trapped,” I assure him. “I will carry you to the surface.”

“No. No, let me...rest...just a moment...”

“You need treatment. Ethridge will have to call in a medic.”

“Can’t...can’t afford...He’d dock me the whole day. I can’t lose the credits.”

“And you cannot work in this condition!”

“Then it’s up to you, my friend. Help me. Push... push my shoulder back into place.”

“It is not only your shoulder. You are bruised. You can hardly breathe.”

“Can...cope.”

“I admire your courage, Tench, but you do not have to do this. I have credits to spare, and I want you to see a doctor. I will make up any lost earnings.”

“Told you before,” he coughs, galvanized by anger, “I won’t let you cover for me.”

“I caused your injury. You stopped to save me. I held you back.” This is all wrong. I am wearing armor; he is not. He is aging, infirm. And still, he put my safety above his own. He acted like a hero, and he made it look simple, effortless.

“And if Ethridge had listened to you,” he insists, “if he’d given us that prop when you asked, this wouldn’t have happened at all. Now, will you pop this damn shoulder back into its socket, or do I have to do it myself?”

“You are right,” I growl, half to myself. “Ethridge *is* to blame. Ethridge and the System...”

Tench tried to talk me out of this. He thought I was doing it for his sake, but he only provided me with inspiration. Whatever I do now, I do for myself.

I shared his brief agony as I snapped his shoulder bones back into place. I saw the sweat on his brow and the tears in his eyes as he sagged against the tunnel wall, relieved but exhausted. I saw my own helplessness, my defeat, reflected in him. Tench is a good man. A strong man. A man who tried to be a hero. I knew then what Persephone saw when she looked at me.

I became angry. The System teaches us that anger is bad, but for once I ignored its dictates. I took hold of that anger, and I let it build. I let it fuel me. The voices in my head are clearer now, and I realize that they have always been there. They have always known what I should do, but I have not listened to them. I let the System drown them out.

I pass several workers as I stride toward the surface. They look at me with surprise and a certain amount of trepidation. They wonder why I have left my position. But they see my clenched fists, and my determined set, and they keep out of my way.

I pause on the lip of Tunnel Four, blinking as daylight hits me in the eyes. Even the polarizing effect of my helmet does not protect me from its glare after so long in the gloom.

I march toward the foreman’s hut, crushing gravel under my feet. I pause in front of the ramshackle building. The voices want to know what I will do to Ethridge when I see him. I am not sure. Maybe I will kill him. The Harrowers would come then, of course. I might kill them, too. Then Ki, and anybody

else who profits from the misery of others.

I might unleash a bloodbath.

I am beginning to falter. I stand before the door of the hut, separated from its occupant by a few centimeters of wood. The System has an information point, bristling with sensors, in this pit; it knows I'm here. Any action I take now will have consequences. Is it worth starting a war for an insignificant bureaucrat like Ethridge?

The sensible option would be to wait, to plan, to choose my targets more carefully. But I am afraid that, if I do not do this now, I never will.

I place my hand on the doorknob.

I hear voices, coming from inside the hut. Ethridge has a visitor.

"I do appreciate the urgency of the situation." The foreman sounds flustered, nervous. His words tumble into each other. "I have my best men assigned to the operation. We're making good progress. I can take you down there, if you like. I can show you."

"We are losing patience with these delays." The voice is harsh and sibilant.

"But you must understand, this is delicate work. The time distortions make it impossible for our instruments to get a precise fix on the chamber; we could be right on top of it, or a mile away. We have to be careful. We don't want to risk damaging the merchandise."

"Your ruler has promised us those machines."

"And you'll get them. Soon, I swear. I am in daily contact with Baron Ki about this operation. It is our highest priority. I just need a little more time."

"Be aware, warm-blood, that if you betray us, our kind will exact a terrible vengeance from yours. We do not forget, and we do not forgive."

Almost too late, I hear scraping footsteps on the hut's wooden floor. There is no more time for thinking, only acting. I am ashamed that instinct makes me hide, although it is probably for the best. I duck around the side of the building as two figures emerge from it.

"I'll report any progress—anything at all—to Baron Ki," Ethridge promises. "I'm sure he'll keep you informed."

"I expect to hear good news soon," his visitor rasps pointedly.

I am intrigued to know what kind of a being it is. I flatten myself against the wall of the hut and peer around its edge. I only intended to take a quick glance, but I find myself frozen.

I have seen Reptos before, but only in my nightmares. This one is smaller than I imagined—although it matches my two meters of height—but its aspect is no less fearsome. Its green-brown scales have a slimy sheen; they glisten and steam as they dry in the city's relentless heat. Each of its two thick arms ends in a three-clawed hand, and saliva drips from the exposed rows of jagged teeth under its long snout. For an instant, I think it has seen me; its narrow yellow eyes with their slit pupils seem to burn into my head.

But then the Repto turns and stalks away, flicking its tail dismissively in Ethridge's direction. It unfurls a pair of membranous wings, their span as wide as the creature is tall, and it steps off the ground and lets the wind snatch it away.

I cannot take my eyes off it; a kind of horrified attraction. I always knew that the Reptos would come for me one day. It was prophesied in the manuscript.

I always knew that they would kill me.

CHAPTER THREE

I never spoke to Ethridge.

I remained in hiding, paralyzed by my inner turmoil, my gaze fixed upon the Repto as it beat its powerful wings and soared into the yellow sky. Soon, it was lost amid the towers of Micropolis; when I returned my attention to ground level, Ethridge had likewise disappeared, into his hut. I returned to the rock face, saying nothing to Bilan Tench. To his credit, he did not press me. He assumed, logically, that my confrontation with our foreman had gone badly, or maybe that I had backed out of it. He did not know the true reason for my silence.

We set to work with our shovels, piling two carts high with debris until we could almost reach the face again. But the rhythm of metal against stone could not distract me from what I had seen. I spent the afternoon wrapped in miserable half-memories and darker imaginings. One thought echoed through my head like the reverberations of a gong: *Persephone was right. It is almost time.*

That is why I sit cross-legged on my pallet now, in my apartment. That is why my closet door stands open for the first time in an eternity. That is why the manuscript lies in front of me. I will not hide from the truth any longer.

I cannot focus upon it. The truth is printed on the yellowed background of a two-page document, but the shapes of the letters have lost meaning. I am afraid to recognize them, to put them together. I have not read the document before; I know much of what it says, but I have avoided learning everything. So long as I do not read it, I can have hope. I can imagine that the Repto's presence at the mine was a coincidence, that my feelings of foreboding have no rational cause.

I would be deluding myself.

The document was given to me by Ki. I know this, although I have no memory of the event itself. It is dated many years into the future, and its presence is an anachronism, another consequence of the time breaks that surround the Time Traveler. The Baron gave me the original document, although no doubt he kept a copy for his own edification. This is the reason why he always had to defeat me, and the proof that he always will.

It is, evidently, a news sheet put together by an underground organization opposed to the Baron's rule. It is not made clear, in the text of the document, whether the Baron in question is Maruunus Ki or a like-minded successor—but the world it describes, the Micropolis of thirty years hence, is depressingly familiar. I am consoled, at least, by evidence of a burgeoning rebellion, an expression of free will such as would be unthinkable in this dark age. I wonder if this might be the blossom from the seeds that Persephone intends to plant.

The future rebels plan to attack the System itself. In a front-page editorial, the news sheet's anonymous compiler assures his readers that such an audacious move can succeed. The System, he asserts, has been attacked before, and crippled.

The story is on the second page, set in uneven letters, smeared with printer's ink. I read through it slowly, absorbing it, reactivating buried memories to which I can now add frightening new details. It is hot in my apartment, but my bones have grown cold.

Thousands will die. Airships will fall out of the sky, supplies at the dispensaries will dry up, defenses

against the time breaks will falter. Many will end their own lives, unable to face the reality of Micropolis without a regular escape. Ki's power base will have been eroded, but at what cost? And for how long? In time, the System will be rebuilt, because the people of the city will demand it. The Baron's hold over them will be stronger than ever.

And the man whose actions caused all this? He will be vilified, held up to public contempt. His image will become a totem, a symbol of the foolhardiness of opposing the System. Future generations will be brought up on the story of his folly.

That man, of course, is me. The article mentions me by name, Kel Nanissar, although it refers to me more often by my former title. Unfortunately, it tells me nothing about myself that I didn't already know. The writer, however, challenges the System's account of the circumstances leading to my death. He contends that, contrary to accepted history, I was not the leader of a rebel group, I did not make a deal with a race of embittered former allies of the Baron, and I did not sabotage his precious computer. Rather, I was fighting to save the System, and all of Micropolis, from the threat of the Reptos.

Ki, it seems, will display my body to the masses, claiming to have slain me in hand-to-hand combat. It will be a deception, another man clad in a replica of my armor, a way of salvaging his reputation. According to the news sheet's unnamed sources, several years will pass before my corpse is found. I will die in an alien spaceship submerged in a stagnant lake, a victim of a flesh-devouring virus. My true legacy, the article claims, is that I will keep that virus contained, keep the Reptos from unleashing it. I will save billions of lives.

I have no difficulty believing the news sheet's interpretation of future events; even Ki seems to accept it. He knows that, even if I could change what is to come, I could not do it. I could not walk away. I could not bear to have those lives on my conscience.

I should show the document to Persephone, explain to her why I cannot help her, why I can't be the man she wants me to be. I should advise her to stay away from me.

The article ends on a hopeful note. It states that lessons can be learned from the past. When the rebels attack the System, this time, they will not destroy it. They will take it over. They will reprogram it, so that the message it feeds into the brains of its slaves will be *their* message. It will take many years—maybe even generations—but they will teach the people of Micropolis how to make the most of their freedom. How to live.

I wish them luck.

I was too tense to sleep last night, or meditate this morning. I left the apartment ahead of schedule, which at least spared me another elevator ride with Ryan Archer. With time to spare, I find my usual purposeful stride replaced by a slow shuffle. In my bearing, at least, I am beginning to resemble my fellow drudges. My mind is so cluttered with thoughts that I cannot concentrate on any one of them.

I pause on the edge of Sector Seventeen, at a System information point: a white pole, striped with red, jutting out of the sidewalk, stained with years of accumulated grime. Tiny red lights chase each other in a loop around the top of the pole: a sensor, picking up invisible signals from the System ports of the people around it.

»Your work period begins in four point three minutes, Citizen Rann.« That voice again, chirping from a circular grille in the pole's side, directed at a bearded man beside me. »You need to increase your speed by a factor of one point four to arrive on time.«

I lean over the grille, and clear my throat hesitantly. "System..."

What do I expect to gain from this? The computer will not tell me the truth, only what Baron Ki wants me to hear. But if there is a chance of learning something...

“System,” I say, “what data do you have on the Reptos?”

The red lights stop spinning, and flash brighter. I frown through my mask.

»Your identity is not recognized,« says the System. »Remain by the information point. A Harrower patrol will arrive in approximately eighteen seconds.«

The light is intense now, reflecting from my armor and turning me into a beacon. I do not know what is happening, but I am uncomfortable with the gazes I am drawing and I won't wait for the Harrowers to take me again. I walk away, but the Harrowers are ahead of me, coming for me at a run. Four of them. I prepare myself to fight them.

But they hurry past me, reaching the flashing information point and searching the crowd around it. They grab a few people, turning them around to inspect the System ports in their necks. They're looking for an intruder, I realize, somebody who shouldn't be here; they paid me no heed because they know me. Everybody knows me. I was invisible to them.

And not only to them. The System did not bid me good morning. It did not speak to me at all last night. I recall rocks striking my helmet, and I know what must have happened.

I feel a cold chill, an emptiness in my chest. The System has been my lifeline; it has always been there. Now, I am truly alone. I should go straight to a medical facility, pay to have my port repaired. It is my duty. It is my only option. The System port connects directly to my brain; a malfunction could have lethal consequences for me.

But at the same time, I am strangely exhilarated. The System has no hold over me anymore, no way of tracking my movements. I am free.

It does not take Ethridge long to disabuse me of that notion.

Had I not reported for work, he would have noted my absence and informed the Harrowers. They would have found me: my bulk, my fame and my distinctive armor would have made it impossible for me to hide. So, nothing has really changed.

Ethridge arrives to inspect Shaft 4d at first break. His olive-colored face turns a deep red, and he can hardly speak for spluttering. He demands to know why nobody told him about yesterday's fall-in. I shoulder the blame for that decision, explaining that I went to his hut but thought it best not to interrupt his meeting. His eyes widen, flicking toward me and then quickly away. He looks worried. He's wondering how much I heard, what I might have seen.

His guilt undermines his confidence. He mutters some vague threat about what he'll do if we don't make up for lost time, but he gives in to my insistence that we can go no farther without first shoring up the tunnel roof. He may have little regard for our lives, but as Tench astutely points out, a more serious collapse would set him back by days or weeks.

By late afternoon, we are ready to start expanding the tunnel again. But thoughts of the future still prey upon my mind, and I cannot settle into my clockwork rhythm.

I ask Tench what he knows about Reptos. He raises an eyebrow, surprised by my apparent desire for small talk, but I ignore his unvoiced questions. “Vicious creatures,” he pants between falls of his pick. “Products of some kind of experiment, so I heard. Meant to be intelligent these days, but you scratch the scales and they're still killers underneath.”

“You have encountered them?”

Tench nods. “Back when I was a kid, yeah. In a bar on Acheron. The old man had dragged me in there, set me down at a table in the corner. Had some business to sort out, if you know what I mean. These three Reptos, they just strutted in. Whole place went quiet. You could see from the off that they wanted trouble. The poor guy at the bar, he couldn’t do anything right. Then the Reptos went up to this young couple and just demanded they clear out.”

“Did nobody stand up to them?”

“Might have been better if they hadn’t. But yeah, there was this one guy, fancied himself a Galactic Defender or something. He gave those lizards exactly what they wanted.”

“He must have been very brave.”

“Or stupid. He was outnumbered. I didn’t see much of what happened next—soon as the claws started flying, I jumped under the table, till Dad came for me and carried me out of there. But I remember one thing: I looked back from the doorway, and I dearly wish I hadn’t. The Reptos, they were tearing into anyone by then. And one of them had this Kronos pinned up against the bar, and you know how the Kronos creatures have these long, spindly necks, right? This lizard clamped its teeth around that neck and it...it just...” He shudders. “Green blood. Green blood, spraying everywhere, and this head in the Repto’s mouth, and its eyes were still open, staring at me...”

Tench has stopped working. He has closed his eyes as if to block out the memory. I did not mean to upset him, but I do not know what to say to make it better. Presently, he looks at me again. “You know,” he says, “when the old man told us we were coming here, to Micropolis, the first thing I said to him was, I asked if there were any Reptos here. Over three years later, it was, and I still had nightmares about them. ’Course, I didn’t know then that he was on the run from the Galactic Defenders, that his so-called business had blown up in his face. I didn’t know that Ki offered asylum to small-time crooks if he thought they were fit enough to work for him. I didn’t know that, once you came to Micropolis, you don’t leave.” He smiles wanly. “Guess there are worse things out there than Reptos, after all.”

Another day. A day like all the others, at first, but for the continuing silence of the System. No sign of Ryan Archer at the elevator, but I think I see him more than once on the street, hiding in the crowd, following me. Watching me.

Tench greets me with a weak smile at the tunnel entrance, and I nod in return. We walk to Shaft 4d side by side. We exchange no words, but I feel a certain kinship between us. Persephone aside—and my relationship with her feels very different—I have not experienced such a thing before. I know that Tench has not plugged in for several weeks, saving his credits to provide for his family in the event of his death. Perhaps it is because we are both cut off from the System that once succored us that we have reached out to each other.

He told me a great deal about himself yesterday. I find myself wishing that I could return his confidence.

We have been digging for an hour when my pick dislodges a large chunk of stone, which falls away from me. The echo as it lands tells me that I have broken into a large open space, and attracts my co-worker’s attention. As the dust clears, Tench and I peer through the jagged opening, the beams from our helmet lights swallowed by the deep darkness beyond.

“A natural cavern, do you think?” breathes Tench.

I shake my head. “Ethridge mentioned a chamber.”

Tench frowns at me, and I take a deep breath and tell him about the conversation I overheard at the foreman's hut. He is wondering why I did not confide in him earlier—I can see it in his eyes—but he does not know what part the Reptos play in my future. That part of the story, I keep to myself. I have not even been able to tell Persephone about it yet.

“This is what we're looking for,” I conclude, nodding toward the tiny opening. “This is what the Reptos want.” I pause for a moment, before adding: “We should report it to Ethridge.”

“We should,” agrees Tench.

We look at each other.

Then we raise our picks and set about the rock face with renewed enthusiasm.

We work through our first break. Even Tench does not flag, displaying a vigor I have not seen in him for many months. Our discovery has gifted us with an unaccustomed sense of purpose; I wonder how long it can last. We cannot keep this chamber a secret. The best we can hope is that we will be able to see for ourselves what so is important to the Reptos.

We think it best to take our usual half-hour lunch break, rather than arouse suspicion by staying underground. Neither of us eat, though; we sit on wooden stools outside and say nothing as co-workers trudge to and from the local food dispensary.

“I was about to inspect your shaft,” growls Ethridge in our direction. “I hope you've got a bit farther than you had yesterday.” I assure him that we have worked hard, and extended the tunnel by a good distance. I hope this will satisfy him, keep him away a while longer.

Forty minutes later, I squeeze my muscular form into the chamber at last.

It is huge. I am halfway across it before my lightbeam finds the far wall. The chamber is triangular in shape, caked in dust and cobwebs. Racks of wooden shelving stand against each of the three walls, but they are empty. A smaller triangle is formed by three flat-topped consoles in the center of the room. Tentatively, I sweep the dust from one of them with my fingertips until I can make out faint symbols on the controls beneath. They are pictograms, indecipherable to me.

Turning, I am startled by a broad-shouldered figure behind me. It is Tench. I expected him to wait outside, although we made no such arrangement. He has pulled down his smog mask, and his eyes search the dark room, wide with wonder.

“Will you look at this!” he whistles. “How old is this place? Must have been built by the Pharoids. We must be the first people to set foot here in centuries.”

It is well known that the Pharoids occupied this world, plotting their rebellion against the Emperors of old. That was before the Time Traveler; before one of those Emperors made this his Throne-World and built Micropolis on their graves. At least two of them have appeared in the city, fallen through the time breaks. They were taken by the Harrowers and never seen again. The System tells us that they are working with Ki, revealing to him the secrets of the advanced technology that was lost when their sect passed from the view of mortal eyes. Translation: Ki has had them tortured for what information they might have. I have yet to see evidence that they have told him anything.

My light finds a corner of the room, and an upright sarcophagus. The stylized image of a Pharoid priest is painted on the wooden lid in blue and gold. I recall old legends that the Pharoids didn't die, they simply retreated into Time Chambers—cryo-crypts—passing the centuries in ageless sleep until the

time is right to rise again. Therefore, I approach the casket with care, wishing not for the first time that I had a weapon in my hand. The lid is surprisingly light, and I throw it back, feeling a little foolish to find nothing behind it. Still, there are two more sarcophagi—one in each of the other corners—and I check them, too.

Maybe it is not yet the Pharoids' time.

Tench has found a hatch in the ceiling, too high to reach. "Must've been the original entrance," he mutters. "We have to be—what?—four, five stories underground. There could be more chambers above this one."

"It is unlikely," I say. "As I recall, Ki used scanning equipment to pinpoint this particular air pocket." Once, maybe, this room served as a sub-basement to some great edifice: a Pharoid pyramid, such as has been unearthed elsewhere. Any such building certainly fell, though, when the surface of this world was raped. Whatever the Reptos want, it must be in here. I return my attention to the three consoles. Standing between them, I reach out to the nearest. I brush cobwebs away to get a closer look at its markings.

As soon as my hand touches the instruments, the lights come on.

I see no light source. The walls themselves appear to be giving off an orange luminescence; the consoles, too. Patterns of color flash across the keys, and now the cobwebs are melting. The machinery looks sparkling new. I step back, into the center of the triangle, and I can feel the earth vibrating deep below my feet.

Suddenly, I am surrounded by three walls of bright white light, trapped. I see Tench reaching out toward me in alarm, but then he is gone. I whirl around, and the light parts to show me that the dust has lifted from the shelves and they are laden with ornate vases and figurines. I see masked Pharoids, their features set in gold. Images of other times, collapsing into each other. A sarcophagus bursts open, an undead creature springing from the space that was empty a moment ago. Its headdress and robes have rotted, as surely as has its flesh; its eyes are hollow sockets. But, as it jerks forward, time moves in reverse and it gains life and youth. And then it, too, is swallowed by the light.

I see the Time Traveler, floating in front of me, beyond the curtain of light. This half-legendary figure, so long a part of my life but always distant, untouchable—and now he is within arm's reach. And he sees me. He seems to know me. He reaches out to me in a mute appeal for help, but his hand dissolves as it touches the light, reforming as he pulls it away. He's falling away from me, as if some dark vortex is sucking at him, and he's shouting something—something important—but I can't hear him.

I see a ladder. The hatch in the ceiling is open, and a wooden ladder stretches from it to the ground. Standing at its base: six figures, translucent ghost images. I realize, with a start, that one of them is me.

I stare at my own ghost. He is brandishing an energy sword. His bearing is proud, and I know that he is not Kel Nanissar. He is Acroyear. Am I looking into my past? Or my future? I stand amazed at the sight of Persephone at his side, wearing a blue battlesuit.

They can't see me. But then, like the Time Traveler before him, Acroyear becomes aware of my presence. He stiffens and turns, and looks right at me.

And then he vanishes, and I reach out to him, but my hand passes through the light and my body follows it. I stumble back into the present, into the orange-lit chamber, unchanged but for the addition of a pyramid of light, which hovers between the consoles behind me. Shadows seem to shift beneath its surface as the pyramid rotates slowly, but any shapes I can make out therein must surely be the product of my own imagination.

Tench is beside me, wanting to know what happened, if I have been harmed. I tune out his words of concern, angry with myself. I was shown something. I think it was important. I should have been objective, quicker to collect myself. I should have analyzed every detail of the fleeting image, committed it to memory. Persephone aside, I am left with only the vaguest impressions of the ghost Acroyear's companions. Two of them, I think, were mechanical in nature—a squat, blank-faced combat droid and a hulking, red-chested robot. The third had four arms and purple skin, and looked like an Antron. And the fourth...the fourth could not have been...two arms, two legs, dark brown hair... Archer?

Ryan Archer?

I am still dealing with that thought, trying to bring the face of the sixth figure into focus in my mind, when Tench stiffens and gasps.

It takes a second for the sound of a gunshot to register on my senses. Then, Bilan Tench collapses into my arms, the back of his coveralls blackened and melted, the skin beneath in a similar state, the gaping wound already cauterized.

Ethridge is standing in front of the hole to Shaft 4d, his oxygen mask slung around his neck. Smoke still curls upward from the muzzle of his snub-nosed, handheld blaster. He glares as he turns the weapon to cover me. "You've just cost me a good worker, Nanissar." I am speechless. All I can feel is the cold weight of my friend's corpse; all I can see is the barrel of the gun. "You are responsible for his being here, I take it? It was your idea to explore this chamber without reporting to me first? Of course it was. I know you've been spying on me, Nanissar. I know you eavesdropped on my meeting with the Reptos' representative. Well, Baron Ki has made it quite clear to me what I should do with anyone who learns too much."

I lay Tench down gently, white light from the rotating pyramid washing over his face. His eyes are open, staring, so I close them. When I am satisfied that he looks peaceful, I raise myself to my full height and advance upon his murderer.

Blanching, Ethridge takes two steps backwards but collides with the wall. He thumbs his safety catch in a pointless threat: We both know that, unlike the Harrowers' armaments, his smaller blaster cannot do me much harm. "Just...just think yourself lucky," he says quickly, "that he made an exception in your case. Don't...don't ask me why, but the Baron doesn't seem to mind you knowing his secrets. He even said it might be...fun."

He fires as I reach him. The point-blank shot feels like a kick to my chest, and my armor glows with heat.

I snatch the gun from Ethridge's grasp. I turn it around, my gloved fingers fitting clumsily around the trigger, and press it against his forehead. He is trembling, almost hyperventilating, his eyes brimming with tears. He cannot even find the voice to beg for his life. He has always been confident, so sure of himself and his position. He has always had control over me. I look down at him, and I see for the first time what a weak man he truly is.

I let the blaster fall from my hand.

He takes a deep breath, and swallows. "I... I... you've made the right choice, Nanissar. The only sensible choice. You know what the Baron would have done to you if you'd..."

I lash out, the flat of my hand striking Ethridge's throat, pinning him to the wall. His eyes bulge. He claws at my fingers, but cannot break my grip.

I press harder.

Ethridge forces out a strangled moan, and I think of Tench gasping for breath in the tunnel. He tries to push me away, and I think of Tench pushing me away from the rock fall. I feel bone crunching under my hand, and I remember having to reset Tench's shoulder.

He was my friend. My best friend, my only friend. I didn't even listen to his final words.

I don't know when Ethridge died. I thought I would. I thought I would be aware of the exact moment. I expected to have to make a conscious decision: to end my enemy's life or to show him mercy. I did not know what I would choose. But the choice has been taken out of my hands, and somehow it seems too easy. Too easy to kill. Too easy to change everything.

I let the body go, and it slides to the ground. A trickle of blood wells from its open mouth. I stare down at it, as if hoping that the sight will stir some strong emotion in me to sort out my conflicting feelings. There is nothing. I feel numb. The one thing of which I am certain is that I don't regret what I have done. I only regret that I didn't do it two days ago.

The question is, what do I do now? Now that I have crossed the line.

Persephone could advise me. But I don't know how to contact her. I am alone.

I cannot afford to be found here. I would be arrested for Ethridge's murder; most likely, for Tench's, too. I will not go back to that cell.

I stoop and retrieve Ethridge's blaster. I turn it over in my hands, examining it, a plan forming in my mind. I take one last look at my friend, and try to imagine that he is only sleeping. Then I step back through the hole that we made together, out into the tunnel.

I would have liked more time to explore the chamber. I would like to know the purpose of its machinery; if it is so important to Ki and the Reptos, then maybe it could be turned against them. But the longer I stay here, the greater the risk of discovery. Even if I could persuade the other miners to keep my secret—and there will always be one wretch prepared to sell out a fellow citizen for the promise of a few credits and the Baron's favor—Ethridge's disappearance will soon be noted in higher circles. Ki will be impatient for a progress report on his project. Anyway, I am no scientist. I am a laborer—and potentially, I flatter myself, a warrior after all. It is enough to know that the chamber *is* important to my enemies. And that I can keep it from them, for a few days at least.

Once my decision is made, I do not allow myself to think about it. I cannot afford to entertain doubts. I set to work, pulling and kicking at the mine prop that Tench and I erected only yesterday. It comes loose and falls, and I am showered with a fine layer of dirt. I back up along the tunnel, and aim my purloined blaster at the roof in front of the chamber entrance. I fire, once, twice, three times, and unleash an avalanche. And I am running again, trying to outpace the fury of the earth...only this time I am leaving Bilan Tench behind.

The second collapse was a great deal heavier than the first—far heavier than I anticipated. I started a chain reaction. It billowed up Shaft 4d, snapping at my heels, splintering two more props even as I passed under them. The entire mine shook, and I could only pray that I had not brought harm to any of the other workers.

They came to investigate, of course. They swarm up and down the shafts, fetching equipment, shouting to each other, galvanized by their concern for imagined victims whom they barely know. Victims who could have been them.

I listen to them from my hiding place: Shaft 4q—a narrow, winding tunnel that yielded no coal and was eventually abandoned. Nobody will look for me down here. Snatches of conversation tell me that my

colleagues have reached the logical conclusion: that Ethridge, Tench and I have all been buried. Nobody holds out much hope for our survival.

They will miss Tench. A few men opine, in hushed voices, that their lives will be better for the absence of Ethridge, but they realize that his replacement is unlikely to be better. My apparent death does not inspire reactions of either extreme, although in some ways it is seen as the most shocking of the three. Nobody thought it would happen to me.

Soon, the Harrowers arrive. They stomp about the tunnels, barking orders, making a lot of threats and generally hampering the recovery effort. They warn that Ki will have somebody's head for this setback—but, with all the people involved presumed dead, they cannot say whose it will be.

I sit in the darkness, alone, thinking but reaching few conclusions.

Hours pass. The voices die down. Eventually, all I can hear is the rhythmic tapping of picks and shovels from Shaft 4d. A special late shift, working to clear the blockage. The Harrowers have imposed a deadline of one day to complete this task, and I'm fairly certain that at least two of them stayed to oversee the work. One man tried to tell them that, unless Ki sanctions the use of explosives, it will take ten days or more to get back to where we were this morning. For his troubles, he received a warning shot. To the left foot.

I slip out into the dark evening, hurry across the empty gravel pit, and scramble up the steep ramp to street level. I keep my head down as I walk back to my apartment building. I try not to skulk—that would only draw attention to me—but I use the narrow back streets wherever I can; areas where the lights at the information points are likely to be out of commission. Inconspicuous I may not be, but the citizens of Micropolis are used to seeing me. I will leave no impression on most; the rest will report seeing me tonight only if questioned, and why would they be?

Still, I breathe a sigh of relief as I reach my small room at last. Safe, for now. So long as the System cannot detect me, the Baron has no reason to believe me alive. I have time to think, and the element of surprise if I need it.

I stare out of my window at the Time Traveler, and suddenly he feels like my foe, too. I will not accept his future, the future he has already seen. I will take charge of my own destiny.

I seem to have decided to fight.

The only question is: How do I start?

CHAPTER FOUR

It begins with a knock at my door.

My eyes snap open. It is late. Who would dare break curfew to call on me? Persephone, maybe, but she has her own keycard.

The sound comes again. A gentle but persistent tapping. I hold my breath. If I am quiet enough, then my unwanted visitor might leave.

But then, a hushed voice sounds through the wood. "Kel? Kel, open up, will you? I know you're in there. Kel...I'm feeling kind of dumb, standing out here talking to myself. Kel?" A short pause. "Acroyear?"

I leap off my bed, cross the room in two strides, and pull the door open. A startled Ryan Archer recoils

from the threshold.

I glance up and down the hallway, but nobody is watching. I grab the youth by the front of his coveralls, drag him into my room, and kick the door shut.

“Who are you?” I snarl. “How did you know I was here?”

“I saw you,” bleats Archer. “I saw you coming in. And then...then, I got this news flash from the System. It said you were...there’d been a collapse at your mine...”

He knows where I work. “You have been watching me,” I growl.

“I was worried about you.”

“Have you been watching me?”

“Well... yes.”

I blink, taken aback by the frank confession, not sure how to deal with it.

Archer plays nervously with his hands. “I don’t know where to start. I...I don’t live here. In Micropolis, I mean. My System port, it’s a fake. I found an empty apartment in your building, and... The thing is, Kel, I came here looking for you.”

“Why?”

“You won’t remember, I know, but you and me...we were friends, once.”

I regard him with suspicion. “We did not meet until a few days ago. You showed no sign, then, that you recognized me.”

“I wanted to take it slow. I’ve got a pretty far-out story, and...well, I don’t know how you’ll take it. I don’t know who you are in this...” His voice tails off, and he gives me a guilty look, as if he has said too much. I remember the ghost images in the Pharoids’ chamber. Myself, Archer, and Persephone.

“You pushed that note under my door.”

He nods. “That woman you’ve been hanging with. Persephone.”

“You know her?”

“We’ve met. You know who her father is?”

“She is an orphan.”

“Her adoptive father. The name Karza ring any bells?”

“It does not.”

“I’d keep my eye on her, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Persephone has helped me. She is my friend. If you have evidence to the contrary...”

“I don’t,” says Archer. “It’s just that...I *do* know her. I know what she can be like. She uses people. Uses them for what she can get out of them.”

“She has not mentioned you.”

“She wouldn’t. She won’t remember me, same as you don’t.” I look at Archer askance, and he grimaces as if realizing the implausibility of his story. “And look, maybe I don’t know her either,” he says quickly. “At least, not as well as I think I do. She might be a good person now. I think she had that potential, deep down. Maybe, without Karza’s influence...”

“What do you know about the Reptos?” I ask.

He frowns. “Never heard of them.”

“Then what do you want from me?”

“I need your help.”

“Ah. Then it is not only Persephone who wishes to use me.”

“No. I mean, it’s not just me. It’s the whole world. Everyone.”

“I’m tired of this.” My voice acquires a threatening rumble in my chest. “I am tired of being told what I must do, how I must sacrifice my future. Let somebody else fight Ki. Let somebody else die for the sake of this miserable city!”

“It’s not like that,” insists Archer. “This isn’t about Ki or Reptos or whatever else you’ve got going on. This isn’t about your future. It’s about your past. *Our* past.”

“Explain.”

“I’ll try, but, like I said, it’s pretty incredible. I didn’t believe it myself at first. But...but have you ever felt like this isn’t the way things ought to be? Like history took a wrong turn somewhere, and brought you here when you should be...I don’t know...somewhere else?”

“I belong in Micropolis.”

“No. No, you don’t. That’s the System talking. The Acroyear I know—”

“Was a noble warrior,” I snap. I am tired of hearing this, too; tired of being measured by his standards and found wanting. “But the past has gone.”

“I’m not talking about the past,” says Archer. “Well, not exactly. It’s complicated.” He moves to the window, and stares out of it. I do not have to follow his gaze to see what he is looking at; I have spent many hours staring in that direction myself. “It’s something to do with the Time Traveler. He’s been trying to contact me, through my dreams. He says there’s something wrong with time, and I believe him. He shows me a world where I...where we fought side by side. He says we have to—”

He breaks off in mid-sentence, ducking below the windowsill. “Harrowers!” he cries.

I hear it. The distinctive whine of an antigravity engine. The technology is expensive, and Ki distributes it sparingly. I have no doubt that Archer tells the truth, that he has seen a Photon Sled. I flatten myself against the wall. An instant later, the room is drenched with light and a voice sounds through a megaphone. “We know you’re in there, Nanissar. Come to the window with your hands above your head.”

I glare at Archer. “Have you done this? Have you brought them here?”

“No, I swear—”

“Is this why you came here? To keep me occupied while they surrounded me?”

“I...I think they saw me...”

The sound of shattering glass. A small, spherical grenade flies through the window and lands on my pallet, hissing, turning the air a thick green. Archer begins to cough and splutter. My helmet protects me for now, but it cannot filter out all the gas. Already, its acrid tang is tearing at the back of my throat, coaxing tears from my eyes.

How did they know I was here? Maybe they don’t; maybe they are guessing.

I should have known that Ki would not let go of his future so easily.

I make a lunge across the room, and grab Ethridge's blaster from the chair beside my bed. I spin around and loose off three shots through the broken window. The sled banks away, taking its bright light with it. I am temporarily blind, my night-vision destroyed. Still, I feel my way to my closet and fumble inside it. If I have to abandon this room, I can't stand the thought of leaving the manuscript behind. I fold it up and slip it into my boot.

Archer is breathing through a tissue, but he looks ready to drop. He is stumbling to the door when it flies open in front of him. Two Harrowers burst in, wearing oxygen masks. Archer's presence distracts them. As they aim their guns at him, I leap out of the teargas cloud beside them, firing. My blaster is not much more effective against their armor than it was against mine, but the sudden onslaught surprises and staggers them, giving me time to reach them.

The first Harrower goes down easily. His helmet, even with its chin guard, is not strong enough to absorb my punch. The second, however, gets behind me and fires at my exposed back. Fire courses through my nervous system, and I roar in animal pain. I spin around and snatch the gun from the Harrower's hands, crushing it in my grip. To his credit, I detect no fear in him—but he sees that he can't win, and tries to withdraw. I bring him down with a tackle in the doorway, driving my fist into his skull until he ceases his struggles.

I drop my gun, to scoop up the bigger blaster dropped by the first Harrower. My stomach convulses. The teargas is starting to get to me. I stagger out into the corridor, wishing I could take off my helmet and gulp in clean air.

I hear a scuffling behind me. Archer has just dragged himself out of the room, doubled over. He tries to call to me, hoarsely, but he gives up and vomits into the corner.

I still don't know who he is. I don't know if I can trust him. The Harrowers did not go out of their way to protect him, but then they have always been ruthless. I would like to hear the rest of his story. But what if I did? Would I be forced to choose between him and Persephone?

I don't want to believe him. My life is complicated enough, and my heart has already made its decision. I turn, intending to leave my erstwhile neighbor behind.

"Acroyear!" he splutters after me. "I have a ship." Each syllable causes him evident pain. He is reaching out to me, unable to get up off his knees. "We can get...away from..."

Away from Micropolis. I had not contemplated such an option. I feel as if he has shot a steel bolt through my chest, skewering me to the spot.

"How..." I begin hesitantly. "How did you get past the Harrowers' blockade?" But Archer's efforts at speech thus far have exhausted him. His arms are fastened around himself, and he is retching and wheezing, his swollen eyes closed.

Could it be possible? Could I leave Micropolis and its problems behind me? Could I start over, somewhere else, a free man? It seems inconceivable, but then that is what the System wants me to think. This may be a lie, but if so, it is a seductive one. It is one that I do not wish to let go. Not until I can be sure, until I know the truth.

I go back for Ryan Archer. I pick him up and sling him over my shoulder.

The elevator is rattling its way towards this floor, no doubt filled with Harrowers. There will be more on the stairs, but I have nowhere else to go. No other way out.

I have descended almost three flights before I hear the first shots above me. I keep my head down and keep moving. I can't stand and fight, not while I am carrying Archer. Fortunately, I have enough distance on my enemies for the winding staircase to block their aim—and they will tire before I do.

Two stories later, their blasters fall silent, although their footsteps continue. My flight has settled into a regular pattern, one foot before the other, rounding the same corners time and time again until I can almost imagine that the staircase has no end. I can breathe freely now, but the teargas has taken its toll upon my constitution, and my chest aches.

The footsteps are receding, at last, but I can hear more now: Ahead of me, no more than three flights down. At least eight more Harrowers to add to the ones behind me. It is too soon. I am still forty stories above ground level, less than halfway there.

They have seen me. Streams of fire explode against the wall above my head, and destroy the stair rail. I barge through the nearest door, emerging into a corridor identical to the one outside my own apartment. I had no choice but to come here, but I am cornered now. I pause to get my bearings, to think.

Archer starts to squirm on my shoulder. I order him to be still. I kick open a door, and stride across the apartment beyond it. A blue-skinned woman squeals as she sits up in bed, clutching the sheets to her chest. The System, unable to detect my presence, tells her to go back to sleep, reminding her that her work period begins soon.

I look out of the room's single window. Another concrete tower stands beside this one, separated from it only by a narrow alleyway. I see no sign of the sled; presumably, it is still at the front of the building. There is no fire escape ladder; such precautions were considered an unnecessary expense. There is only the sheer drop.

The window won't open, so I throw a chair at it. The shattering of glass merges with the woman's scream. I punch the remaining sharp fragments out of the window frame, climb onto the sill and set my sights on the window opposite.

The jump would be difficult, even without Archer to weigh me down. I am not sure I can make it. But the Harrowers will be here soon, and I have nowhere else to go.

I flex my leg muscles, hold my breath, and propel myself into the night air.

For a moment, I rejoice in my apparent weightlessness. I feel as if I am flying, as if nothing can bring me down. But it is only an illusion. I am falling, and the window—my target—is escaping from me, rising above me. I reach out to it, desperately. My questing fingers find the sill, and I collide face first with the concrete wall and almost lose my tentative grip.

Archer is crying out to his god, tightening his hold on me in his fear. I haul myself up until I can rest one elbow on the windowsill and punch out the glass. The Harrowers have reached the window behind us, but I cannot imagine that any of them will dare try to follow me. I flop into the apartment of another startled citizen amid a hail of fire.

A minute later, I am racing down another staircase. Archer has recovered enough to run alongside me, but he slows me down and I find myself having to pull him by the hand. I pray that I can still reach the street before the Harrowers do. Even if I do, I realize, I will find the Photon Sled waiting, and its crew will have called for reinforcements now that they have a positive sighting of their quarry. The voices in my head are clamoring at me, suggesting other options, reminding me of the capabilities of my armor.

Fourth floor. This is as far as I go. I shoulder my way into another apartment, and pick up the panting Archer. "Oh, no," he groans, "please, not again..."

I smash through the window, and I'm flying over the alleyway again, but this time the ground is

rushing toward me. Without thinking about it, without knowing where the idea came from, I perform a midair somersault. Halfway over, I experience a moment of panic; I think I'm going to hit the concrete headfirst. But I come out of the roll, having altered the angle of my fall so that it terminates in an overflowing Dumpster. The impact is jarring, but somewhat cushioned by my armor and a little more by a thick pile of garbage. I am unharmed. As I fight my way out of a clinging mass of wet cardboard and rusted tin cans, Archer vomits again. His skin has acquired a decidedly green tint, but we can't afford to rest yet. I pluck him out of the Dumpster and set him down beside me.

The sled, as I anticipated, was waiting at the front of the building. Its searchlight finds us as we set off along the alleyway in the opposite direction. The pilot tilts his rocket-shaped, open-topped craft to fit it into the narrow passage; even so, sparks fly from its hull where its glider wings scrape the walls. This makes it difficult for the other two crewmembers to aim the onboard plasma cannons. Balls of flame whoosh over my head, or explode at my heels. Amid the tumult, it takes me a moment to realize that I am leaving Archer behind again. He is limping, having evidently injured his leg in our fall. I entertain the notion of abandoning him, to save myself, but the voices reassure me of my ability to protect us both.

I extend a hand to him, and let him lean on my shoulder. And he throws himself against me, catching me off-balance, knocking us both aside. He saves me from the next blast: it hits so close that I feel the air imploding. My breath is sucked from my lungs, and a wave of intense heat passes over us. An instant later, we are showered in concrete chips.

It had occurred to me that Ki would want me alive. If that is the case, and if these Harrowers are indeed aware of it, then they are evidently worse shots than I thought they were.

The alleyway leads onto a wide street, dark and empty, where we have no hope of outpacing the sled. I look for somewhere to run, somewhere it cannot follow, but there is nowhere. Only into the buildings, where we would be cornered again. I weave between information points and parked vehicles, but the sled overcomes such obstacles by gaining height. It sits above us, and all I can see when I look up is a circle of dazzling light. I switch to a more direct course, hurtling down the center of the roadway, trusting to fortune.

There are no more plasma bolts—but, so long as the sled is on our tail, its crew can relay our position to their ground-based colleagues. Harrowers stream from the side streets like Antrons swarming toward sugar. I take one down with a snap shot from my blaster, but their answering fire comes close to nailing me in turn. I take Archer on a detour through a plug-in center, shooting the door off its hinges before I reach it. I remember that this building has a back entrance, which takes us out into another alleyway. I am about to turn left, when Archer tugs at my arm, pulling me to the right.

"Trust me," he says, "I have a kind of instinct about this sort of thing." There is no time to argue; one way is as good as another, in my eyes.

We emerge onto another street, which we cross. The Harrowers are hot on our heels, so I take cover behind a sleek Warp Racer and pick them off as they emerge, one by one, from the opening behind us. Three more down. But the Photon Sled reappears, banking around the corner of a building two blocks away. I think about taking the racer, but even on clear roads, Micropolis's antique vehicles move slowly, and we would have no hope of escape.

The sight of a Terraphant depot gives me inspiration. Its double doors are secured by an old padlock and chain, but one shot dispenses with them. I drag my exhausted charge into the echoing gloom of a high-ceilinged garage. Around us, hulking shapes are beginning to stir and snuffle.

"Acroyear," moans Archer, "I hope you know what you're doing."

I don't answer. I see no reason to add to his worries. Anyway, we must be silent: The Terraphants were bred to carry passengers, and for the most part they are content to do so—but they are notoriously prickly, especially when their rest is disturbed.

We tiptoe around the half-dozing creatures. At the far side of the garage, we find a row of wooden tethering posts, set into the stone floor. The Terraphants are tied up with rope, three or four to a post. The quickest way to free them is to blast those posts. I do so, working my way from one end of the row to the other, ignoring Archer's squeal of protest. The Terraphants are awoken, startled and freed, all at once. Their snorts and grunts fill the garage. I push Ryan Archer into a corner, and shield him with my armored body.

"Make no sudden moves!" I instruct him in an urgent whisper.

Fortunately, my timing is perfect. The outer doors are thrown open again, and three Harrowers storm in, freezing as they see what awaits them. The confused Terraphants see a route to freedom, and they take it.

The ferocity of the stampede is such that the floor shakes. The Harrowers are able to let off four shots between them, making the situation worse for themselves. It is difficult to make out what is happening—I can see little more than shifting silhouettes against the faint shape of the doorway—but I hear a scream, and fancy that I see a black-clad body tossed into the air, to be caught in a Terraphant's jaws.

Within thirty seconds, the depot has been emptied. Cries of alarm and the retorts of blaster fire from outside indicate that the Harrowers will be occupied for some time. I make for a back window, pausing to snatch a thick loop of rope from a hook on the wall.

"Which way?" I ask Archer. He looks at me dumbly. "To your ship," I prompt him.

"I'm not sure. I've lost my bearings."

"What happened to this 'instinct' of yours?"

"I..." He closes his eyes, and puts a hand to his temple, then points. "That way...I think."

As we cross the boundary into Sector Seven, I allow myself a brief hope that we may have shaken off our pursuers. But the Photon Sled is waiting for us—and with no Harrowers nearby on the ground, its crew take to the cannons again. I am certain, this time, that they are not trying to hit me, and I keep Archer close to my side, to share in my apparent invulnerability. The Harrowers are hoping that a barrage of plasma bolts will herd us back the way we came, but I override my natural caution to plow on through the flames.

We take shelter in the deep doorway of a food dispensary. The sled keeps its distance, its pilot waiting to see what we will do as, no doubt, he summons more ground troops. Archer leans against the doorframe, panting; he can't hold out much longer.

"What are your instincts telling you now?" I grunt, as I tie one end of my rope into a lasso.

"Only that we're screwed."

The Harrowers become impatient, as I gambled they would. I cannot see the sled, but I can hear its engine, its whine growing louder as it descends, coming closer, ever closer...

I break cover. The Photon Sled is right above me, its gravity downdraft pressing down on me, driving me into the ground. With difficulty, I raise my head, whip the lasso back over my shoulder and hurl it over the vehicle's nosecone. The sled pilot realizes, too late, that he has flown into a trap, he pulls up sharply. At the same time, I run across the road, uncoiling the rope behind me. I wrap the final meter or

so around my hands, and brace myself behind a large, six-wheeled vehicle as it is pulled taut.

At first, the Harrowers don't know what is happening. Their craft rocks from side to side as its pilot tilts and swerves, trying to climb but forever being pulled back down. His erratic course swings him perilously close to the buildings beside him. Then he sees me, his living anchor, and he cranks his engine to full power and flies directly away from me. I hold on to the rope, gritting my teeth, straining with every sinew to maintain my position. I am almost flattened against the side of the six-wheeler, and even it is beginning to slide, slowly but inexorably—inch by painful, squealing inch—sideways across the road. The pain is blinding. I am being torn apart.

And then the rope goes slack, and I think it must have snapped—until I realize that my opponent has surrendered the tug-of-war, reversing his direction. He is coming right at me.

I dive, forcing my howling muscles to move. The rope slips from my hands, as was surely the sled pilot's intention. I hit the sidewalk, rolling as the arrow-headed craft shoots over me. I curse myself for my moment of weakness, but the pilot has made a deadlier mistake: He has misjudged his speed and trajectory, and he cannot turn in time. One wing of the sled crumples as it smacks into the fifth floor of a storage building above me. I hear windows breaking, an engine shrieking, and the vehicle lurches out into the middle of the road, trailing its broken wing like a wounded insect. It almost flips over, but the pilot is able to right it in time. For a second, it looks like he might have regained control. But then, the sled tips over and takes a nosedive into the asphalt.

I run, yelling to Archer to do likewise. I can't see him, so I do not know if he heard me. A moment later, it is too late to do anything about it. Antigravity is a non-combustible, non-polluting fuel source—but the mixture that powers the sled's plasma cannons is notoriously unstable. The explosion shatters every window on the block, and knocks me off my feet. I lie on my stomach, covering my head as I am pelted with flaming debris.

Some people have come to their broken windows, staring in horror at the scene of devastation below them. Most, however, stay cowering in their beds, mindful of the fact that Ki has had citizens executed in the past for seeing things they were not meant to see.

I plunge into the mushrooming cloud of smoke, and almost stumble over the unconscious Archer. He does not seem badly hurt; weak as he was, I expect he was knocked out by the sheer concussive force of the blast. I pick him up and carry him away, but by the time we reach the end of the street, I am almost ready to pass out myself. I drop my charge through the shattered window of a plug-in center, hoping that nobody will find him there before he has a chance to recover. Already, more Harrowers are rushing toward me; I have to draw them away from him.

I heft my blaster, draw on my scant remaining energy reserves, and run at them, firing.

Ryan Archer never told me where his spaceship was. How will I ever find him again?

The Harrowers scatter like tenpins as I bowl into them. I lash out with fists and feet, not caring where the blows land so long as they hit something. They pile on top of me, their numbers multiplying. They cannot use their guns at such close quarters, but they pummel me and claw at me and try to bear me down to the ground, and I don't know how it is that I am still standing, how I can resist them at all. I can no longer see. I am overcome by a scarlet mist; I am not even sure that my eyes are still open. Long-buried instincts take over; the voices in my head scream at me to keep on fighting. I give in to them, because if I stop for a second, if I question what I am doing, then I will surely fail.

The mist lifts, some time after I realize that I have been punching air.

Slowly, my sight returns, and I see the bloodied Harrowers sprawled at my feet.

Somehow, this does not seem real. How can it be possible? I feel as if the world is turning beneath me, and I am no longer a part of it. I am watching from a distance, unable to understand what I see, feeling a heady mixture of triumph and revulsion. My chest is heaving, my muscles feel like spent elastic, and a familiar whining sound is impinging upon my hearing. With a plunging sense of despair, I turn to greet the arriving Photon Sled.

I cannot fight any more. I sink to my knees in surrender.

I dream about Persephone.

I do not want to wake up, because I know what will be waiting for me.

Gradually, however, I realize that there is no pain, no noise, no light. I think I have opened my eyes, but I can see nothing, so maybe I have not. I concentrate on what I can feel. A cushioned surface beneath me, softer than my pallet but harder than a mattress. A long seat—leather, I think, but narrow. I am too tall, my shoulders too broad, for it to hold me. My right arm hangs over its side, my fingers touching a metal floor, and my knees are bent.

She is with me. The familiar violet scent of her perfume plays with my nostrils. Is it real, I ask myself, or a lingering remnant of the dream?

She came to me out of the light, like an angel. She picked me up from the ground. I leaned on her, and she laid me gently on the back seat of her vehicle.

My neck is stiff, and I shift my position uncomfortably.

“You’re awake, at last.” Her voice. I had hardly dared hope. She *is* here. She is real.

I wondered, just for a moment, if Archer had been right. She was in a Photon Sled: was she working for Baron Ki, after all? Was she taking me to him?

“Where...where are we?” I struggle to sit up.

“An old mine tunnel,” says Persephone, “in Sector Fourteen.”

“This is your base?”

I can see her now; make out her shape, at least. She is in the front seat, turned to face me. She shakes her head, and her blonde hair dances. “I don’t have a base. The only way to stay ahead of the Harrowers is to keep on the move.”

“And the rest of the rebels? Are they here, too?”

“We’re all here, Nanissar.”

“Archer? Do you know what happened to Ryan Archer?”

“He’ll be the boy you went on the run with? I’m sorry. He was captured.”

“Did...did they...?”

“He is still alive, according to the System. Ki will want to question him. After that, I wouldn’t give much for his chances.”

“We have to rescue him!”

“Attack the Harrowers’ headquarters? Have you taken leave of your senses?”

“He tried to help me!”

“He is lost, Nanissar. Accept it!”

“He has a spaceship. He can take us away from here.”

“Has he, indeed?” Persephone narrows her eyes thoughtfully. I can see this, because my own eyes are becoming accustomed to the darkness. I can see the rough-hewn tunnel, stretching away behind her. And, seeing her strong face and her confident expression, I remember why I admire her so much. She always knows what to do. “If that is what you want, Nanissar, then I can provide it. How do you think I came to be here, on this godforsaken world? Did you really think I was one of Micropolis’s hopeless slaves?”

No. No, I didn’t. I did not think at all.

“But we have work to do, before we can leave.”

Her words crush me. I had begun to see an escape, but she has taken it from me.

“What do we have to do?” I ask, in a hollow voice.

“Destroy the System!” she says.

“No!” The protest comes automatically. “We cannot!”

“That is what the System tells you.”

“No. I mean, we *won’t*. The Reptos, they’ll...” I bury my head in my hands, more confused than ever. I think about the news sheet, folded up in my boot, and I bring its printed truths to mind. The Reptos turn against Ki. They attack the System. I fight them. I die.

But what if the news sheet is wrong? It is not inconceivable: much of its content is based on conjecture. It occurs to me that, by burying the Pharoid chamber and its secrets, I have already driven a wedge between Ki and his impatient allies. The future is unfolding before me; even when I try to take charge of my own fate, I only seem to bring it closer.

In the future, Ki will blame me for damaging the System, for plunging his city into chaos. Perhaps he will be telling the truth, after all.

“Do not weaken now,” snaps Persephone. “You have done well so far. I did not expect you to find yourself so soon.” She reaches down into the cockpit, and produces something that makes a scraping sound as she lifts it. She passes it to me, and I take it. As my hand closes around it, it starts to glow.

It is a sword: half as long as I am tall, but I can lift it easily. Its pommeled hilt feels comfortable in my palm, like a part of me, like I’ve grown back a limb that had been amputated. And the blade burns now with a pure white light, although darker matter collects at its keen edges. With a sword like this, I know I could cut through anything.

He wielded a sword like this.

“You are ready for it,” says Persephone quietly. “You are Acroyear.”

“I...I can’t...” I can’t take my eyes off the sword. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You do, Nanissar. You only have to convince yourself of that. Listen to the voices.”

I start, looking up at her guiltily. How does she know about the voices?

She bathes me in a rare smile. “They are your heritage, Nanissar. Your people. They fought Ki alongside you. They strengthen you with the sum of their experience.”

“The armor,” I realize, breathlessly. “The voices were...in the armor? All this time?”

“They could not reach you. The System dampened your connection to them. It stopped you from listening. But the System has no hold over you now. Listen to them. Listen!”

I listen to the voices, and they tell me that Persephone is right. I am Acroyear. The hero of a dead people. I came to Micropolis seeking vengeance for their spilt blood. Instead, I was beaten and humiliated. But there will be a reckoning. I will honor their memory.

“I will do it,” I say. “I will be your hero, a figurehead for your rebellion.”

She shakes her head. “There is no rebellion, Nanissar. As I said before, we are all here.”

I stare at her.

“I also told you that one man can make a difference,” she says, “if he is the right man. I have faith in you, Nanissar. I have faith in Acroyear. You can destroy the System, and you can bring down Maruunus Ki. We need nobody else!”

CHAPTER FIVE

We leave the sled hidden in the mine. Persephone says it would attract too much attention in daylight. “You were lucky last night,” she tells me as we tramp through darkness, aiming for a distant pinpoint of light. “Had the Harrowers really expected to find you at home, they would have turned up in force.”

We halt just inside the tunnel entrance, and she slips a belt from around her waist and fastens it around mine. She twists a dial on its buckle, and, when I look down at myself again, I see a different person. I am still tall and muscular, but now I appear to be wearing standard issue coveralls, and I have pink skin on my ungloved hands.

“The belt projects a holographic field,” explains Persephone. “It will allow you to blend in with the other citizens.” I put a hand to my face, but it is blocked by my helmet. “The illusion is optical only. You mustn’t let anybody touch you. They would notice the discrepancy between the way you look and the way you feel.”

“I will be careful,” I promise. I can still feel the sword in my hand, but it is invisible now. I lift it, experimentally, and its blade reappears as it leaves the field.

“Be sure that you are. The Harrowers are combing the city for us. The System has offered a substantial reward for information leading to our capture. We can trust nobody.”

“They know about you?”

“You were in trouble; I was forced to act. Ki knows, now, that you have an accomplice. Fortunately, I was able to lose our pursuers last night, before they got a good look at me.”

“Archer...” I feel a lump in my throat. “He can identify you.”

Persephone’s nostrils flare. “You told him about me?”

“No,” I answer defensively. “He saw you at my apartment.”

She frowns. “I have only one holo-belt.”

“Then take it.”

“No. You are far more conspicuous than I am—and the System does not have a description of me yet. We’ll just have to trust the boy to hold out a while longer.”

“How do you know so much about the System? You haven’t...plugged in?”

“Of course I haven’t! Have you not noticed, Nanissar? I have no port.”

“Then...?”

She produces a small, square device, which nestles in the palm of her hand. It has a keyboard, and a miniature screen. It looks like a toy. “I don’t have to surrender my mind to the System to access its database. There are several back doors, if you know where to look for them.”

“That is how you were able to amend my records?”

“And acquire a Photon Sled without inviting questions. I programmed a blind spot into the System so that the vehicle simply vanished from its sensors. It will take the maintainers days to find out what I have done and activate the onboard tracer.”

“I have never seen such technology,” I say in awe.

Persephone’s lips curl into a snarl. “There are people out there, away from this cesspit—inventors, bio-smiths, technicians, programmers—brilliant men, working to improve our lives. Ki wouldn’t understand. All he cares about is maintaining his own power base. He shuns progress, lest it sweep him away like the insect he is!”

“You tapped into my credit account with that device,” I realize. “Can you get into other accounts? Can you transfer credits?”

“I can, but I don’t see—”

“Citizen Tench. Bilan Tench. He was a...friend of mine. He is dead now. I want you to ensure that his family is comfortable. They should not want for anything.”

“Every time I hack into the System, I risk detection,” flares Persephone. “You ask me to do it on a foolish whim?”

“It is the price of my cooperation,” I say firmly. She arches an eyebrow, and I realize that this is the first time I have stood up to her. I am not sure if she is angry or proud.

“You realize that, if we complete our mission, System credits will become worthless?”

“I do. But, if we fail...”

She sighs. “Very well.”

“And you can find us another vehicle?”

Persephone shakes her head. “From now on, we travel on foot. We are forty-eight miles from the System complex. Close enough to walk in two days; not so close that our plans will be obvious to Ki if the sled is recovered. We will also travel separately. The Harrowers are searching for a pair of fugitives.”

I nod, accepting her logic.

“We will meet two hours before curfew tomorrow night,” she adds. She takes a small, white gun from a pouch in her coveralls, and checks that it is loaded. “At the main gate of the Northern Quarter Refinery. Do you know it?”

“I will find it,” I say.

I study my reflection in a plug-in center window. I have a thatch of red hair, freckles on my pale skin,

and watery blue eyes. I try to imagine that this is my real face, that I am seeing myself for the first time, but the image does not seem real. It does not feel like me. Its expression does not change as mine does, although its sag reflects my doleful mood.

I look like any other citizen, in my coveralls and smog mask. They are not afraid of me anymore. They do not avoid me; few of them even spare me a glance. I have walked many times through the teeming crowds of the morning rush hour, but never have they closed in around me as they do now. I feel trapped, claustrophobic. I feel like one of them. I didn't realize it until this moment, but I have never felt like that before. I always thought I was different.

I try to avoid them, but they are everywhere. I am repeatedly jostled, but most people fail to register the feel of my armor beneath my disguise. One or two pairs of eyes flick toward me, but they shift quickly back to the ground, their owners afraid to get involved, to draw attention to themselves.

There is no time, during daylight, at which the streets are empty. People work different shifts, driving to and from their jobs at all hours. Trucks carry coal to the refineries, while delivery men struggle with sacks of correspondence between the bureaucrats who run the city's industries on the Baron's behalf. Citizens visit dispensaries during their staggered lunch breaks, the weakest of them snatching minutes in the plug-in centers. Still, sometimes the crowd around me thins out, and I think it best to go to ground for an hour or so. I break into an apartment while the owner is out, and rest on his bed. At one point in the afternoon, I even hide in the corner of a plug-in center, where nobody can see that I am not connected. I am pleased to find that the System terminal in front of me holds no temptation.

Evening draws in. The lights of the city lure people from their homes, and it becomes easy to lose myself again. I pause, for a moment, outside a rundown cinema. I recognize the movie being screened. I must have seen it a long time ago. It concerns the invasion of Micropolis by unknown aliens—beings who uncannily resemble the Galactic Defenders—and the heroic struggle of the incumbent Baron to save his people. Aiding the Baron in his quest is the Time Traveler, come to life because his city needs him. There are terrorists, too, of course, but they die. They always do. The feature was made on a shoestring—the Time Traveler was clearly a man wearing silver face paint—but I remember being mesmerized for an hour and a half.

Part of me longs for that simpler time.

I round a corner, and almost come up short at the sight of two Harrowers marching toward me. I have to will myself to keep walking. I have avoided Ki's police force so far—but, if I change direction now, if I move away from them, I will invite suspicion. I have to act natural, stare at the ground like everybody else, and trust the holo-belt to protect me.

I draw level with the Harrowers.

We pass each other.

One of them comes too close. I flinch from him, but I think he may have touched me. He might have brushed against my armor; I don't know.

I keep walking. I don't dare look behind me. I wait for the call.

Just when I think I am safe, it comes. "Hey, you, Citizen! Hold it right there!"

I freeze. I hear their footsteps behind me. I turn, slowly, one hand on the pommel of my invisible sword, which, for want of a scabbard, I have threaded through my belt.

The two Harrowers have stopped a young, purple-skinned woman with flowing white hair. She trembles as they take up positions to each side of her. "Where are you going?"

"I...I...I can't afford to visit a plug-in center. I was just...looking in the window..."

The shock batons come out. The young woman screams as electricity snaps through her.

“We’re looking for a young female,” snarls one of the Harrowers. “Acroyear’s accomplice! Is that why you’re loitering here? Are you waiting for him?”

“No, no,” she sobs. “I swear...”

I tear myself away from the dreadful scene. I can’t be noticed. I have to keep walking.

I have witnessed many similar sights: Harrowers, breaking up the monotony of their patrols by finding an innocent to victimize. I have felt like this before: This burning sense of injustice, made many times worse by the knowledge that I can do nothing. I must harden my resolve.

But, this time, it is about me. My name is being used to justify this cruelty.

And it has happened before. I had almost forgotten, but the memory comes now. When I first arrived in Micropolis, when my defeat was still fresh. When the Harrowers grew tired of using their batons on me, they would use them on those around me. Anyone could be targeted, branded a collaborator, just for walking too close to me, for glancing at me.

Never again!

The woman sobs. I keep on walking.

The crackle of a shock baton. I draw my blaster.

She screams. I turn. I fire.

The first Harrower falls before he even knows what is happening. But the second recovers quickly. He leaps behind a stationary vehicle, and lets off four shoots without really stopping to aim. A System information point explodes. This man doesn’t care who he hits, so long as he has a chance of hitting me. One more reason why I must end this fast.

The crowd scatters in panic, and the purple-skinned woman takes her chance to flee. I don’t think the Harrowers took her name; with luck, they won’t find her again. No one will be able to blame her for this. I vault over the vehicle, part of me enjoying the Harrower’s wide-eyed expression as I land gracefully beside him. He brings up his gun, but my hand moves faster. I snap his neck, freezing the fear on his face.

He had time to call for reinforcements.

I set off at a run, looking for an escape route.

Two blocks later, I find one: A large, sullen-looking Terraphant, moving through the evening traffic at a relatively brisk pace. I could make better time on foot, but this mode of transport is far less conspicuous. I match the creature’s speed, and leap onto its stoop. I tumble into the spacious interior of the bio-vehicle’s passenger compartment, past a System sensor that should identify me and dock the fare from my credit account.

I take the last of eight seats, wedging myself between two pink-faced Kalarians on an extruded bench of hard, green bio-mass. Nobody acknowledges my arrival. They do not know who I am, nor what I have just done. But they see the four Harrowers who come running down the center of the road toward us. They react in the customary way, shifting their gazes downward. I do the same, and pray that I will not be noticed.

A few more seconds, and I will be on the outside of the tightening cordon.

But the Terraphant chooses one of those seconds to register my unauthorized presence.

I know what is happening as soon as I hear its disgruntled rumble. The part of the creature's brain that is hardwired to the System is telling it that it should have seven passengers. It can feel the weight of eight. It is not happy.

Terraphants earn credits like everybody else. That is why they remain subservient. They are paid a proportion of the fares that they collect. Defaulters cost them food.

The bio-vehicle screeches to a halt. Its back end collides with its front, the jolt throwing most of my fellow passengers from their seats. The Terraphant twists its neck, reaching behind itself with its long jaws, snapping at the open windows of our compartment. It doesn't know which of us is the fare dodger, but I don't think it cares much.

I have seen enraged Terraphants behaving like this before. The creature can't get to us back here, but it will do all it can to shake or scare us out onto the road, and then it will pounce. Ordinarily, I could hold on tight until it had tired itself out—but the Kalarians are fighting to get to the exit, about to be slaughtered for my sake. And the Harrowers are closing in, coming to investigate the disturbance.

I take out my sword, and slice through a cluster of tendons in the ceiling. The Terraphant lets out an almighty howl, and rears up. Seven people roll into me, bowling me over. Blood drips onto my arm, and the bio-mass around me sags.

The Terraphant will live, if it is tended to in time. So, hopefully, will its passengers, although at the moment they don't know who to fear the most. As the creature falls still, they stumble over each other, and me, in their haste to scramble out of it. They find themselves trapped between me and the Harrowers, unsure whether to obey the latter's orders to freeze.

I settle the matter by leaping past them, my sword raised, making myself the prime target.

I hit my enemies hard, taking them by surprise.

I give myself to the scarlet mist again. I let my voices guide me.

And, soon, there is nobody to left to stand against me, and I can run free again.

I keep moving until the curfew siren sounds, gaining as much distance as I can. I take a circuitous route, sometimes moving directly away from my real destination in the hope of confusing pursuit. The Harrowers are out in force, looking for me, but I have left none alive who can identify me. I can lose myself among the masses. Four times, a Photon Sled passes over my head, but the searchlights don't pick me out.

I have been lucky, so far.

I can't risk travelling at night—I will be too exposed—so I make a bed from a pile of cardboard boxes in the damp cellar of an apartment block. But I can't sleep.

I should not have gotten involved. What good did it do? I saved one person, but the Harrowers will hurt dozens more in their frustration at having lost me.

They will have a description by now. They will have questioned witnesses, and built up a computer image of my current disguise. I experiment with the holo-belt, hoping that Persephone might have programmed an alternative image into it, but I find nothing.

What if they work out where I am going? They might find the abandoned sled, trace my course through this sector and see what lies at its end.

I shake my head firmly, angry at myself for not having seen the obvious. Ki *knows* where I am going.

He knows my future as well as I do, and he has no wish to change it.

We will fail in our mission. We will damage the System, but not destroy it. And, in that case, what will happen to Persephone? I am resigned to my fate, but I cannot stand the thought of her being made to suffer.

I have to tell her. I have to tell her about the news sheet, expose my secret pain to her. I have to let her make her own choice.

But what if that choice is the wrong one?

We make our rendezvous the following evening. I do not recognize Persephone at first, feeling a brief stab of alarm as she approaches me at the refinery gate. She has cut her beautiful blonde hair short, and dyed it black. An opaque smog mask obscures the lower half of her face. “The System circulated my description this morning,” she explains. I nod gloomily. Ryan Archer has given Ki what he wanted. He is probably dead now.

We make our way to the northern edge of Micropolis. We stay in the open, trying to look like a young couple wandering without aim, high on the promises of the System. The boundary is watched by Harrowers, patrolling in pairs. I could take them out with ease, but Persephone urges caution. We don’t want to leave a trace of our presence.

We watch from behind an apartment building, timing the guards’ movements, looking for the best opening. After an hour of this, I grow impatient. I point out that the curfew period begins soon, and we will no longer be safe here. Persephone nods—and, a few minutes later, she adjusts the settings of my holo-belt, and we break cover at last.

Concrete and asphalt give way to sand. It is brown and gritty, and my boots sink deep. Fortunately for us, the sand does not hold footprints; each impression seems to suck matter into it until it is refilled. The whole planet must have been blanketed in this unpleasant substance, before the first Baron created the foundations of Micropolis. Ki has often talked about extending the city, but terraforming is an expensive process. Had it not been for the Time Traveler, then I doubt this world would have been colonized at all. The resting places of the Pharoids would have been left undisturbed.

We run for precisely eighteen seconds, then Persephone throws herself to the ground. I dive on top of her, covering her as best I can. We lie flat, listening to Harrower footsteps. Sand settles on top of us, and this helps to conceal our position. As does the holo-belt, which now has me clad in a dark brown cloak and hood. We are in plain view of the sentries, but there are no lights out here. We are gambling that they won’t look hard enough to see us.

I count out a full one minute and forty-four seconds, each second seeming to stretch to many times its length, before I raise my head. I can see two Harrowers, but they are marching away, their backs to us. I scramble to my feet and, taking Persephone’s hand, help her up. We run for the nearest sand dune, acutely aware of the silhouettes we are making against the night sky as we leap over its crest.

I have to tell her about the news sheet.

I *can’t* tell her. For as long as I remember, it has been my darkest secret. Ki conditioned me to feel ashamed of it. He laughed at my failure, my humiliation.

I should tell her. I should warn her of what is to come. But if, like me, she can do nothing about it, then I would only be sharing my pain.

We lie side by side in the sand, until we are certain that our departure from Micropolis has gone unnoticed. Then, keeping our heads down behind the sand dune, we begin the second leg of our long

journey.

Huge, black cables run from Micropolis to the System complex, thousands of wires bound up in thick rubber casings. I almost trip over one, half-buried and dusted with a fine layer of sand as it is. It is tempting to cut it, but Persephone stays my sword.

“There’d be a Harrower patrol here in minutes,” she says, “and a maintenance crew within the hour. In the meantime, we’d have given our position anyway, and the System would only reroute its functions through one of hundreds of other cables like this one.”

I bow to her logic, as always, and we keep walking.

It takes us ninety minutes, all told, to reach our destination. During this time, we have to hide from a slow-moving airship just once, the holo-belt camouflaging us again. At last, we lie on our stomachs on the slope of a dune, peering over its top at the System complex, bathed in stark blue light beneath us.

The System, so it continually tells us, is our greatest achievement. It began life as a single bank of equipment in the first plug-in center. Now, its processors and memory storage units cover an area of over thirty square miles. The building that houses them was once a regular twelve-sided structure, but decades of haphazard additions have corrupted its shape. The gigantic furnace at the heart of the complex consumes almost eight tons of coal each day, its chimneys pumping great black clouds into our air. I had always thought of Micropolis’s buildings as grimy, but these windowless concrete blocks are positively caked in soot.

“Do not admire its scale,” mutters Persephone, her voice tinged with bitterness. “I know men who could build computers a thousandth of its size, with twice the processing power.”

“I was wondering about that,” I say. “With the technology you have, could we not bring down the System from without?”

She shakes her head. “I have prepared a virus, but it will only affect the System’s peripheral functions. It will corrupt records, take out the information points, even shut down the plug-in centers. A useful distraction for us, but not a solution. The maintainers will combat the virus, and eradicate it within twelve hours. In the meantime, the only victims will be the ordinary people of this city, as always. No, if we are to cause lasting damage, we must access the processors. The only way to do that—the only way to bypass their valves and circuit breakers—is physically. Ironically, the System’s primitive nature is its best defense.”

“I expected you to bring explosives.”

“They are not necessary. If I can have five minutes with the central processor, I can convince it to melt itself down.”

“Then my function is...?”

“To give me those minutes. We will encounter resistance.”

I had already seen the guards at the entrance. Two Harrowers. Normally, they would be standing to attention, but with no eyes upon them—or so they think—they have relaxed. One of them leans against the doorframe, while the other idly kicks up sand. They risk imprisonment and torture, should Ki learn of this, but the long hours of monotony out here must take their toll, I suppose. Getting past them will be no problem. Taking them down before they can raise the alarm will be a little more difficult.

One of the men unclips a radio handset from his belt, and speaks into it. We cannot hear his words from here, but Persephone has no doubt that he is checking in with his guardhouse. She checks her

timepiece, and we wait in tense silence. The better part of the night seems to crawl by before the handset appears again, but Persephone assures me that only an hour has passed. We withdraw to the foot of our dune and sit in the brown dust.

“The next time they check in,” she says, “we will be ready to act.”

“Still,” I point out, “we will only have one hour before they are missed.”

She nods. “I had hoped for more, but it was not to be expected.”

For several minutes, neither of us speaks. I break the silence, at last, with a question that I have been turning over in my mind. “Why are you doing this?”

Persephone frowns at me.

“This is not your battle,” I say. “You don’t live here. You have not suffered under Baron Ki’s rule. And yet you risk your life to depose him.”

“He is a tyrant,” she says simply. “Somebody has to stand up to him!”

I don’t believe her. I would not say so to her face, but I don’t believe she could be so altruistic. I see her as somebody who decides what she wants, then goes out and gets it. “You have hinted that you are working with somebody else. A...scientist?”

“There is somebody,” she admits, guardedly.

A name swims to the forefront of my memories. “Karza?”

Persephone reacts as if stung. Her eyes widen in alarm, then narrow in suspicion. “Where did you hear that name?” she asks in a low, threatening voice.

“Archer. He said that Karza was...your father?”

“You should have told me this sooner. What else did he say?”

“He said...he told me that something had gone wrong with time. He said that this isn’t how things should be. He mentioned the Time Traveler.”

Persephone clenches her fists. “The boy knows too much.”

“He spoke the truth?”

“No!” snaps Persephone. She thinks for a second, then sighs. “He is partially right. He acknowledges a truth about the Time Traveler that Ki would deny.”

“And Karza...?”

“He is not my father—but he is the closest thing I have known. He rescued me from a lifetime of poverty and stupefying boredom. He opened my mind. He showed me a universe beyond the one I knew, a future worth dreaming of.”

“And he sent you to save Micropolis?”

She scowls. “I am not used to being questioned!”

“I am risking my life, too,” I say. “I would like to know why.” I need to know how it will happen. I need to know that my death will be in a good cause.

I have to decide. How can I tell her? How can I not?

Persephone turns from me, her eyes hooded. I do not press her further—and, after a few minutes, I accept that she will tell me no more. But then, in a quiet and distant voice, she speaks. “You’re right,”

she says. “I was not sent here to save Micropolis. I was sent to save the Time Traveler—and, by saving him, to save us all.”

“The Time Traveler?”

“That is what the Reptos want: The Time Traveler and his technology.”

“But Ki would never...”

“Micropolis is in a financial mess. Ki did not care when his subjects were starving and working like dogs—but now, he can barely afford to maintain the System, let alone the luxuries to which he has become accustomed. And he knows that others have developed better weapons than his. He was on the verge of losing his hold on the city—until the Reptos approached him.”

“They made him an offer?”

“The Reptos have always striven to improve their position by trade. In the course of one such deal, they acquired certain documents. They told of ancient experiments in the field of time travel—experiments that took place on this world.”

“In the Pharoid chamber that Tench and I discovered,” I deduce. “Then that is where the Time Traveler came from?”

“His journey began there,” says Persephone, “or in a similar chamber.”

“And the Reptos knew where to find it?”

“That is why Ki had to deal with them, rather than unearthing the chamber for himself. By the time he located it, it may have been too late for him.”

“So, he sold the Pharoid machines. The Reptos will be able to travel in time!”

“Fortunately, no. The Pharoids’ work was incomplete, and the Reptos lack the intelligence to further it. Better to have it in their hands, and let them destroy it, than to leave it with Ki.”

“Then why...?”

“They must not take the Time Traveler. Even now, Ki has technicians and hired scientists in that building—” she points toward the hidden complex, with an angry stabbing motion “—working with the System, seeking a way to move him.”

“Can it be done?”

“With difficulty, yes. Karza came up with a theory decades ago; Ki is almost there himself. The technology to create an anti-time field exists. But the Time Traveler belongs here, in Micropolis.”

The heart of our city. I cannot imagine the sky without him. Ki must be as desperate as Persephone claims, to barter the very symbol of his power. I shift my position, and the news sheet rustles softly in my boot. I want to bring it out into the open, to examine it again.

“Are you hearing me, Nanissar? Ki doesn’t see it. He won’t listen. But Karza has devoted his entire adult life to the study of time. He knows that, if the Time Traveler is moved, it will mean disaster for us all!”

“How...how can that be?”

“Time is fragile, Nanissar. It can be broken by a butterfly’s wings. The Pharoids knew that. They knew that, by stepping into the past, they could improve their present—or they might have destroyed it. To the best of our knowledge, they never used their technology.”

“And yet, somebody did. Somebody became the Time Traveler.”

“No,” says Persephone, “they haven’t. At least, not yet. You do know that the Time Traveler comes from the future?”

“So it is said. One day, we will reach the beginning of his journey, and know him.”

“No, we will not—because his future is not *our* future. The Pharoids’ equipment malfunctioned. The Time Traveler’s flight is uncontrolled. He is screaming backwards through time, tearing its delicate fabric as he goes.”

“He is the cause of the time breaks?”

“He has changed his own past, rewritten his own life.”

“Without him,” I say slowly, “the city would not be here. Everything would be different.”

“The Time Traveler’s existence is a paradox. He is an effect without a cause. And time cannot abide a paradox. Already, it is weakened.”

I put my head in my hands. I am trying to understand, but this talk of other times confuses me. It ties my brain into a knot. “If the Reptos move the Time Traveler,” I say, trying to follow Persephone’s logic, “then he...he will never have existed?”

“They will fold his timeline back upon itself,” she says. “He will exist in our present; his past self will still float above the city. But his future self will not exist in our past. History will be altered again, and with the bluntest of instruments.”

“The Reptos will have taken the Time Traveler, but...but, thanks to their interference, the Time Traveler...will not have been here for them to take?”

“Everything we know will change, and we won’t even be aware of it. We will have lived different lives, on different worlds.” She catches the angle of my head, as I look at her. “And yes, that may sound appealing, Nanissar, but that is not our prime concern. The new timeline, like this one, will be based upon a paradox. The damage will be compounded. Time may lose its integrity; it may collapse altogether, multiple realities crashing into each other. In their arrogance and greed, Ki and his allies may destroy the universe itself!”

There is more than one entrance to the System complex, more than one set of guards. We can’t get far from the first pair without coming into sight of another. But the erratic architecture of the complex works in our favor. Emerging from between two dunes, we only have to cross a short patch of open ground to gain shelter behind a jutting extension.

Persephone goes first, and beckons to me to follow her. The guards, engaged in a bored conversation, don’t see us.

We make our way around the building, until only one corner and a stretch of wall five yards long separate us from our targets. We wait, until we hear one of the Harrowers reporting in. We give him five seconds to return his handset to its belt clip. Then, we strike.

One of the guards has his back to me. The other sees me coming, my sword raised and blazing, and he goes for his gun. I leap past his startled partner and cleave him in two. I turn, to find the other Harrower backing away from me, reaching for his handset. Persephone shoots him in the back before he can press its alarm button. Despite its size, her gun packs a powerful charge. The Harrower’s black armor saves his life, but he slumps to his knees in agony. I end his pain for him by parting his head from his shoulders.

The entrance is double-locked with a numeric keypad and an optical scanner. Persephone taps a

combination into the former, which I guess she must have plucked from the System with her amazing mini-computer. She picks up the severed head of the second guard, dispassionately, flips up his helmet visor and holds him up to the scanner. A light blinks as a sensor recognizes his dead, staring eyes, and the metal door slides open with a harsh squeal.

As we step into the cold interior of the System complex, I am gripped by a sudden anxiety. A final glimmer of self-awareness from the broken man I used to be, a man I can barely remember now. He wants to know why I am doing this, why it has to be my responsibility. Why did Persephone not go to the Galactic Defenders for help, instead of coming to me?

I have not told her what I know. It doesn't seem important anymore. I thought we were destined to fail—but I did not know, then, what we were fighting for.

I have been trying to remember if the Time Traveler is mentioned in the news sheet. I do not think he is, but that could mean anything. He might be there, in the future, watching over Micropolis, so much a part of its everyday life that people rarely acknowledge him. Or he might have gone. He might have reached the end of his long journey, and faded from sight.

Either way, the news sheet is proof that we can save the future. Persephone and I may not destroy the System, but we will deal it enough damage to prevent Ki from moving the Time Traveler, at least for now. Then, the Reptos, incensed by this delay, will attempt to wipe out the citizens of Micropolis, and I will save them, too.

I will die. Persephone may die, too, but I will do everything in my power to protect her.

And I will meet my destiny gladly. I will save untold billions of lives, many of them twice over. I am prepared to sacrifice my own life in that cause.

In the end, what better definition of a hero is there?

CHAPTER SIX

»Maintainer Team 14d to Data Node 1903.«

I feel as if I have stepped into another world.

I had become used to the heat and pollution of Micropolis, but here, the air is cool and clean. Even under my armor, my skin tingles, welcoming its balmy touch. I take deep breaths, quenching a fire that I had almost forgotten burnt in my lungs.

“Ki's personal quarters must feel like this,” I murmur in wonder.

“The System's function is impaired by excess heat,” explains Persephone. “The maintainers have to keep the temperature down.”

»Maintainer Team 9p to tertiary coolant tank D.«

I remember that we have business here. “Where is the System?”

She makes a sweeping gesture with her arm. “Everywhere. It's all around us.”

I look, but I see nothing. Just gray walls, punctuated by air-conditioning vents; strips of lighting panels, bathing us in their sterile white glow; and, fixed in every corner at ceiling level, speakers, to relay the voice of the computerized intelligence that runs this place.

Impatiently, Persephone raps the nearest wall with her knuckles. It gives off a metallic ring. “It's behind

here, Nanissar. Under the floor. Above the ceiling. Unlike the rest of this world, the System has never been starved of resources. For centuries, it has grown.”

“You sound as if you admire it, after all.”

She sighs. “Maybe I do. Ki ignores the development of the microchip, because it would mean decommissioning this monster and starting all over again. But he has paid, blackmailed and bullied some of the greatest engineers in the galaxy to work on the System over the years, and what they have achieved...” She lets out a soft whistle, and for a moment, her eyes mist over. Then she snaps out of it, becoming her old dispassionate self. “Still, we are not here to admire the System. We’re here to destroy it!”

She sets off at a purposeful stride, leading me down a side passageway, then taking the right fork at a T-junction. To me, every corridor looks the same, but Persephone seems to know where she is going. She must have studied a plan of this place.

We round another corner, and see two people ahead of us—a man and a woman. Ordinary citizens, from the look of their coveralls. They have removed a wall panel, and the woman is poking at something behind it with a tubular, plastic tool. The man is watching over her shoulder, making notes on a clipboard. My first impulse to duck back out of sight, but Persephone marches toward them, intent on bluffing this out. With some misgiving, I follow. As we draw level with the couple, the man nods and smiles at us, and bids us good morning. Persephone returns the greeting, and we breeze on by.

“Is it safe to be out in the open like this?” I ask, when we are alone again.

“You saw what just happened,” she says. “We look like any other maintainer team.”

“Until somebody realizes that they haven’t seen us before.”

“Hundreds of people work in this complex. New maintainers are brought in every week. Nobody expects to recognize every face they see.”

“Even so,” I persist, “the people here seem more alert than those in the city.”

“Naturally. Ki needs only two things from the citizens of Micropolis: their muscle and their unstinting loyalty. Here, it is different. The maintainers are chosen for their intellect. Were Ki to allow the System to dull their brains, they would be useless to him.”

“Then how does he keep them in line?”

“As I said, he pays them, blackmails them, bullies them—whatever it takes. They are not mindless slaves, Nanissar. Many of them are here by choice. They were taken from the city and offered a more comfortable life, which they accepted.”

“Then they are unlikely to stand by while we end that life.”

“Indeed. We have to consider the maintainers, every one of them, hostile.”

The System broadcasts another terse instruction, and I think about what Persephone said. The maintainers may not be mindless, but that does not mean they aren’t still slaves.

“But if the main processor is at the center of the complex, we have—” I make a quick calculation “—at least three miles to cover. Can we evade suspicion for so long?”

“The journey will take a little more than fifteen minutes.”

“How is that possible?” I ask.

Persephone doesn’t answer my question. Instead, she leads me down another gray corridor. We emerge

into a much wider passageway, where the walls are tiled and the air carries a faint ozone scent. Set into the ground, running parallel down the center of the passageway, are two narrow steel rails. They curve slightly, and disappear into tunnel entrances to each side of us. Three large digits are stenciled onto the wall in red: 271. A station number, I assume.

Persephone finds a wall-mounted control box, into which a single red button is set. She presses the button, and a light snaps on behind it. We wait.

“Ki has long promised a light rail system for Micropolis,” I say quietly.

Within a few minutes, I hear the hissing and clanking of an oncoming vehicle. Two balls of light appear in the tunnel to our left, like the bright eyes of an approaching monster.

It erupts from the tunnel mouth like a steel serpent, stale air gusting in front of it. It is dirtier than I expected, its metal sides scratched and dented. So long as it functions, though, its aesthetic qualities are of little importance. The train’s braking power is phenomenal; at first, I think it is going to barrel straight through our station, but suddenly it is motionless, its lighted windows stretched out in front of us, its doors sliding open with a synchronized hiss.

I count seven and a half carriages. The eighth has not fully emerged from the tunnel, but its entrance is visible, and Persephone takes my hand and pulls me toward it. The train carries only a few passengers, perhaps two or three per carriage. They stare at their clipboards and scribble hasty notes, or simply doze, their heads lolling against the backs of their seats.

The rearmost carriage is empty. We climb into it, and Persephone enters two digits into a keypad behind the door. We sink onto opposite benches with a shared feeling of relief; a moment later, the doors hiss together, and the train jerks into motion.

“We will arrive at Station 13 in approximately seven minutes,” says Persephone in a brusque, businesslike tone. I stare through the window behind her, past my deceptive reflection, trying to judge the speed at which the tunnel wall is blurring past. For our journey to take as long as she suggests, the train must take something of a circular route. “Maybe a little longer, if we make too many stops. From 13, it’s only a short walk to Station Zero.”

“We cannot ride to Station Zero?”

“We could, but I’d rather not disembark there. It would be hard to explain our presence, if questioned. Anyway, we’re ahead of schedule. We’ll be out of here, on our way back to the city, before most of the maintainers even wake for the morning shift.”

I nod distractedly, deep in thought. Everything is going well. Too well. Several stations flash by—109, 83, 194; the numbers follow no logical order—and then we make another stop. I tense, my fingers gripping the edge of the bench. Is this it? Is this where we are discovered, where the future catches up to us?

Two more pairs of maintainers are waiting on the platform. They board the train, choosing a carriage toward its center, leaving us undisturbed. We pull out, and I allow myself to relax.

Too soon.

A shape cuts across the corner of my field of vision, momentarily framed in the carriage’s rear window. A leather wing, the shape of my nightmares. Gone, before I can examine it in the light. We plunge into the tunnel again, dragged by the rest of the train, and suddenly there is nothing outside but darkness. Still, my mind paints pictures on the shadows, hearing scratches and creaks above the rumbling of wheels. I glance at Persephone, who frowns at me in return. She hasn’t noticed anything amiss.

I try to drive the nightmares, my fear of the future, away.

Then something bangs on the carriage roof, and my fear becomes real.

This time, Persephone hears it. She leaps out of her seat and snatches her gun from inside her coveralls, pointing it upward. I stand, too, and draw my sword.

Something is moving up there. Shuffling, scraping footsteps.

Three bone claws punch through the thin roof, like nails driven by a sledgehammer. Persephone fires at them, and something lets out an animal roar. The claws close together, tearing through metal, as another set punctures the roof beside them.

And another. And another.

I swipe at them, my energy blade slicing the tip from one of them.

Something hits the side of our carriage, threatening to derail us. A window cracks, and, through its crazed glass, I see the mad yellow eyes of a Repto. It's holding on to the roof of the train with one clawed hand, smashing at the window with the other, its jaws slaving in anticipation of a kill. The window shatters, and the Repto leaps at me, but I am ready for it. It impales itself on my sword, but the wound only seems to drive it into a frenzy. The Repto screams, and lashes out with its claws. If it weren't for my armor—if my only protection were the coveralls I appear to be wearing—it would have shredded my skin.

Confused by my refusal to die, it whips its tail around my legs and trips me. The maneuver would not have worked, were I not still trying to pull my sword out of its scaly chest. I stumble back into the carriage wall, and brace myself as the Repto lunges at me, jaws gaping, its long, serrated rows of teeth ready to clamp themselves about my neck.

I dissuade the creature with a solid punch to its snout. It reels, tries to recover, but feels the effects of my sword thrust at last and crashes to the floor, its head glancing off a bench on the way down. A long, thin tongue lolls out of its mouth between broken teeth.

A terrible rending of metal fills my ears, and vibrates through my nervous system. Persephone has been fighting a losing battle against the creatures above us. They tear back the roof, peeling open the carriage like a sardine can. Four sets of yellow eyes glare down at us, gleaming slits of malevolence in the darkness.

"This way, Nanissar!" yells Persephone, snatching open the door to the next carriage.

I hesitate. I need my weapon. I brace my foot against the stomach of my fallen enemy, and drag my blade from its heart. While I am thus occupied, Persephone tries to hold off the other Reptos. Her gun barks out a staccato rhythm, its energy beams stinging its targets but doing no real damage. It is only a matter of time before one of them gets brave.

It sets its sights on me, perhaps seeing my sword as the deadlier of our weapons. I am turning to withdraw when it swoops at me, shrugging off Persephone's frantic shots at its back. Suddenly, my head is buried in its wings, and I cannot see what I am doing. The creature wraps itself around me: I can feel its feet digging into my stomach, its claws piercing the armor on my back to scratch the skin below.

I'm ducking and twisting, unable to swing my blade, trusting to instinct and blind fortune to aid me against a threat that I can't see. Pain stabs into my back as the claws dig deeper, but the teeth are the greater threat; if I let them get a hold on me, I'm as good as dead.

Fortunately, the Repto's hisses and growls—of eagerness, triumph, anger and frustration in turn—give me a virtual running commentary of its progress, and help me to pinpoint its head. I duck under it and come up quickly, my helmet cracking into the Repto's chin. Its claws withdraw from my back, and I

take the opportunity to grab its thick arm, plant my foot in its stomach, fall back and throw the creature over my head. It flaps its wings, but lacks the space to unfurl them to their full span. It lands headfirst, but it is already struggling to stand.

I dive for the exit. Persephone sees me coming, and backs out of the carriage ahead of me. I almost make it, but another Repto descends and, even as I attain the doorway, its claws slash at me from behind, raking across my injured back. The agony is red hot.

My voices guide me. I spin around, and cut out the Repto's throat with the tip of my sword. As black blood drips down its front, it freezes, stunned, its eyes glazing over. Its fellows push at it from behind, hissing violently as they try to reach past its dead weight.

Persephone has reached the far end of the carriage, and she screams at me to join her. I see no passengers; I assume that they have fled ahead of her.

My voices tell me to fight, but three Reptos remain and I do not know if I can take them all. So far, only our close quarters have saved me, preventing them from attacking me in concert. Anyway, news of our battle will surely spread fast. If the Harrowers and maintainers do not know of our presence already, they will know of it soon. I can't fight all of Ki's forces.

I run, following Persephone through three carriages in quick succession. Passengers stare blankly at her as she bursts in on them, but their reactions when they see the Reptos and me are more animated. Some dive for cover under their seats, others cower in fear, covering their heads with their arms as if it might protect them. I catch sight of my reflection, and realize that my illusory disguise has fallen. The holo-belt is no longer around my waist; it must have been cut off by a flailing claw.

My pursuers are not used to running, but they don't have room to fly. They move with an ungainly shuffle, their wings wrapped around their bodies. Still, they are fast. Alone, I could outpace them, but Persephone is slower. I remain at her back, shielding her, as the Reptos snap at my heels. I swing my sword indiscriminately behind me, keeping them at bay. The next door offers a useful bottleneck, and I turn and slash fiercely at the creature immediately behind me. It evades most of my swings, taking only a shallow cut to its arm, but I keep it pinned in the doorway, a living obstruction, for a second and a half. Long enough for Persephone to gain some distance again. Now, I can do the same.

I sprint into the next carriage with seconds to spare. Time, I think, to try something more extreme. I raise my sword, and slash at one of the wooden passenger benches. I wrench a section of it away from the wall, and turn to face the door again, even as the Reptos come at me. I push the bench into the first one, driving it back into the others. My makeshift barricade is now clamped across the doorway, and the strength in my arms keeps it there.

It doesn't last long. Unable to push me back, or to reach me around the bench, the leading Repto concentrates its fury on the bench itself. Its claws rise and fall, its teeth rend, and my shield disintegrates into a shower of wood splinters.

We hurtle through a station, light streaming past the windows for a brief moment. I'm uncomfortably aware that we have nowhere to run, only a dead end some three carriages ahead. If I knew the number of the next station, I could request a stop there, but I don't; I can only hope that, by chance, somebody halts the train for us.

By the time I crash through the final door, I have decided not to trust to luck. We have collected six passengers in front of us. They cower at the far end of the carriage, two of them fighting each other to pull hopelessly at the locked door to the engine car.

Persephone brushes them aside. "Help me get through here," she instructs me. "If we can get to the braking system, I might be able to override the remote—"

“My way’s quicker,” I grunt. I pry my fingers into the gap between the exit doors, and pull them apart. Glass pops, metal shrieks, and I’m almost snatched out of the train by its slipstream. In the meantime, the Reptos have caught up to us again.

Persephone is trying to fight them off with her gun, to no avail. Fortunately, there are six bystanders in their way, delaying them just long enough.

I curl my arm around Persephone’s waist, and pull her to me. We stand in the open doorway, the passing air blowing her newly short hair to one side. A Repto sees a clear path to us, and bares its teeth, but I discourage it from attacking with a prod of my blade.

I see light, and leap for it.

Persephone begins to shriek my name, but her voice is whipped away. I wrap myself around her, becoming her armored cocoon.

We seem to fly forever. But, when we hit the ground, we hit hard. We skip and roll, still sharing the train’s sideways momentum, until a wall brings us up short. I lie, entangled in Persephone’s limbs, until the spots clear from my eyes and my breathing slows to normal. My armor is scuffed, and holed in several places. I will have to find something to patch it. Slowly, gingerly, I lift myself onto my elbows.

Persephone raises her head to glare at me. Her hair is bedraggled, her face pale. She pouts angrily, and punches me in the chest with both fists. “Don’t you *ever* do that to me again!”

“You’re welcome,” I say.

We pick ourselves up, checking ourselves for injuries. Thankfully, we find only minor bruising. Persephone has developed a slight limp, favoring her left foot, but she insists that it is nothing. “222,” she says, reading the station number from the wall. “If I remember correctly, we are not too far from our destination.”

One of the creatures tried to follow us. It jumped a fraction of a second too late. Its broken corpse lies a short way into the exit tunnel, its blood staining the wall.

“You should go on alone,” I say. “I will hold off the remaining Reptos.”

They are on their way. The future, closing in upon me. I can hear their cries already, although I have to concede that this might be imagination. There isn’t enough space between the train and the tunnel wall for the Reptos to unfurl their wings—but the train will stop soon, and they will fly back down the tunnel. We can’t outrun them. But there are only two of them now. Battered and shaken though I am, I think it will be a fair fight.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Nanissar!” snaps Persephone. “I need you!”

“You need to reach the main processor,” I counter. “Without a holo-belt, I can only be a hindrance to you. We must separate. I will draw our enemies away from you.”

I want to protect her. If we are not together, then she might avoid sharing my fate.

Persephone shakes her head fiercely. “The Reptos know we’re here. They can’t be the only ones. The System will have placed its guards on full alert. Reinforcements will be on their way from the city. We won’t reach the processors without a fight.”

“Then maybe we should retreat for now, and pick our next battle more carefully.”

“If we fail now,” says Persephone grimly, “there won’t *be* a next battle. Come on!”

We race down more gray corridors, the metallic floor ringing under our feet. We see several more maintainers—and they can hardly fail to notice, now, that we don't belong here—but they see my sword and think twice about trying to stop us. Still, I have little doubt that every one of them will report their sighting of us to the System. The Harrowers will know, by now, where we are headed. Our only hope is to get there before they do.

We have sacrificed subtlety for speed, and abandoned all hope of escape once our job is done. I wish Persephone could have turned back. I wish I could have done this without her.

A door slides open for us, and she leads me into a circular room. A bridge stretches to the opposite door—and it's only as I step onto it that I see the scale of the drop below us.

"We're in one of the memory storage units," explains Persephone. "They reach up to a mile down into the earth." I can't see quite that far. The bottom of the pit is filled with a blue liquid, which reflects the light from the ceiling panels back at us. The walls are scored with horizontal slots, thousands of them, each with a hole-punched plastic card protruding from it. I can see no way to reach them without wings or antigravity technology.

Nor was the bridge designed for heavy use. It comprises four chains, the top pair acting as handrails while the lower pair are connected by a series of wooden slats. It sways perilously as we cross it, forcing us to slow to a walking pace.

All in all, then, there could hardly be a worse time for the surviving Reptos to find us.

They swoop from behind each door, converging upon us. They are more cunning than I thought; they were waiting for us. Again, they concentrate their attack upon me.

I swipe at the creature in front, but the one behind tackles me, sinking its talons into the flesh of my neck, where my shoulder harness does not protect me. It carries me into the air. Its wings are beating rapidly, and I can feel it struggling with my weight, but the bridge is receding below me, and the first Repto is flying at me again. With nothing to brace against, I have to strain my stomach muscles to bring up my feet, but I succeed in kicking its head aside. Not for long, though. It thrusts forward again, and I ready my sword, but I am off-balance. The Repto feints, gets past my guard, and suddenly, its jaws are around my weapon arm. I try to pry them apart, but their grip only tightens, and I can feel tiny, sharp teeth tearing into muscle. My fingers spasm involuntarily, and the sword slips out of their grasp.

Persephone fires shot after shot, targeting the Reptos' wings. She knows she cannot penetrate their armor, but she hopes to cripple them, at least, to bring them down. I cannot wait for her to succeed. Blood rushes to my head, and I feel faint. I have to act now.

With my free hand, I gouge at the biting Repto's eye. It flinches, and I pull my bloodied arm from its maw and kick it again. It falls away from me, but not far enough. It comes at me again, its jaws wide open; I can see right down its throat.

I pull out my blaster weapon, and blow out its tonsils.

I hear the distant splash of my sword hitting the blue liquid. Even with my gun, I feel suddenly defenseless.

I twist in my captor's grip, reaching back over my shoulders to take hold of its wrists. I'm hit by the rotting meat stench of its breath, and I realize that it's about to fasten its teeth around my head. Desperately, I tear myself free from it, leaving lumps of flesh behind.

I'm falling, and the Reptos are swooping after me. I reach out instinctively, catching a chain handrail of the bridge as I pass it. Pain sears down my injured arm, and yanks at my shoulder, but I do not let go.

The Reptos overshoot me, having not anticipated my sudden stop. Persephone runs to me, rendering

what help she can as I haul myself up over the chain. My armored weight is too much for it, and it snaps its mooring at one end, going suddenly slack. I fall clumsily onto the bridge, making it sway so furiously that I have to hold on to a wooden slat to keep myself from being pitched over the edge.

A Repto blocks out the light above me, swaying from side to side in my vision, and I fire repeatedly in its direction, unable to get a lock on it. Something guides me: instinct or luck. Its head snaps back, its cracked-voice squeal telling me that this is the same creature I shot before. As it plummets past me, dead or dying, the final Repto circles warily. I raise the blaster again, but a red indicator light on its grip tells me that its power is low.

I hesitate. Sensing my weakness, the Repto dives at me.

I snatch up the broken chain, gathering its trailing end. The Repto hits me, clawing and biting at me. Persephone leaps gamely onto its back, and it half-turns to lash out at her, giving me an opening. I loop the chain around its neck and tighten it. The creature squawks in impotent fury as I cut off its air supply. It puts its claws to its throat, trying to pull the chain away, but I give it a hefty kick and, unbalanced, it stumbles and topples off the bridge.

The chain slips through my hands. I tighten my grip, and brace myself.

The creature unfurls its wings, too late. The chain tightens.

Compared to the Photon Sled two nights ago, the Repto's weight is slight. But I am tired and losing blood, and, in that frenzied, pain-filled instant, I think I will have to let it go or risk plunging after it. But my voices tell me to hold on, and somehow I bear the agony.

The creature's neck snaps.

I let it fall.

I watch as it drops into the pit, as it hits the blue liquid and floats facedown. I keep watching as it sinks slowly, until the bridge has stopped swaying and there is nothing more to see.

All dead. All dead at my hands.

I had no choice. I fought in self-defense. But that does not warm the chill in my marrow that comes with the realization of what I have become. My true self.

Then, I look back at Persephone, and I see that she is bleeding, too.

Her breathing becomes ragged as we stumble onward. The Repto's claws struck deep, her wounds are open and sucking, but still she won't rest. She will not let me tend to her. Even if she did, I do not think I could help her.

Persephone is dying. That knowledge is a ball of hurt in my chest, which I don't dare acknowledge. Not yet. I have to remain focused. Her final wish is to reach the central processor, to plant her virus, to destroy the System. And it is my wish that, if she must die, then at least she will do so fulfilled.

But I am tired, myself. Persephone leans on my shoulder, and I drag us both, with painful slowness, along the latest gray corridor. We can only consider ourselves fortunate not to have encountered more opposition.

She pulls away from me, and sinks into a heap. "I'm sorry," she mumbles breathlessly, her eyelids fluttering. "I can't...can't go on..."

"You must!" I insist. "We are almost there!" Or so she told me, a lifetime ago.

“Just...around the next corner,” she wheezes, “and straight on into the...main chamber. Just...just do what you can, Nanissar.”

“I will carry you,” I offer.

She shakes her head, lethargically. For all my protestations, I know she will not leave this spot. It is a miracle—a testament to her determination—that she came this far. “Harrowers. You’ll have to fight. I would...weigh you down.”

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to input the virus.”

“No time to...teach you. Just do...do as much damage as you...can.”

“I won’t leave you!” I protest, knowing that it is hopeless.

“You must,” she whispers as her eyes close.

She is so still. Still breathing, but barely conscious. I cannot look at the livid red marks across her chest, the spreading bloodstains on her tattered coveralls. I lean closer to her, until I can see only her beautiful face, her expression dignified as always but tinged with a pale betrayal of the suffering she bears. I long to be able to touch her skin with mine, to bid her good-bye with a kiss to her white forehead. But I am trapped inside my cold shell, and my emotions are trapped in here with me, screaming inside me.

Tears form in my eyes, but I fight them back. I must see clearly.

There is only one thing I can do for her now.

I straighten up slowly, hardening my grief, turning it into anger. I inspect my blaster: The low-power light is still shining, but the power pack should have two, maybe three, good shots left in it before it dies. I will make them count.

Around the next corner, she said, and straight on into the main chamber. I set off at a determined march, head up, back straight. My own injuries, my weariness, are all but forgotten. They don’t matter. I know what I must do. I can hear the future, calling to me.

A pair of thick blast doors stands open, at the end of a long corridor. At first, the distance to them seems insurmountable, and I cannot believe that I will reach them unmolested. But suddenly, I am there, marching between them, and I am just beginning to realize that the total absence of Harrower guards goes beyond the scope of mere good fortune.

The chamber beyond the doors is dark, but the echo of my footsteps tells me that I have entered a large space. I begin to cross it, listening for any sign of movement.

I know what to expect by now. I have resolved to face it, anyway.

The blast doors slam shut behind me. I come to a halt, but I don’t look round. A light snaps on, faint at first but growing brighter. I am beginning to make out shapes.

A large room, as I had already guessed, ringed by a balcony some three meters high. Lining the walls: black-uniformed Harrowers, shock batons raised. And more of them, above me, sighting down the barrels of their blaster weapons from behind balcony rails. Dozens of them, in all. Many more than I could hope to beat, even if I were armed and ready.

And, as the light grows, I realize that there is nothing else. No consoles, no banks of machinery, nothing that could be a processing unit for the System. Nothing.

Somehow, Persephone’s information was wrong. I am numbed by the thought of everything we risked, everything she sacrificed, for this. Our ultimate goal: An empty room, where our enemies were waiting

for us. A trap.

“Lay down your weapon,” instructs a Harrower Captain from the balcony. I do not respond. “Put down the gun, Nanissar, and raise your hands!”

I accept that I am beaten. But I also know that I have nothing to lose.

Two, maybe three, good shots left.

I leap forward, presenting a moving target to the Harrowers, simultaneously snapping up my blaster weapon and firing at their Captain. My second shot hits him, knocking him backward. I don’t know if it was enough to kill. I fire again, but my gun whines and discharges a feeble, sputtering cough of smoke. And now, a barrage of fire from the balcony, striking from all sides, tearing fresh holes in my armor, knocking the wind out of me, sending me to my knees.

I expect to die. But, to my surprise, the onslaught ceases.

It is the turn of the ground level troops, now. They swarm over me, batons sending jolt after jolt through my battered body, until I can’t see, can’t hear, can’t feel anything but the searing, electric pain. And then this, too, stops, at the signal of single clap.

I’m drenched in sweat, arms wrapped about myself, trembling, no longer in control of my own body. And, as my hearing returns, I hear ringing footsteps. The sound of somebody climbing down a ladder from the balcony, marching toward me.

The boots of a green battlesuit, under my nose. I make a supreme effort to force my head to tilt upward, wanting to look, even though I have no doubt of what I will see.

I am staring up into the sneering face of Maruunus Ki.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Citizen Nanissar,” intones Ki with supreme relish, rolling his tongue around each syllable.

“Your citizen...no longer...” I rasp, my voice scraping my throat.

“As you can see,” he continues, unabashed, “we have been expecting you. Or had you perhaps forgotten that I, too, have seen the future?”

My silence, I hope, will be interpreted as a gesture of contempt. The truth, however, is that I have nothing to say.

“No,” rumbles Ki, “I don’t think that would be the case. Perhaps, then, you simply believed I would not wish to alter what is to come? If so, Nanissar, then you have underestimated the scale of my ambition.” He clasps his hands behind his back, and begins to circle me, taking slow, measured paces. I remain still. He has waited a long time for this, I think, to savor his second great victory over me. I will let him enjoy it. The more he says, the more I will learn. The more time I will have to recover, before I am required to fight again. Already, the smaller holes in my armor are beginning to knit themselves back together, my self-repair systems fuelled by the electrical discharges from the shock batons.

“No doubt you have studied the document I gave you,” says Ki. “I have done the same. I have had copies of the manuscript examined by linguists, statisticians, even those charlatans who claim to possess the power of precognition. I have cross-referenced its information with that gleaned from a dozen other artifacts delivered to us by the time breaks. I have built up a more complete picture of the future than you can know—and yes, Nanissar, I am pleased. I am content to know that my power over

this city will remain absolute. But then..." He comes to a halt in front of me again, his eyes gleaming with triumph as he leans down at me. "...there is always room for improvement, is there not?"

"You want to change the future," I croak.

"Just a little. The outcome of our struggle will, I assure you, remain the same. I will win; you will die. But, as you know, the manuscript predicts that my System will be crippled in the process. A temporary setback, yes, but one I would rather not bear at all." Ki smiles tightly. "My advisers tell me that, by altering one part of the future, I risk changing it all. It may be that, as an indirect consequence of my actions today, the Reptos will unleash their flesh-eating virus after all. The population of Micropolis could be wiped out in weeks. But I don't think you'd let that happen, would you, Nanissar? And even if you could—" he turns away from me, with a nonchalant shrug "—the risk would have been worth taking."

"You are that desperate to cling to power," I mutter contemptuously.

Ki ignores me. "Your body, as I'm sure you recall, will be found on a submerged spaceship. My technicians have already located that ship, on the bed of Lake Wherle. How the Reptos ran my blockade, I don't know, but they think they can spy on me from within my own domain. What they don't realize is that I already know more about their plans, and their outcome, than they will ever know about mine. You see, Nanissar, over these past few years, I have asked myself how it may be that you will come aboard that ship, and I have come to this conclusion: That you can only have been a prisoner of the Reptos. Maybe they thought to punish you for your sabotage of the System, which would, after all, have seriously impeded their plan to take the Time Traveler. Whatever their reason, it matters not, now."

"You...intend to hand me over to them."

"We have been watching your progress through this complex. By your very presence, and your stated aim, you have earned the Reptos' enmity. Their representatives here would not even wait for you to enter my trap, so impatient were they to see you pay for your crimes. Their intervention was unexpected, but it worked in my favor. Not only have the creatures spared the lives of many of my Harrowers—and, therefore, saved me the bother of finding replacements—by tiring you out; they have also ensured, by their deaths, that the Repto High Command will try you on their homeworld. I have already informed them that you are in my custody. They are coming here to collect you. The System is undamaged, but the rest of the manuscript's prophecy will be fulfilled. You will be held on the Repto's submerged spy ship. Of course, you will escape. And, when I betray those cold-blooded monsters—when I take the secrets of the Pharoid chamber for myself—you will be in the right place at the right time to frustrate their attempts at revenge."

"You think you have everything worked out." I am regaining my voice. "But there is one element of your equation that you can't control. I have free will, Ki!"

"Do you?" The Baron raises an eyebrow in amusement. "So far, I have anticipated and guided your actions with perfect accuracy."

"I won't do what you want me to do."

"You have no choice. I know you too well, Nanissar. Whatever you think of me, you won't let the citizens of Micropolis die."

"I don't care about your drudges," I spit, trying to sound dispassionate. Like Persephone; submerging my own feelings, to do what must be done. "I have lived among them long enough to know how little their lives are worth. Death would be a blessing for them."

I almost mean it, too. The only person I cared about is dead.

Or dying. Maybe there is still hope.

“You wouldn’t do it,” says Ki. “The great and good Acroyear, driven to genocide by his hatred of one man?” His tone is dismissive, but he has turned away from me again, hiding his face. He is not sure. He does not know how my captivity might have changed me.

“There is one way to guarantee my cooperation,” I say.

Ki stops in his tracks.

“Persephone must not die.”

A short silence. Then, Ki says quietly: “It may already be too late.”

“For your sake, and for the sake of Micropolis, I hope you are wrong.”

He turns back to me, his expression composed. “I will have my surgeons do all they can.”

“Tell them to do better.”

“If the woman dies, they die, too. I cannot promise any more.”

I nod. “That is acceptable.”

Ki smiles again, as if at some private joke. Then he snaps his fingers at one of his armored lackeys, and barks, “See to it.”

“Yes, sir!” shouts the Harrower. He salutes smartly, and rushes away.

Two of his comrades open the blast doors for him, leaving them open as the Baron follows him at a more sedate pace. “Bring the prisoner!” he instructs, with the merest flick of his hand over his shoulder. Eight more Harrowers spring to attention, and make haste to my side. Four of them haul me to my feet, two taking each arm. I make no attempt to carry my own weight; I will not assist them.

With two Harrowers marching in front of us, and two behind, we follow Ki out of the room. We pass the junction of the corridor in which I left Persephone. She is no longer there, although I think I see an ominous dark stain where once she lay. Whatever else they might be, the Baron’s forces are efficient. They have to be, if they wish to survive. If Ki is as good as his word, then Persephone will be receiving the best of medical care right now.

I only pray it is enough.

Ki’s personal airship squats above the System complex. We climb three flights of steps, to emerge onto a flat roof beneath its ovoid bulk. I wonder how the Harrowers expect to haul me up a ladder, but, of course, the Baron has technology denied to the masses.

A rectangular hatchway slides open in the blimp’s base, and a bright beam of purple light stabs out. It surrounds Ki, and he rises slowly until the ship swallows him. The rest of us are to travel together, the Harrowers surrounding me in a tight circle as they wait for the antigravity beam to activate a second time.

Eight to one. I might never get a better chance to break out, I think. But I am not ready. And, in the unlikely event that I did escape, Persephone might suffer for it.

We alight in the cargo hold of the airship. But this is the baronial ship, and even this area is draped with velvet, carpeted in red. I am taken into a mirrored elevator, which responds to our call in seconds and plays soothing music during our brief upward journey.

The topmost deck. Fine art from a dozen worlds hangs in gilded frames. I think of my apartment, of the squalid little rooms in which all of Ki's subjects cower, and I am disgusted.

Ki is waiting for us at the end of a long corridor. He takes off a glove, and flattens his hand against a palm reader on the wall. A white door clicks open, and he indicates it with a nod. "Put him in with the other one."

The Harrowers bring me forward, and push me into a well-appointed guestroom. A huge, four-poster bed stands at its center, and a holo-print of the Time Traveler seems to follow my progress from its mounting on the wall above an oak chest of drawers. It is not what I expected from a prison cell, but I assume it is all that was available on this vessel. And a prison cell it certainly is, despite appearances to the contrary.

"Enjoy it while you can," sneers Ki. "I doubt the Reptos will be so hospitable."

The door closes and locks behind me, but I am barely aware of it. My gaze is rooted upon my cellmate. He, in turn, has climbed to his feet from the bed, and is staring at me.

"Acroyear!" exclaims Ryan Archer. "Man, am I glad to see you again!"

For the next hour, we say nothing. I slump into a comfortable chair, and sit with my chin in my hands, the regular sound of my breathing filling my helmet, the events of the past few days filling my mind as my body recovers.

It is hard for me to accept what has happened. I thought I knew where my life was leading me, but it was not to here. My destiny still lies before me—I can still save Micropolis—and maybe, I think, it is best this way. I remember what the news sheet told me, about the consequences of my attack upon the System: the suffering, the misery, the deaths. Somehow, Persephone made all that seem unimportant, a price worth paying for freedom. I went along with her, although I had seen the future, although I knew that any freedom gained would be temporary. And I did it because, casting all logic aside, I thought I could change what was to come. I thought I could make a difference.

And maybe I was right. If Maruunus Ki can defy the future, then why can't I?

I already know the answer to that. Ki knows it, too. He may be willing to play games, to gamble with the lives of every one of his subjects—but am I?

Maybe it *is* best this way. But I am a warrior, much as I might wish now that I could have remained ignorant of my heritage. The knowledge of my defeat is a resentful beast, waiting in my chest for a chance to burst free and consume those who have thought to belittle me.

Ryan Archer, to his credit, has not disturbed me. He understands that I do not wish to talk. He has fallen into a light doze on the huge bed. When I first saw him here, I felt a rush of resentment towards him. I blamed him for telling his interrogators about Persephone. I look, now, at the purple bruises on his face and beneath the tears in his coveralls, and I remember that even I was broken, once.

Had Archer not come to see me, if he'd had the sense to abandon me, he would not be here. Clearly, Ki hopes to gain the Reptos' favor by handing them an accomplice to my crimes.

I recall our conversation, that night in my apartment. I haven't thought about it much, until now. I let Persephone tell me what to do, and I tried to ignore the things I didn't understand. I wanted to be sure of myself. I did not want to be confused anymore.

I am not confused now. Suddenly, I think I know what the boy was trying to tell me.

I am woken by the sound of the door. I must have dozed for an hour or more. We have not moved. I expected the airship to get underway some time ago, but its engines are idling, just keeping us afloat. Ki must have more business in the System complex below us.

Breakfast, for Ryan Archer, is a glass of water and a bowl of purple oats, carried on a tray and slapped down on the table by a begrudging Harrower. As he turns to leave, I leap out of my seat, spring across the room and take him by the arm. He reaches for his shock baton with his free hand, but I pin his wrist to the wall.

"I want you to take a message to Ki," I growl. The guard stares mutinously at me, but he is shaking with fear. He could call for backup, but he would be dead before it arrived. "Tell him I want to see Persephone. I need proof that he has kept his word."

"You're a prisoner," splutters the Harrower. "You don't make demands."

I tighten my grip on his wrist, just enough to feel the bones shifting beneath my thumb. "And you are a cringing lackey, who cannot tie his own bootlaces without Ki's authorization. So, go to your master and tell him that, if I don't see my friend, our deal is off!"

I let the Harrower go, and he backs away from me, as far as the doorway. I watch his fingers as they twitch over his baton, but he thinks better of provoking me further. He closes the door, and I hear the clunk of its lock sliding into place.

"I hope you know what you're doing," says Ryan Archer, quietly.

"I am not afraid of Ki's thugs."

"I, um, didn't mean with him. I meant with Persephone."

I round on him, angered by the insinuation. Archer reads my body language, and holds up his hands in a placatory gesture. "Just saying, that's all."

He takes a seat at the table, grimacing at the unedifying sight of his meal. "Getting used to this stuff," he mutters wryly. He takes a spoonful, wrinkling his nose with distaste as he moves it to his mouth. He sees me looking at him, and adds, "You know, I used to think you had it pretty rough, not being able to eat. Now, I figure you're the lucky one."

"You do not belong here," I say.

He frowns, unsure of my meaning. "Well...there are places I'd rather be, sure."

"You don't belong in this city. This galaxy. This—" I search for the word "—timeline."

Archer's eyes widen. He sets down his spoon, and gives me his full attention. "I..."

"Persephone told me," I say. "She explained how the Time Traveler came from another reality, how he created *our* reality as a side-effect of his journey. I have even glimpsed his timeline, I think. I saw you, me, Persephone, and...and three others. A...an Antron?"

"No. No, a Vaerian. Knave. He's called Knave! What else do you remember?"

"Robots. One tall, with shining eyes. The other short, with wheels."

"Biotron and Microtron!" cries Archer. "Where did you see them?"

I intended to ask questions, not answer them. Still, after a moment's consideration, I decide that it can do no harm to tell him about the Pharoid chamber. Archer becomes more and more excited as I talk, nodding enthusiastically. "I...I think I remember," he whispers. "Climbing down the ladder. Three consoles. A pyramid of light."

“You, too, have forgotten your past?”

“No. Well...yeah, I guess so. But not like you mean. I haven’t been brainwashed. I remember my childhood and everything—in this timeline, anyway. I’m not really *from* the Time Traveler’s reality. It’s just that I...he contacted me, and...” He lets out a slow breath, blowing out his cheeks. “I should start at the beginning, shouldn’t I?”

I make no response.

“I told you I wasn’t from Micropolis. I’m not even from this galaxy. I grew up a long way from here. A whole other dimension. A planet called Earth. We’d never had contact with other races. I mean, the farthest we’d gotten was to our own moon. But then, this...this hole in space opened up—‘the Rift,’ we called it—in this hick town called Angel’s Gift, and I...well, my Dad worked for the government, investigating stuff like that, and I just sort of tagged along with him. That’s how I came to meet some people from *your* galaxy. ‘Micronauts,’ we called them, because they were...on our side of the Rift, they were a lot smaller than us. Knave was there, and this pair of mercenaries, Ordaal and Nova.” He seems to expect me to recognize the names. I do not. “And that’s when I started to have these weird dreams about the Time Traveler. I mean, I’d never seen this guy in my life, but there he was, in my head, asking me to help him. He said history had been, like, pushed off course and I had to put it right. I didn’t believe him at first, but then...then, some stuff happened, and I...well, now I do.”

One thing doesn’t make sense to me. “Why would the Time Traveler contact you? Why go to this...this ‘Earth’ for help?”

“I’m still trying to work that one out,” says Archer. “Best I can figure is that I...*we*...had something to do with messing up the timelines in the first place.”

“Explain.”

“Ever since the Time Traveler first came to me, I’ve been having these...visions. Like flashbacks, only to things that never happened.”

“Images from his timeline,” I deduce.

“I know it sounds nuts, but the images...the *memories*...they seem so real. I see myself, but it’s a different me. And I see Knave and Ordaal and Nova, and...and you.”

“Tell me about the Time Traveler’s reality.”

“Well...okay, I’ve been trying to put the pieces together, and this is what I’ve come up with so far.” Archer rises from his seat, abandoning his meal altogether. He crosses the room, and settles into a more comfortable armchair. I sit beside him.

“Some things were the same,” he begins, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. “I grew up the same, I’m sure of that. Well, that’d make sense. Somehow, the Time Traveler’s presence changed everything in this galaxy—but Earth wasn’t affected until the Rift opened, until what happened *here* began to have an effect on what happened *there*. And there *was* a Rift, I remember that much. It wasn’t in the same place, it didn’t open at the same time, but I remember the Rift. I remember the—” he shudders, involuntarily “—the Harrowers. They burst through, into our world, in these giant battle suits, looking for me. They...they killed my father, and brought me here. To a galaxy ruled by a psychotic power junkie.”

“It has been many years since the last Emperor fell,” I point out.

Archer nods. “This guy, he’d killed the last one himself. He was like...no exaggeration, he was like the embodiment of pure evil, he just felt...he had that kind of presence, you know? I mean, compared to him, Ki...Ki was just one of his soldiers. The Emperor, he had all these plans for me, some crazy idea that I’d be his protégé, carry on his work after he’d gone. I don’t know why he chose me. I got the hell

away from him, first chance I got. *You* got me away. You and a few others, opposed to his rule. Knave, I already mentioned. Microtron was a...I'm not sure, I think he came from my world, but he'd been altered somehow." He pauses, staring into space for a moment, his brow knitted in concentration. "Koriah! I remember Koriah. I thought she'd died. I remember holding her, but...no, she pulled through...I think I'm sure...she came with us...and Biotron..."

His eyes have clouded, as he searches for memories in the fog of his mind. I know how he feels, but I am impatient to learn more. "Persephone?" I prompt him.

"Yeah." He nods. "Persephone was there, too. After that, just snatches of memory: A shootout...Biotron leading us to a ship...on the run...Ordaal's mercenaries...I remember a world where we fought these huge scorpion creatures, and I...I met a Time Traveler."

I raise my eyebrows. "The Time Traveler? You knew him?"

"He was a different guy, I think. Maybe someone else who'd used the Pharoids' technology. An actual Pharoid, maybe, I don't know. His suit looked different. But he showed me the past. He showed me where the Emperor came from, and he showed me his future. He showed me..." Archer pauses and looks at me, as if afraid of how I might react. "He showed me our deaths, all of us. He said the Emperor was destined to kill us."

I stiffen. His words have struck a raw nerve.

"But the Time Traveler said," he continues quickly, "he said the future is always in motion, uncertain. He said we could change what was to happen. He said we had to fight."

"Then, we...fought together? Comrades?"

"You taught me how," grins Archer. "That's why I came here. That's why I came looking for you. The Time Traveler—our Time Traveler, the one in my dreams—wants me to fix things, but I don't know how. I thought, maybe, with your help..."

I am on the verge of an idea so big that I cannot believe I am considering it. I *can* change the future, and more. I can rewrite the past. I can not only avenge my years of enslavement, I can wipe them away so that they never happened.

"What else do you remember?" I ask, eagerly.

"Just this one time," says Archer. "This one incident...it keeps coming back to me, as if it's important. As if the Time Traveler wants me to remember."

"Tell me."

"It was..." he begins, uncertainly. "We were..." He takes a deep breath. "Nova. The bounty hunter. I mentioned her, remember? Azura Nova. In this timeline, she was a...a General, I think. In charge of the Harriers. They were the Emperor's airborne troops. She shot us down, over a planet. *This* planet, I think. Only...there was no city, no people here. Micropolis hadn't been built. Or maybe it had, but... somewhere else. We climbed out of the wreckage, the six of us, and there was just...just desert. Brown sand. And the Harriers, they were circling above us. We had to get away from the crash site, and Biotron, he said he'd detected some building or other, and maybe we could take shelter there." His eyes cloud over again. "I remember...the blazing suns. We walked forever. Microtron got sand in his casing. But you kept us going, kept telling us that, if we stopped, we were dead. And we found it. A pyramid, built from slabs of stone. It was ancient, crumbling."

"A Pharoid construct?"

"I guess. The sand had almost buried it, but the tip was showing, like a marker. Like we were meant to

find it. Biotron dug down to the entrance—these big double doors, marked with rows of pictograms—but, once we were inside...” Archer’s face crumples in frustration. “I don’t know. The chamber...when you described it, I just had this sense of déjà vu, you know? I *was* there, and something happened. Something big. Why can’t I remember?”

“Do not try to force it,” I advise him. “The memory will come, in time.”

Archer lies on the bed, on his back, his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. I have been pacing the width of the guestroom, restlessly. I need something to happen, even if it is something bad. I cannot bear this monotony.

I hammer on the door, impatiently. “I want to see Persephone!” I shout through the wood, but nobody responds. I could rip the door from its hinges—I am feeling strong enough now—but Ki is no fool. He will have posted enough guards in the corridors to defeat me. I would expend my energy for nothing. Better to contain myself, to pick my moment.

I turn to Archer. “You never told me about her.”

He pulls himself up into a sitting position and looks at me, shaken from his reverie.

“Persephone,” I say. “She appeared in your dreams. She was one of our comrades, in the Time Traveler’s timeline. You confirmed that much about her, but no more.”

“The thing is, Acroyear...” he says awkwardly, nervously. “The thing about Persephone is...I never said she was our comrade. She...came with us, yeah, but she...well, she didn’t have much say in the matter. We’d kind of...we’d taken her hostage.”

“Hostage?” I echo in disbelief, not quite able to grasp the implications of the word.

“Well, yeah,” says Archer. “That’s why...I mean, if you hadn’t had a sword to her throat, we’d never have...”

“She...meant something to the Emperor, then?”

“I think she might have been the only thing that did.”

I remember Archer’s note, under my door. “You can’t trust her,” I whisper to myself.

“But that was in the other timeline,” he says quickly, “and even there, she...I thought she could have been...I don’t think it was her fault. The Baron got his hands on Persephone when she was only a kid. He brainwashed her. He corrupted her like he wanted to corrupt me. Like he’d been corrupted by his own predecessor. When she realized what was going down, who the bad guys were...I just think, if it weren’t for him, if he hadn’t adopted her...”

“What was his name?” I ask, abruptly. “This Emperor? This Baron?”

I know the answer before it comes. I have already put the pieces together.

“He was called Karza!”

We are left alone for several hours. Our guards don’t even bring lunch. Ryan Archer’s stomach begins to make rumbling noises, and eventually he is forced to eat his cold breakfast.

Eventually, however, the door opens again, and the guard from this morning returns with a fresh tray, its contents identical to the first. This time, he has brought two more Harrowers with him. They wait in the doorway, keeping their blaster weapons trained on me.

“Did you take my message to Ki?” I ask, in a threatening rumble.

The Harrower licks his dry lips. “The Baron doesn’t act on your convenience. He might deal with your request later, if he is not busy.” He drops his tray on the table, almost spilling Archer’s water. He picks up the old tray, his hands trembling so much that the spoon rattles in the empty bowl, and he scuttles away.

I have more questions to ask. I wait until Archer has finished eating.

“How did you find me? How did you even know I existed in this version of reality?”

“Knave brought me here,” he says. “I told you about Knave, right? The Vaerian. I hooked up with him on Earth. Ordaal had taken him there as a slave, and...well, none of that matters now. The Time Traveler was calling me here, through the Rift, and after a bit of kicking and screaming, I gave in and came to him. We took Ordaal’s ship, the *Sunrunner*, just Knave and me. Knave had heard of the Time Traveler, and he’d heard of you. You’re both pretty famous, you know. And you both happened to be in the same city...It seemed like fate.”

“Where is your ship now?”

“Still in wide orbit, I hope. I haven’t had a chance to contact Knave in days. We fixed a rendezvous point, outside the city, and I buried a signal device there. I didn’t want to keep it on me in case I was searched, you know?”

“Then, we only have to reach the device and operate it...”

“And Knave’ll come down and get us. That’s the plan, anyway.”

“What about the blockade?”

“We poked around in the *Sunrunner*’s computers, found Ordaal’s clearance codes. Looks like he did a lot of business with Ki.” I nod. The Baron is certainly not above hiring common mercenaries to get what—or whom—he wants. “Anyway,” says Archer, “the codes got us down here once already. I just hope they’ll work a second time.”

“There is also,” I remind him, “the small matter of our incarceration.”

“Yeah,” he sighs, “there’s that, too. Any ideas?”

“When the time comes,” I say, “we must be ready to fight.”

“Um...yeah, right.” Archer lies down on the bed again. Reflectively, he says, “Even if we do get out of here, we’ve got to find a way into that Pharoid chamber.”

“Is that necessary?” I ask, disappointed. I had allowed myself to dream of leaving this world; in the face of that possibility, the obstacles in my path had seemed small indeed.

“If we want to find out about the Time Traveler, it’s the best lead we’ve got. The equipment in that chamber...I think it’s where he might have come from.”

“I have been there,” I insist. “I saw nothing, and nobody.”

“It might be different for me. The Time Traveler might show me. I might remember.”

I scowl, behind my helmet. “You speak of this Karza. An evil man, you say, who held a galaxy in his grip. But you plot to restore his timeline, return him to his throne.”

“I...guess so. I’m not sure. I just want to...”

“Maybe, for all that is wrong with this universe, it is preferable to the alternative.”

He looks away from me, as if to hide a secret hurt. “And I’ve thought about that,” he mumbles, “don’t think I haven’t. I’m just doing what the Time Traveler wants. Maybe, when I understand more, when I know what he expects of me, I’ll be able to decide...”

We lapse into another long silence, then. I begin to pace again, wondering how long it has been since Ki got my first message. Is he making me wait out of sheer sadism, or because he does not want to admit that Persephone is dead? Perhaps he fears what I would do.

I make for the door, fully intending to tear it open after all. I might not be able to escape, but Ki cannot have me killed. He needs me. He can hurt me, but I can bear that. I am not afraid. I can do a great deal of damage before I am restrained. I can make my point.

I hear footsteps, out in the carpeted corridor. Ki’s voice, instructing a subordinate to unlock the guestroom. I step back from the door, my stomach fluttering in anticipation.

“Oh, God,” moans Archer, suddenly, from the bed. He sits up abruptly, clutching his head with his hands as if he is in pain. “Oh, God, it’s just come to me...He *was* there. I know he was there. I saw him. I...I’m looking up into his face. That silver mask. And he’s just...he’s just standing there, staring at me, eyes blank, expressionless...”

“The Time Traveler?” I ask, eagerly. “You saw him in the Pharoid chamber?”

“Yes. I...no...no, I don’t know. I don’t think...” He grits his teeth and buries his head in his knees, concentrating. “In the temple. The Pharoid pyramid. But on one of the upper levels, I think. He might have...I think he led us down into that basement. He was waiting for us. I think he’d been waiting for a very long time. Hundreds of years.”

I have no time to ask further questions. The door opens, and a quartet of Harrowers escort Maruunus Ki into the room. Ki and one other.

“Persephone!” I gasp.

“Acroyear,” she responds, with a curt nod. “I believe you wished to see me.”

She looks well. I detect a certain stiffness to her posture, a certain amount of controlled pain in the rigidity of her expression, but she is standing. Alive. So, it is true that Ki’s personal doctors have advanced equipment and techniques kept from the masses.

I am filled with joy at the sight of her. I don’t think I acknowledged to myself, before, how little hope I had that she could be saved at all. I want to go to her. I want to fall to my knees before her and pray forgiveness for failing her. I want to hold her, and protect her forever.

But there is something wrong. Something in the way she stands at Ki’s side, her head held high. Not like a prisoner. Of course, she has always been proud. But the Harrowers, I note, maintain a respectful distance—not just around their master, but around her, too. And her clothing...Gone are the torn and bloodied coveralls. Now, she wears a padded blue jumpsuit.

Archer senses it, too, I think. He gets off the bed, slowly, climbing to his feet.

Ki’s smug grin threatens to split his face wide open. “Nothing to say, Nanissar? I thought this was what you wanted. We have restored Persephone to full health. Of course, she was already receiving medical care before you made your request. Why shouldn’t she?”

I look into her expressionless face, imploringly. This cannot be true. Tell me it is not true!

“She is a loyal soldier, after all,” boasts Ki, “and she has succeeded admirably in her mission. She has brought you here to fulfil your destiny. She has brought you here to die!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Persephone...”

I cannot accept what I am hearing. Just as I would not listen to Archer’s warnings. I still want to believe that this is a trick on Ki’s part, intended to demoralize me.

I take two lurching steps toward her, and four blaster weapons snap up into their firing positions. I reach for her, but she bats my hand away with a snarl of contempt.

“You pathetic creature!” she spits. “Living as a slave all these years...beaten, humiliated, doomed to an ignoble death. What did you imagine I saw in you? You are weak, Nanissar. A disgrace to the proud name of the Acroyears, unfit to wear their armor.”

I feel as if she is turning a knife in my chest. “Everything you told me...all lies?” My voice is a pleading whine. I am a hero no longer, just a broken man. I want to hit her, make her pay for lifting me up and dashing me onto the rocks of despair. But I cannot conceive of ever hurting her. She is right. I am pathetic.

“Most of it was true,” she shrugs. “I was sent here to keep the Reptos from moving the Time Traveler, and that is my only concern. Lord Ki showed me the manuscript—the news sheet from the future, which you were so keen to hide from me. He convinced me that destiny was on our side. But the future, we agreed, was too important to leave to chance. It needed a push in the right direction.”

“I’d broken you, little man,” sneers Ki. “You were a shell of your old self. You would have cowered from the future forever, had I not stepped in. With Persephone’s help, I brought you here. Every choice you made, every step you took, was guided by me.”

It is too much. My anger boils over, and it has a target now. I launch myself at Ki, intending to throttle the smirk from his face. But I am slow, not yet recovered from last night’s ordeal, and he catches my arm and twists it, dropping me to my knees and keeping me there with the strength of his battle armor. The four Harrowers surround me, and electric fire lances through me again.

Archer is shouting, pleading on my behalf. “Leave him alone! Don’t you think you’ve hurt him enough?”

But, through the fire, through the blurring of my vision, I see only one face. I stare up into Persephone’s cold, disdainful eyes, and maybe I see something there. A flicker of sympathy; a hint of regret. Or maybe I only see what I want to see.

Ki and the Harrowers depart, taking her with them, leaving me a whimpering ball of pain. Ryan Archer stands over me, shuffling from foot to foot. He claims to have been my friend, my comrade—somewhere, sometime—but he is still nervous around me.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “I tried to stop them, I...”

I drag myself to my feet. I will not prove her right. I will not be as weak as she thinks I am.

Archer is still talking, but I don’t listen. The only voices I will hear now are in my head, the voices of those who wore this armor before me.

Ki has made a mistake. He should have kept up the pretence that Persephone cared for me. But he is a vain man; he couldn’t enjoy a victory that his enemy did not know about. And so, he has thrown away a potential hostage, his greatest hold over me. No doubt, he thinks I will fight the Reptos anyway, out of

a sense of duty. Not so long ago, he may have been right.

But, if Archer's tale is true, if we can solve the Time Traveler's riddle, then none of this will matter. I do not have to do what anybody expects of me.

I do not have to accept the future. I can change the past.

I hear them again. Ki's soldiers, marching in step. They are not alone. Rasping breaths, and the creaking of folded wings. I climb to my feet. Ryan Archer stands, too, taking his cue from me.

"It is almost time," I growl under my breath. "Be ready." He nods, but his eyes betray his anxiety. I cannot rely on him.

The door clicks open, and the room fills with Harrowers. They surround us, thrusting our hands into heavy wrist clamps. I do not resist. I don't even look at them. Nor do I meet the smirking, mocking gaze of Maruunus Ki. I focus my attention upon the creatures in the doorway behind him.

Only two Reptos have come to collect us. Their yellow eyes flash angrily, and they crane forward, grumbling and twitching in their eagerness to lay claws upon me. One of them is drooling, its snakelike tongue flicking in and out of its hideous maw.

A light on my clamp snaps on, to indicate that my wrists are secure. Our hands buried in plastic, Archer and I are ushered out of the guestroom by the prodding of guns in our backs. More Harrowers line the corridors of the airship, guarding all possible escape routes.

Two more Reptos wait for us at a circular hatch. The first is taller than the others; its scales are a darker green in color, cracked and patterned with white flecks. A red scar runs from the corner of its right eye, down to its jaw. It hisses at me, its nostrils flaring. "So, this is the saboteur; the warm-blooded killer of my brave brothers." Behind me, Archer tries to back away, only to be brought up short by Harrowers. I stand my ground.

"Maybe now you will believe me, Nest Leader," says Ki tartly. "I have done everything in my power to honor our deal. Unfortunately, some dissident elements fear our united strength, and will dare anything to sunder our alliance."

The Nest Leader narrows its eyes to yellow slits. "I trust, now that the mammal and its disgusting accomplice are in custody, there will be no further delays to the project?"

"My people are still working to reopen the Pharoid chamber. However, they face a difficult task. The cave-in—"

"How much longer, Ki?" hisses the aged Repto, impatiently. Its escort, I notice, has a tank strapped to its back; it brings up a hose attachment, twists a nozzle and douses its commander in a fine spray of water. The Nest Leader shudders with pleasure—but its eyes remain angry, and fixed upon the Baron. "It is a simple question, is it not? You would not know the location of the chamber at all, were it not for us. You are a greedy man, Ki. You must be tempted to take the Pharoids' secrets for yourself."

"Nothing could be further from my mind, I assure you." Ki's tone is painstakingly polite, but a muscle twitches beneath his eye. He does not like being addressed with such disrespect, especially not in front of his prisoners. Inwardly, I know he will be plotting his revenge.

"For your sake, I hope that is the truth!"

"Perhaps we should let your men deal with the prisoners," says Ki pointedly, "while we discuss this matter in my quarters."

“Agreed.” The Nest Leader does not wait for the Baron to lead the way. As it marches off, its escort hurries after it with the water tank, obsequiously moistening its back. Ki’s expression briefly creases with resentment, but he composes himself and follows.

The remaining two Reptos take charge of Archer and me, bundling us through the hatchway and off the airship. I had not felt the vessel land, so I knew what to expect; Archer, however, halts in his tracks and lets out a quiet exclamation of alarm.

The airship is old technology, and the Reptos couldn’t dock directly on to it. Instead, a docking tube reaches from one ship to the other. Its corrugated plastic is semi-transparent, and as we step into it, we see the alien vessel waiting for us: a dirty, green-brown, spear-shaped craft, semi-organic like the Terraphants. We also see smog ribbons in the evening sky beneath our feet—and, when they separate, the System complex laid out below. For a second, even my senses insist that I am walking on air, and my stomach reacts accordingly.

Archer, however, is given no time to overcome his vertigo. The Reptos tear at our clothing, pulling us onward, and two Harrowers enter the tube behind us, batons at the ready.

We make awkward progress. The docking tube stretches and twists as air currents pull the floating ships apart, only to push them back together. Archer is wrong-footed more than once, but the Reptos prevent him from falling, crowding around us, hemming us both in.

We stumble onto their ship, at last. Inside, the air feels damp, and the corridors are lit with a dim, greenish tint. The walls are encrusted with old slime and dribbling with fresh water, and there is a strong musty smell.

Curious Reptos line up to hiss and snarl at us as we are marched by. Some even lash out, and Archer flinches as he takes a shallow cut to his arm. Another Repto squeals as it blunts its claws on my shoulder harness. I count sixteen of the creatures, and there are doubtless more; many more than I had hoped. After what I did to its initial, five-strong contingent, the Repto High Command is taking no chances—and Ki, presumably, was in no position to argue about the number of “representatives” he allowed into his airspace this time.

He is playing a dangerous game. We all are.

An elevator platform takes us slowly into the bowels of the spaceship, where the air is colder and dryer. We halt in front of a heavy door, and one of our Repto guards sinks the claws of its right hand into three indentations in the wall. It twists a disc-shaped panel half a rotation clockwise, and the door slides open. Archer and I are prodded into a small, dark cell, with no windows and no furniture.

Two sets of chains are attached to the slime-dripping wall. Rusted manacles trail open on the floor; once we are fastened into them, escape will be almost impossible. The Reptos and Harrowers squeeze into the cell beside us, and one of the latter produces a penlight-shaped device, which he touches to Archer’s wrist clamp. An electronic key, I presume; Ki will want his equipment back. Once our hands are free, we will have our best, our only, chance.

“It is time,” I whisper to my fellow prisoner. He stiffens, almost imperceptibly.

The Harrower seems to be having trouble. His key makes a shrill whining noise, which cuts in and out like a faint radio signal. One of the Reptos grows so impatient that he tries to snatch the device, but the Harrower shrugs him away, irritably.

“Mammals!” spits the creature in disgust. “Your technology is as unreliable as your soft, weak bodies.”

Archer’s clamp falls away, at last. The Harrower, tight-lipped, takes him by the arm and thrusts him at the Reptos. They manhandle him across the room, and hurl him to the floor, among the chains. I had

hoped they would make the mistake of unshackling me first.

Archer casts a quick glance at me, then says loudly, “If you Reptos are so tough, why do you need Ki’s goons for backup? Couldn’t handle two ‘weak mammals’ alone?”

The creatures bridle. “We need no assistance from your kind.”

“It was your Lord who insisted on sending his guards with us.”

“And he insults us, by providing such feeble specimens.”

I can see what Archer is doing. I am surprised, even impressed. But he should have picked a better moment. He should have waited until I was free.

“Now, hold on a minute!” A Harrower—the key holder—has risen to the bait. “We were the ones who brought in the prisoners.”

“After you had allowed them to bury the Pharoid machines.”

“I didn’t see you guys doing much better,” chimes in Archer.

“Be silent!” A Repto delivers a resounding, backhanded blow to his cheek.

“He’s right,” argues the Harrower. “Five of your best fighters went after the prisoner. Five reptiles against one mammal, and they got their heads handed to them!”

“We have only Ki’s word for what happened.”

The second Harrower speaks up, then, in protest. “You question our Lord’s honesty?”

“I saw it for myself,” says his partner, his lips curling in contempt. “Acroyear went through those lizards like a knife through butter. They were slaughtered!”

With a furious roar, a Repto leaps for his throat. Surprised by the sudden ferocity of the attack, the Harrower gets off only one shot before falling in a spray of blood. The Repto staggers, clutching its hands to its stomach, and the second Harrower shoots him from behind. Both Reptos turn on the trembling guard; he makes for the door, but the injured creature springs into his path. He is backed into a corner, firing repeatedly. I throw myself to the floor as the small cell is filled with ricocheting bolts of energy.

Archer scrambles to my side, clutching the electronic key that must have fallen from the dead Harrower’s hand. He tries to operate it, but it cuts out on him as it did on its owner. And, suddenly, I realize that the gunfire has ceased.

One Repto lies dead, as does the second Harrower. But the other creature is rearing up behind Archer, and he hasn’t seen it yet. I yell at him, and he throws himself aside. He didn’t stop to look. He trusts me implicitly. Interesting...

I lever myself up and spring forward, in one movement, bringing my shackled hands around and using the locking clamp as a cudgel, striking the Repto’s jaw with all the force I can muster. It reels, almost falling. It claws at me, but it is dazed and slow. And Archer has one of the Harrowers’ blasters, his first shot punching the creature in the eye. It screams and buckles, and I hit it again on the back of its head, robbing it of consciousness.

For the next minute, I stand and listen. Fortunately, I hear no sound of approaching reinforcements, no sign that anybody heard our battle.

The second Harrower had been decapitated. His killer must have bitten the head from his body, and spat it out. It also mangled his blaster weapon; it is no good to us.

I hold out my hand toward Archer, and he gives me his gun. I roll the unconscious Repto onto its back with my foot, and shoot it twice in its tender stomach area, killing it. Archer winces, turns his back on the carnage, and walks quietly out of the room.

“It was necessary,” I tell him, outside. “If we are to get off this ship, we will need surprise on our side. Had the Repto woken, it would have informed its crewmates of our escape.”

Archer’s face is pale, but he does not argue.

We lock the cell door on the dead Reptos and Harrowers, and hope that nobody finds them—or, indeed, misses them—for a while. I give the blaster back to Archer; he needs it more than I, and he seems to know how to use it.

This lower deck is happily almost deserted, and we are able to explore, only once having to take cover from a pair of wandering Reptos. In a cavernous storage bay, however, we encounter a different type of creature altogether.

It is Archer who sees them coming; I left him watching the door while I pried open a succession of wooden crates. He runs toward me, motioning urgently with his hands, and we duck into our prearranged hiding place, behind a pile of boxes.

Peering through a gap, I see them striding past us. Only two of them—but I don’t want to risk a fight without knowing their capabilities. Their upright, two-legged bodies are protected by natural armor: plates of blood-red chitin, similar to those of the Scorpites. Each of them has two eyes, jutting out of its shell-like head on stalks, and prominent mandibles. I have not seen anything like them before, but a word lurks at the back of my thoughts: Mam...Mem...*Membros*! The armor remembers.

I had thought they were carrying weapons. Upon further inspection, I see that their arms *are* the weapons, from the elbow joints down. They are warriors, genetically engineered and cybernetically augmented to fight. The guns that take the place of their right arms are connected, via thin tubes, to packs on their backs. I think I recall that these...hydro-lasers?...were built for underwater combat, the Membros race’s specialty.

They must be on a security patrol, because they sweep through the bay without apparent purpose, and leave the way they came in. Archer breathes a sigh of relief. “Good thing they didn’t think to check the crates you opened,” he whispers.

“Indeed.”

“You find anything yet?”

I shake my head. Most of the containers appear to hold dehydrated meat.

“What are we looking for?” asks Archer, as we emerge cautiously from hiding.

“A means of abandoning a vehicle in flight.”

“You mean, like a glider pack?”

“Precisely.”

He mulls over that thought for a few seconds. Then: “What are the chances of a Repto ship carrying something like that? I mean...they’ve got wings of their own, right?”

“Unfortunately,” I say, “we are unlikely to survive Plan B.”

“Right. Um...well, no harm in checking out a few more boxes first, is there?”

“Perhaps you would like to suggest an area to search?” I am not sure I believe Archer’s claim to

unerring intuition, but at this point, his guess is as at least as good as mine.

His brow crumples in concentration, and he directs me uncertainly toward a dark corner of the bay. The first crate I open there contains a useless pile of circuit boards; the second, however, is packed with blaster rifles. In the next, I find a number of small, magnetic explosive devices; I take four. Hardly daring to hope, I search the other crates around me until I find one the right size and shape. I tear off its lid with my fingers, and a grin stretches across my face at the sight of the energy sword within.

I weigh it in my hands. It is competently, though not expertly, made. Its balance is not quite right, but I can compensate for that. It feels good to hold it.

I stride out of the cargo bay, past Ryan Archer, who shoots me a questioning look before scurrying to fall into step at my heels. “Plan B?” he asks, mournfully.

I shift my grip on the sword handle. “I think we are ready now,” I say.

I do not know my way around the Repto ship. However, I don’t mind betting that, if we keep heading forwards and upwards, we will reach the bridge. At one point, when I am unsure which of two passageways to take, I follow Archer’s instinct—and we come to a more populace area of the vessel. We are forced to take cover ever few steps now, as our enemies prowl the corridors. On more than one occasion, we are extremely fortunate to evade detection. When Archer pulls me into a side corridor, a second before a Repto emerges from a door behind us, I begin to wonder how far he is responsible for our good luck.

It doesn’t last, of course.

An elevator platform lifts us up to the top deck, and brings three Reptos into view.

Two of them haven’t seen us yet. I launch myself at the one that has, my sword tip cutting through its throat and slicing its vocal chords before it can let out a warning cry. The other two come for me, but I am like a whirlwind, limbs moving faster than I can think, and yet somehow remaining under my total control. The fight is fast and furious, my unprepared foes unable to lay a claw on me. I retrieve my sword from the heart of the last Repto to fall, and turn to find Archer watching wide-eyed from the platform, lowering the gun that he never had time to fire.

“Wow,” he breathes. “I’d forgotten what it was like to see you in action!”

The deck shudders beneath my feet. We are moving.

The alarms go off three minutes later, a deep emerald light filling the ship as a raucous klaxon sound fills my ears. I hid the three Repto corpses in a cleaning closet; could they have been discovered already? More likely, I think, somebody has investigated the cells.

I redouble my speed, rounding a corner and sighting the bridge through an open archway ahead. A solid blast door, presumably an intruder precaution, is dropping between us. I throw myself under it, and take its weight on my shoulders. It almost forces me to my knees, but I bear it long enough for Archer to scramble through.

The bridge fills a triangular area, viewscreens dominating two of its three walls. To my right, I see Ki’s airship receding slowly, beginning to lose definition behind a cloud of smog. Consoles stand against each wall: half-mechanical, half-biological; great lumps of bruised, rotting matter, manned by five Reptos in all. In the center of the room is a circular pool of dark water, presumably for the comfort of the absent Nest Leader.

Rushing to meet us are two Membros creatures, maybe the very ones we encountered in the storage

bay. Their blaster arms spit fire, and there is no cover on offer. I lower my head and rush them, drawing their attention from Archer. I deflect two close shots with my metallic armbands, and barrel between the creatures, pushing them aside. I take advantage of their confusion to reach for an explosive.

I hurl it across the bridge, and it hits a forward console and sticks to it. Two Reptos leap out of their seats, wings flapping in alarm. One retreats; the other scrabbles at the device and pries it loose, only for the bomb to detonate in its hands. It screams as it is engulfed in flames, and it dives into the dark pool, too late—its charred corpse floats on the water.

Smoke pours from the damaged console. Fortunately, the explosion was not powerful enough to rupture the bulkhead. Still, the ship lurches alarmingly, and its bridge crew fight to bring it back under control, giving me time to deal with their guard dogs.

I bring down my sword, severing the blaster attachment from a Membros arm. As it reels in shock, I spin around and swing at its comrade. The creature tries to dodge out of my way, but its movements are sluggish. My blade penetrates its shell, and draws blood from its shoulder.

Archer is circling, trying to get a clear shot past me. “I can handle them,” I yell. “Target the ship’s systems. Keep the Reptos busy!”

He does as instructed, firing into the nearest console, which erupts in the faces of its hapless operators. The ship reacts violently, throwing the one-armed Membros off its feet just as it was about to strike again.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” wails Archer.

I dispatch my remaining opponent with a thrust to its stomach. But the first Membros cannons into me from behind, even as the deck rights itself and then drops out from beneath me. I fall, the Membros on top of me, and we roll perilously close to the pool’s edge. I realize that the creature is trying to push me into the water, and I resist its efforts. It clambers onto me, blood dripping from the stump of its left arm, and it fires its hydro-laser at my head. Designed as it is to function underwater, the weapon whines in protest and emits a thin, weak beam of red light. Still, it could cut through my helmet, given enough time.

I bring up my feet and thrust the creature away. It flies into a Repto, distracting it from its urgent business, and slides to the deck. It is still trying to stand, thrashing its stump, when I hurl my sword at it, pinning it to a console by its throat.

A Repto has abandoned its malfunctioning instruments to advance upon Archer. He backs away from it, firing wildly. I am not even sure his eyes are open, but somehow he manages to strike a vital spot, and the advancing monster folds.

The remaining crewmembers are bringing the ship under control—it is level again, and slowing to a crawl—which frees one of their number to lunge at me. I do not have time to retrieve my sword, but I don’t need it. The creature snaps at me, but it cannot match my reflexes. It is a pilot or a technician, not a warrior. I catch hold of its jaws and lever them apart, until I hear a crack. The Repto falls, not dead but crippled and bleeding. Archer delivers a mercy shot to its head, showing no sign of his earlier squeamishness in the heat of the moment. Two to go...and they are torn between fighting me and keeping their stricken vessel in the air. They try to do both, to hold me at bay with one claw whilst keeping the other on their instruments. My sword slices through them both in seconds.

By the time I take the controls, our nose has dipped, dragging us into a steep dive. I heave back on the main column, trying to pull us out of it, but the engines are sluggish. I may have done too much damage. A hundred warning lights are blinking at me.

Gunfire. Another Membros has appeared behind me, crawling out of the water. Archer repels it with a volley of shots before it can get its bearings; it disappears below the surface, but I don't think it is dead. How many more creatures are lurking down there? Maybe the pool can be entered from a lower deck, a back route onto the bridge. And, casting a second glance over my shoulder, I see that the lowered blast door is glowing red hot. Somebody is pumping energy into it from the far side, and it is about to burst.

Even if I still thought I could make a half-safe landing, I would not have time. We have a minute, maybe less, before we are overwhelmed—and if I leave the controls, this ship will start to break up. Time for Plan C.

“Escape capsule!” I yell at Archer. He looks at me uncomprehendingly, and I direct him toward the nearest of two recessed hatchways with a nod of my head: an escape route for the Nest Leader and its senior officers.

We are picking up speed; I can't slow us down. The temperature is increasing.

“I can't get it open!” cries Archer. “There's some kind of combination keypad.”

“Try!” I snarl through clenched teeth. I have given him an impossible task, I know, but we have exhausted our options.

One thing, at least, is going my way. I have pulled the Repto ship out of its dive. We are climbing now, although the engines shriek with the strain. Another circuit shorts out, showering me in electrical sparks, and a desperate idea hits me. If am to die, then I will take as many Reptos and Harrowers with me as I can.

I have lost my bearings, and I search the smoky sky through the view-screens around me until I see it: A distant blob of hovering darkness that can only be Ki's airship. I keep climbing, banking the ship around, pushing the acceleration to maximum. The deck rattles under my feet, the control column like a writhing snake in my grasp. Archer is trying to crack the access code for the escape capsule, but I keep stealing his footing. It does not matter, now. The ship pulls out of my control, at last, and plunges into another suicidal dive—its nose is pointed directly at my fat target.

I am overcome by an unexpected sense of calm. I sit back and watch as the airship grows larger on the screen. I picture Maruunus Ki's face as he sees it coming, and I only regret that he might have time to bail out, that I will never know if I killed him or not.

And then I remember that Persephone is on board that ship, and I feel a cold pain in my stomach.

Forget her, say my voices, she betrayed you! But I am beginning to have doubts. If I die now, I ask myself, who will stop the Repto virus? Who will help the Time Traveler? Maybe I should surrender; take the small chance that I might live to fight another day.

“I've got it!” whoops Archer—as, to my amazement, the circular hatchway to the capsule irises open. That instinct of his again?

The blast door explodes—and, simultaneously, three Membros heads appear on the surface of the pool. Streams of fire converge on me from all sides as I leap out of my seat and run; I don't know how I manage to evade them all. I dive into the small, spherical capsule, hurling a second explosive over my shoulder. As Archer seals the hatch behind me, I cast around for the launch control. The first blast hits the hatch from outside, denting the metal. I find a big, red button and punch it.

The pod ejects, the sudden g-force slamming me into Archer, and Archer into the hull. We must have hurtled almost a mile in less than five seconds.

For one eerie, gravity-defying moment, our pod hangs in midair, Archer and I entangled on its floor. Then, it drops into freefall, and I fear that it may never come out of it. It was not designed for use

within a planetary atmosphere, and I don't know if we are far enough off the ground for whatever landing mechanisms the capsule has to catch us in time.

I am immensely relieved when a row of blue lights flickers on, and our plunge is slowed. Archer lies back, his brow soaked with sweat, closes his eyes, and lets out a deep breath.

There is one thing I still have to know. I find a small screen set into the capsule wall, and experiment with the controls beside it until it lights up. At first, I see only an expanse of gray—until I work out how to change the camera angle and focus. Now, the Repto craft appears in flickering monochrome. It is trailing smoke, but its crew must have regained partial control, because it is banking, trying to pull out of its collision course before it's too late.

It almost makes it. The capsule's monitor offers no sound, but I can imagine the tooth-curling screech as the underside of the spear-shaped ship scrapes across the skin of the baronial transport.

The wounded Repto vessel falls into a controlled spiral, limping earthward to die; the airship's demise is more spectacular. The first explosion blows out its rear engines, sparking a chain reaction. One section at a time, from stern to prow, the great vessel bursts into blossoms of flame, a victim of the volatile gases that once kept it afloat.

I watch closely as fragments of the airship's corpse are thrown clear. But the image is hazy, and I can't tell if any of the black shapes are capsules like this one.

One thing I can see, as we drift lower, is the damage to the System complex. At first, I dismiss the smoke as the usual byproduct of its processes; then, I see the fires, lighting up the skyline. Just like the news sheet prophesied.

An uncontrollable laugh rises from my throat, barking from my vocal chords, making Archer stare at me as if I am mad.

"You can't fight the future after all, Ki," I spit at the viewscreen. "You can't fight the future!"

CHAPTER NINE

The capsule does not land gently, but it lands in one piece. Having strapped ourselves into safety harnesses before impact, Archer and I are shaken but not hurt. We open the circular hatch, and are buried up to the knees in a deluge of fine, brown sand.

I take my sword to the pod's inner workings, shredding wires until I detect no further signs of electronic life. "It may have broadcast a tracking signal," I explain to the bemused Archer. "This way, we gain more time."

The System is still burning. Against the twilit horizon, I see the shapes of six Photon Sleds speeding toward the complex, doubtless from the city. This gives me all the information I need to calculate our position. The Repto ship spat us out in a roughly eastward direction. It will take us several hours to make our way back to Micropolis.

I set out along the most direct route. It is a risky strategy—should anyone find our half-buried capsule, they will be able to guess, and follow, our path with ease. But the greater risk, I consider, would be staying out here in the open any longer than we must.

We walk in silence, the euphoria of our escape dampened by our continuing peril. Night draws in around us, providing welcome concealment, but we have to remain alert. Every few minutes, we see the lights of another sled streaking across the sky, to our right. The Harrowers must have emptied every

one of their hangars. Fortunately, no searchlights flicker in our direction: With both the System and the Baron attacked, and either of them potentially crippled or dead, their priority must be damage limitation. For now. They will come after us soon, thirsting for vengeance.

As we near the city, we see the airships, following in the sleds' paths, nosing their way across the boundaries of Micropolis for what must be the first time in a decade. Ki's captains of industry, his privileged elite, come to assess the situation. They will feign concern, when all they really want to know is what they might gain or lose from this catastrophe. Aspiring eyes will already be set upon the Baron's throne.

The towers of Micropolis are dark, but its smokestacks are still belching. Wreathed in its own pollution, the city looks like a jagged hole punched out of the sky. I look for the light of the Time Traveler, but I cannot see it.

I turn to Archer. "You said there was no Micropolis in your timeline?"

"I don't think so," he says, "although I think... I think I might have seen a city like this, once." He lapses into a contemplative silence, and I do not disturb him. We trudge onward, covering another hundred meters before he speaks again. "It was... I was given a glimpse of the past. Baron Karza's past. He grew up in a place like Micropolis, only it... it was a long way from here. Throne-World, it was called. It was the Emperor's world."

I nod. "This place was once known as such."

"But Karza killed the Emperor, and rebuilt the world in his own image."

"It must have been an improvement."

"I... guess so. In some ways. Karza... he was evil, yeah. Evil and twisted. But he was a genius. He called his city Mechopolis. It was a... a technological Utopia. I've been there. I remember... shining towers... they had these rocket tubes: You just stepped into them, and they shot you from one side of the city to the other in a few seconds. Mantlo Tubes, they were called, after some great architect."

"Persephone was right," I mutter. "Ki has impeded progress. He has held back time here."

The guard at the city's edge has been doubled. Still, the Harrowers cannot know about us, as they are alert for people trying to leave Micropolis, not returning to it. We await our opportunity, then slip behind their turned backs and disappear into the shadows.

With so many sleds out at the System complex, there are few patrols tonight. We take full advantage of that. We walk until the suns rise, painting the sky in its usual yellow hue. Still, we have covered only a third of the distance to Sector Nineteen, and my old workplace.

Before the morning rush hour fills the streets, we take refuge inside an apartment building. Without the holo-belt, I cannot afford to be seen. We hide in a storage closet, peering around the door, until a woman—I think it is a woman; it is a strange life form, with a triangular purple head—passes us on her way to the elevators. Then, we break into her room. Archer rips off his smog mask and collapses, exhausted, onto her bed. Soon, he falls into a troubled sleep. I sit in a chair by the window, mulling over everything that has happened, searching the sky for the Time Traveler and trying not to think about Persephone.

Slowly, I realize that something is different. The background clatter of the factories has lessened, as if they are winding down. And I can hear voices. People seldom have much to talk about in Micropolis, but they are talking now, and they sound afraid. I risk opening the window, and leaning out of it until I can see the street below. Normally, the rush hour crowds resemble a complex machine, ribbons of

people passing each other as if drawn toward their workplaces on conveyor-belts. The System keeps them in line. Today, they are confused, bumping into each other, wandering dazed. A few people are weeping, writhing on the ground in despair. Even the traffic is lighter than it ought to be—and, as I watch, a Terraphant shakes its passengers loose and lies down sullenly in the middle of its lane.

It takes me a minute to see what should have been immediately obvious.

“The System is down,” I explain to Archer, when he wakes late in the afternoon. “The repercussions are still limited. Most people have gone to work as normal, through force of habit, but they are afraid. Afraid that their credits will not be paid on time. Afraid that there will be no food at the dispensaries. Afraid that they will have to face real life. As the day drags on, if the System does not return, they will become desperate.”

“You don’t think they’ll riot?” Archer looks worried. “I just went through a riot, back on Earth. I don’t recommend it.”

“This city—a city of billions of people—is about to go through forced withdrawal from one of the most powerful drugs ever known,” I say. “It will not be pleasant.”

“And it’s all our fault,” wails Archer. “We caused that crash!”

I glare at him. “It is Ki’s fault,” I snap, “for enslaving them in the first place! They are free now.” Quietly, wistfully, I add, “They are free, and they don’t know what to do next.”

Outside, a citizen is kicking at a System information point in tearful frustration. Once, he would have been executed for such a crime. Today, the Harrowers do not come.

By nightfall, the situation has worsened.

Archer and I slipped out of our borrowed apartment before the purple-headed woman returned. She looked forlornly at the broken lock on her door, then shut herself inside the room. We heard the sound of furniture being dragged across the floor.

We are in another apartment now, although we don’t know if its occupant has reported dutifully for a night shift or if he is among the thousands who roam the streets, disaffected. We can only see one stretch of road, one tiny fraction of this great city, from our window, but it is enough. The information points and shop fronts are in darkness, the only illumination coming from the headlights of hot-wired vehicles. We witness tears, breakdowns, and spontaneous outbreaks of violence. Vehicles and trashcans are overturned—and, at one point, a brick is hurled through the window of a closed plug-in center.

Harrower patrols have returned to the city, bearing torches to cleave the darkness. They deliver electric shocks to those who break the law—or to those who are just unfortunate enough to get in their way. But they cannot be everywhere at once, and their restraining influence ends as soon as they are out of sight. The curfew siren sounds early, but this only stokes the tangible sense of resentment in the air. If anything, more people take to the streets in protest, although many more watch, wide-eyed and pale, from their darkened rooms, waiting for the nightmare to end.

I wonder out loud at how it has come to this so quickly.

“Three meals,” mutters Archer, and I shoot him a questioning look. “Something that somebody on my world said,” he explains. “Any society is only three meals away from anarchy. Or was it revolution?” As if in response to his words, his stomach emits a hungry growl.

“Either way,” I say, “there is little we can do. I suggest we get underway again.”

“With all these people around?”

“I don’t think we will get a better chance.”

We steal a Warp Racer. In the circumstances, we feel that a single vehicle on the road at night should not attract undue attention. It takes Archer a few minutes to trip the ignition, and many people see us, but nobody cares. We drive with the canopy up, and I shrink down into the back seat of the cockpit. We pass several Harrowers, and draw a few bursts of gunfire, but they have better things to worry about— and easier marks—than us. That is, so long as they do not recognize my companion or catch a glimpse of my armor.

I direct Archer away from the main streets, hoping to avoid the worst of the trouble. In this, we are successful; even so, we progress slowly, obstructed by knots of people in the road. Some malcontents hurl bricks and stones at us, for want of a better target.

We witness a raid on a dispensary, its steel shutters wrenched from their hinges by the impact of a truck. Harrowers descend, but they are outnumbered by two hundred citizens, whose fear of slow starvation is greater than their fear of a quick death. As some of them emerge from the building, laden down with sacks of provisions—the food that has remained in storage because the System had not allocated it—they are attacked by others. Everybody wants more than his or her share, afraid that this will be the last they get.

An airship has come down in the center of Sector Twenty-Eight, its crew evidently not up to the task of piloting it without the System’s electronic guidance. By some miracle, it is intact—but, with the buildings around it aflame and its engines smoldering, it may combust at any moment. This has not deterred looters from swarming aboard, finding the sort of fine food and fine furniture that has always been denied to them. I see people struggling back to their apartments with easy chairs, gilt-edged picture frames and, in one case, a marble toilet seat. What good they think such trappings will do them now is unclear.

It is difficult to see through the throng, but I count at least three bodies on the floor. The blimp’s owners, I guess, have paid the price for their alliance with Ki, for leading a comfortable life at the expense of others. A day ago, I would not have thought Micropolis’s downtrodden masses capable of such savagery.

We turn our backs on that miserable scene. We can do nothing to help.

Turning a corner, we come upon a Photon Sled, turned sideways in the roadway, blocking our path. Archer steps on the brakes, and makes to reverse. But a Harrower has spotted us, and he is approaching our Warp Racer curiously. He sees me, his eyes widening—and, as we pull backwards away from him, he brings up his blaster.

The windscreen explodes, and Archer ducks and covers his face, but somehow manages to keep a hand on the wheel. He brings the vehicle around, with a squealing of tires, until it is pointed in the direction we wish to go, back down the road we came up. Before his foot can touch the accelerator, however, the Harrower leaps onto the racer’s elongated hood. He reaches into the vehicle and grabs Archer’s throat. Archer puts his foot down anyway, and the racer surges forward, but we can’t see where we are going.

As we accelerate, pedestrians scatter in front of us, but the Harrower hangs on to both vehicle and driver tenaciously. I struggle to draw my energy sword, to wield it in such close quarters.

The Harrower’s face turns ashen, his expression disbelieving, as I slice through his arm, just below the elbow. Then he slides away from me, landing helplessly beneath our wheels. The racer jolts over him,

but now we are speeding toward a brick wall. The Harrower's disembodied arm remains in position, its fingers locked around its victim's throat. I pry them loose as a spluttering Archer spins the steering wheel for dear life.

Somehow, he avoids a head-on collision, scraping the fender as we screech onto the sidewalk. Glancing over my shoulder, I see three more Harrowers running after us. A volley of blaster fire scorches the air around our vehicle, and at least one bystander is hit. Archer guns the engine, and we roar around the next corner, temporarily safe. But it cannot be long before our enemies take to their airborne sled.

Fortunately, the mine is only a couple of miles away, now. We abandon the suddenly conspicuous racer in a dark alleyway, and proceed on foot.

The pit below us is dark and quiet. Archer and I proceed carefully down its stone ramp, the angry sounds of the city becoming muted by distance and by the deadening acoustics of the bowl-shaped depression. I can make out the equipment shed now, its door hanging open—and a Crater Cruncher, lying abandoned, rubble stacked in its scoop. We stand in silence, our eyes adjusting, and the world around us suddenly seems a calm, still place. Unnaturally so, I fear. Whatever might be happening elsewhere, somehow I expected work to be continuing in Shaft 4d. I cannot imagine that Ki would abandon the chamber, unless he is truly dead.

I warily scan the pitch-black tunnel entrances. I keep expecting Harrowers to emerge from the openings and surround us. I experience a prickling sensation of foreboding, my instincts telling me that something is wrong here. But I detect nothing.

I take another step. And something leaps out of the darkness, and hits me.

The attack is entirely unexpected; I am not even braced for it. I fall, and the creature jumps after me. I manage to bring up my sword between us; my attacker falls onto it, and the blade sinks into its shoulder. It recoils, but makes no sound. Cold water drips onto me, from the creature's glistening shell. I press my advantage, bearing it down into the gravel. I know what it is now. Avoiding the Membros's weapon arms, I take its head and beat it repeatedly into the ground, until its shell cracks open to reveal a pulsating red brain.

I was lucky. I let my opponent get the upper hand; it could have killed me—except, I see now, that it was already wounded. Its right eyestalk has been separated from its head, leaving a gash that is still weeping. Why did I not detect the scent of damp seaweed and fresh blood? Why did I not hear footsteps? Where the hell did this thing come from?

"Do you think he was alone?" asks Archer, nervously.

I do not answer him. I stride across to the equipment shed, and he hurries after me. We take a safety helmet each. I activate the light on mine, and flash it around the pit to reassure myself that nobody and nothing else lurks in the shadows.

We climb over the threshold of Tunnel Four, and I lead the way through the maze beyond. I tread carefully, alert for any sign that we are not alone. There is nothing, but that does not comfort me. I feel that I can no longer trust my senses.

The blockage has been cleared. Explosives must have been employed, after all. Indeed, the scent of cordite lingers in the air. Ki risked damaging the very equipment for which he has been searching. He must have been desperate to reach it before the Reptos lost patience. And yet, only last night, he told the Nest Leader that there was still some way to go.

We step into the Pharoid chamber, and I feel a chill. The toe of my boot touches something soft, and my stomach tightens at the thought that it might be Bilan Tench. But no, this is not where I left his body, nor where Ethridge fell.

I point my light downwards, and its beam bounces off the curved surface of a black helmet. I have indeed stumbled upon a corpse, but it is not one I recognize. It is—*was*—a Harrower. His throat has been slashed open. Searching the rest of the room, I find at least six of his comrades—and there are Reptos, too. Just three of them. There was a battle here. The Harrowers, it seems, lost.

Archer directs his own light toward the chamber's center. He is shaking his head, muttering to himself. "This isn't right. This isn't what I saw."

He is right. Our beams converge upon a haphazard collection of upturned machinery. The three consoles are gone, replaced by a collection of spare parts. Junk. Closer inspection reveals that every box and cabinet is labeled with Pharoid pictograms, but I see nothing familiar. Even the sarcophagi have been removed from the chamber's three corners. Some of the equipment has been blasted to bits; much of it bears deep claw gouges.

I hear a sound—a nervous shuffling. Spinning around, I pinpoint the source. One of the Harrowers was playing dead; he is making for the exit, on his hands and knees, trying to slip away behind our backs. He recoils as I leap to head him off. He tries to stand, tries to bring up his blaster, but can do neither. He is wounded, I see, his shoulder bloodied. His dehumanizing helmet has slipped from his head, revealing a young face with tousled brown hair. He looks up at me in a silent plea for mercy.

"Talk to me," I demand. "What happened here?"

"The Reptos. They attacked us. They..."

"The machines," I prompt him curtly. "Where are the machines?"

"We emptied the chamber. The Baron had us take everything to his palace."

"Everything here is a fake," I deduce. "Or perhaps it is real, but useless. Ancient, obsolete machines excavated from other sites or delivered to Ki by the time breaks."

The young man nods, eagerly. "The Reptos are primitives, lacking in intelligence. The Baron thought it would take them months to discover his ruse, if they ever did."

"But they weren't fooled, were they?" says Archer.

"They knew the location of the chamber," I remind him. "Maybe, like us, they also knew what it contained." On an impulse, I shine my light up at the ceiling hatch. It hangs open, but there is nothing behind it, only terraformed concrete.

"They came to collect the equipment, just a few hours ago. They...they went berserk! We couldn't stop them." Our captive is weakening. He rolls onto his side, clutching his stomach, and his breath comes in short, labored gasps.

"What do we do with him?" Archer whispers to me. "We can't...you know..."

"He is our enemy," I say firmly. "Given a chance, he would kill us both and expect a reward for his bravery. We cannot allow him to relay our position to his comrades."

"He's just a kid, Acroyear!"

"You would not think so, were he still fully armored!" I had not given a thought, before, to the similarities between Archer and Ki's people. They have the same body shape; the same facial features, arranged in the same manner. Archer is probably asking himself what he would do in this young man's

shoes. Would he refuse membership in Ki's militia, turn down his only chance to lift his family out of ruinous poverty? Would he question his orders, knowing that to do so would mean death? Could he be strong, or would he wind up hiding behind the armor? He has looked into his enemy's eyes, and seen himself reflected there.

"Fortunately," I say, "the decision is in greater hands than ours."

We watch as the Harrower's eyes close, as he takes his final gurgling breath and falls still. Archer cannot seem to tear his gaze away; I don't know what he is thinking now.

Finally, he turns to me, his face pale, and says, "Let's get out of here."

"Should we not stay? I thought the surroundings might help you to remember."

He shakes his head vehemently. "We wasted our time coming here. I don't know what I expected... I just know that this place stinks of death, and I feel shut in, and I just want to get out of here. Okay?"

I accede to the request, although I share Archer's disappointment and frustration.

We tramp back to the surface, not caring to hide our lights this time. Reaching the tunnel mouth, we stop to rest, by unvoiced agreement. Archer sits with his back against the wall, his knees drawn up to his chest, a distant look on his face.

"So, what do you think the Reptos will do now?" he asks, presently. "They must be pretty steamed at Ki."

"For all I care," I retort, "they can kill each other. It is none of our concern."

"It's just... I just... I don't know what to do. For so long, I was focused on just finding you, getting you on my side. Then there was the Pharoid chamber, and..."

"Did you sense nothing in there?"

"Only a belt of déjà vu between the eyes. It was the right place, I'm sure. I remember... I think there was a ladder, down from that hatchway."

"I have seen it."

"But that's it. No big revelations, no new memories. I thought... I don't know, I just thought, if we came here... I had this crazy idea that the Time Traveler would reveal himself to me, somehow. I thought everything would be clear at last. Now, I don't know what to do. I've come all this way, and I just... I don't know where to go next."

"Should we pursue the stolen equipment?"

"You mean break into Ki's palace?"

"It can be done, if necessary."

"I... No, I don't think it would help. I just... I have to be patient. The Time Traveler will tell me more, when he's ready. When he can."

"And in the meantime?"

Archer shrugs. "We keep looking."

"You are ready to—" I hardly dare say the words "—leave Micropolis?"

"I guess so. Like you said, there's nothing to keep us here."

I do not respond to that.

"I don't know," sighs Archer. "Maybe, if we could find Karza..."

"Your dark Emperor?"

"It's just this feeling I have, like he might be the key to all this. In the old timeline, he was the most powerful man in the galaxy, but now...now, nobody even knows who he is. Something must have happened to him. For all I know, he could be dead, but...but if he's alive, I can't imagine that he's not out there somewhere, scheming to take power."

"He is not dead," I say. "Persephone knows him."

"She...she said that? She's met him?"

"She works for him. At least," I add bitterly, "that is what she told me."

"What did she say about him? Do you know where he is?"

"No," I say, "but I don't think he is far away. He is a scientist, in this timeline as in the other, and he appears to have a particular interest in the Time Traveler."

Archer lets out a hollow laugh. "So, all roads lead to Karza, as usual." He levers himself to his feet, galvanized by a fresh sense of purpose. "We should get moving, then. The sooner we reach the rendezvous point and signal Knave to collect us, the happier I'll be."

Almost as soon as we return to the road, we encounter two Harrowers. The ensuing battle is brief and brutal, the outcome never in doubt. I am no longer hearing the voices in my head, although they are still present. They have become a part of me, speaking directly to my subconscious. Even so, my reflexes are slowing. One of my opponents gets off a distress message, in the instant before I cut him down.

I am tired, both physically and mentally, and there is still a long way to go. When a Photon Sled comes after us, spitting plasma, I decide I have had enough.

The Harrowers mean business this time. I let them get a bead on me, making myself an inviting target, and I trust to my instincts—and the armor's experience—to tell me when to jump. I frustrate my attackers with a series of near misses, drawing them away from Archer, tempting them down from the sky in their eagerness to see me burn.

I avoid other people, as much as I can, because I know that the Harrowers will not think twice about shooting through them. The sight of the Photon Sled with weapons blazing has, in any case, driven many of them to shelter. Still, fires are burning in the street, sending up thick gray smoke. For a moment, the sled is totally obscured; assuming that its occupants cannot see me either, I make a sudden sharp turn. The Harrowers find me again within seconds—I never intended to lose them—but my brief escape has rattled them, and the sled pilot brings his vehicle lower...

I race through a narrow alleyway, knowing it will buy me only seconds, knowing that the Harrowers will steer around the block and find me at the far end. Ahead of me: the high mesh fence of the Eastern Quarter Refinery. I attack it at a run, leaping half its height, dragging myself the rest of the way up. Three strands of barbed wire prove ineffectual against my armor; I crouch atop the fence and watch, as the sled comes back into view. Its searchlight combs the ground, looking for me in the wrong direction.

The pilot sees me, and tries to pull up. I make my leap, anyway. I catch hold of the edge of a wing, making the sled lurch in my direction. A Harrower falls past me; he must have been trying to stand, to draw his blaster weapon, when he was tipped out of the cockpit. He manages to catch hold of my foot on his way past; indignantly, I kick him loose. A fall from this height won't kill him, but it will keep him out of my way.

The sled pilot tries to shake me off with a series of aerobatics. I close my eyes, and try to ignore the fact that gravity is shifting around me. I concentrate on the solid metal beneath my fingers. I push down on it, levering myself upward, performing a back flip and landing on my feet on the wing's upper surface. A shot rings out, and a wave of heat scorches my helmet: Another Harrower has just fired at me, but with all the turbulence, he can't aim properly. I do not intend to give him another chance. The wing beneath me is already tilting to a dangerous angle; I take two steps along it, and launch myself into the cockpit.

I snatch the blaster from the hands of the pilot's remaining colleague, and run my sword through his chest. The pilot himself is still trying to cope with the sudden shift of my weight, when I bring my fists down on his head from behind. He slumps, dazed, and I pick him up by the shoulders, and pitch him over the vehicle's side.

I leap into his seat, losing a precious half-second as I try to wedge my long legs under the navigation console. The sled is hurtling toward the ground, and I am looking at a bewildering array of colored buttons and dials. For an instant, I panic. I have never flown anything like this before; I don't know where to start. But then, I remind myself sternly, never had I flown a Repto spaceship until tonight.

Don't think about it. Let the voices speak to your subconscious mind. Use their experience—and your own, even the parts you cannot remember. Just don't think about it. Operate the switches that feel right. Bring this craft up, and get it under control.

The underside of the Photon Sled scrapes the empty sidewalk, once, twice, then skips into the air and begins to gain height. I let out a breath of relief.

And that's when I hear the engines above me.

At first, I think the Reptos have found me. I crane my neck to gaze up at their spear-shaped craft. Somehow, it seems bigger from a distance than it did up close; framed by the thrusting towers of apartment buildings to my left and the refinery to my right, it is lent a sense of scale. It seems to fill the dark, dirty sky. The ship is flying low, almost touching the tops of the buildings. I am exposed, a sitting duck to its occupants. But suddenly, it is gone, those same buildings blocking it from my sight as it continues on its path. A path that will take it to the very center of the city. And over the street where I left Ryan Archer.

No sooner has that thought occurred to me, than I hear weapons fire. The sound is like that of the Harrowers' blasters, but a hundred times louder and more ferocious.

A tremendous, rumbling explosion. Screaming.

I spin the Photon Sled around, torn between the desire to find Archer—to check that he is okay—and the urge to climb higher, to get a better perspective on what is happening. I conclude that the bigger picture can wait. Archer is more important. I tell myself that this is a cold, logical decision. He is my ticket off this world, after all.

Even so, as I wind my way back to the place where I last saw him, my free hand plays with the controls of the sled's in-built radio, and I find myself tuned in to the static-drowned squawks of Harrowers across the city. A barrage of startled exclamations: *"Holy—" "It's just passed over here. Heading into Sector Four, now." "—firing again. Oh, my God, oh my—" "—a building down in Sector Fifteen. Repeat, we have—" "—casualties—" "—streets are on fire—" "Moving to intercept." "It's just changed course; heading mark oh one four—"*

A new voice. Cold, clear, strong, cutting across the hubbub, but with fear perhaps lending it a note of high-pitched urgency. A female voice. *Her voice.* *"All Harrower patrols pull back to Sector One. Repeat, Sector One. Fire upon the Repto vessel. Defend the palace with your worthless lives. Your*

Baron expects this of you.”

People are staggering out of a white cloud of concrete dust, coughing and spluttering through smog masks, some crying and wailing in anguish, some injured, clutching bleeding arms or dragging broken legs. The sight of my sled, hovering in front of them, unnerves them—they think I am a Harrower, and they are hardly reassured to see the truth—but they are more afraid of what is happening behind them, so they keep on coming.

The cloud is still expanding. It billows around me. I can only imagine what devastation has been wrought at its center. I am about to plunge into the choking fog, impatient for a sighting of my comrade, when I see him. He is stumbling towards me. Seeing the sled, he turns back and tries to run, but he is overcome by a crippling coughing fit.

I land beside him, and he recognizes me, relief shining through the tears in his eyes. I help him into the cockpit behind me.

“The...the ship,” he wheezes. “Did you see it? It just...it opened fire, right at us. People were...there were fireballs...and the buildings, they were crumbling...nothing I could do...” He shudders, closing his eyes.

“The Reptos are showing their strength,” I say. I guide the Photon Sled upwards, away from the scene of carnage, searching for fresh air, or at least for the nearest that Micropolis can offer. “Their true target is Ki’s palace. Perhaps, once they have revenged themselves upon him, they will leave the rest of the city alone.” The lie almost sticks in my throat.

“I...I’m not so sure about that. Look!”

I follow the direction of Archer’s pointed finger, but see nothing at first. Then, the sky lights up, and a descending trail of fire bisects the canopy of night. As we watch, more distant explosions blossom and die.

“Am I imagining this,” says Archer in a quivering voice, “or is that one doozy of a dogfight in full swing?”

“Ki has a blockade of a hundred warships around this planet,” I reply. “It has been decades since anybody tried to break through it.”

“Like I said,” mutters Archer, “the Reptos must be pretty steamed.”

“They can desire nothing less than the total destruction of Micropolis.”

“And, while they’re going at it up there,” Archer realizes, “there’s no chance of Knave being able to bring down the *Sunrunner*. We’re stranded!”

CHAPTER TEN

As the Repto ship swoops over Ki’s palace, red beams of energy stab down from its underside. We don’t see where they hit, but plumes of smoke rise in their wake. Photon Sleds wheel around the enemy vessel, fire sputtering from their plasma cannons.

Archer and I watch in silence from our own sled, parked on a flat roof, a safe distance away. We listen to panicked reports and shouted warnings over the Harrowers’ radio system. I keep wondering if I will hear Persephone’s voice again, but I do not.

The Photon Sleds are tiny, compared to the ship; they cannot seem to do much more than sting it. But they are also more maneuverable, easily keeping out of the blast field of its forward weaponry. The ship completes a wide, lumbering circle, and concentrates its firepower on the palace again. There cannot be much of Ki's stronghold left, now, nor of its surroundings. I can only pray that civilian casualties will be kept to a minimum. I have an awful suspicion that, when the System first went down, people may have gathered outside the palace to demand answers. I find myself hoping that the Harrowers dispersed them.

I wonder, for that matter, if the Baron himself is at home. If Persephone survived the airship explosion, then I am sure he must have survived it, too. Maybe he can even survive this. I have often heard rumors of a network of tunnels beneath the city, into which the Baron can escape when threatened.

"Shouldn't we do something?" asks Archer.

"We would only be one more sled," I murmur. "Anyway, this is not our war."

A Harrower pilot gets careless. I wince as his craft spirals downward in flames.

"We can't just sit here!"

"You would have us throw away our lives for the likes of Ki and the Harrowers? Who would listen to the Time Traveler, then?"

"I was thinking more of the innocent bystanders," mutters Archer, although I think he sees the hopelessness of the situation.

"We can do nothing for them," I say, "at least, not in this reality. Maybe, if we are successful in restoring the Time Traveler's timeline, so that this never happened..."

"We can't count on that," Archer insists, stubbornly. "It might not turn out that way. What...what if this is all there is, and the Reptos...they don't stop?" He looks up at me, pale-faced, wringing his hands in anguish. "We're partly responsible for this, Acroyear. I mean, I know Ki emptied the Pharoid chamber, but we ticked off the Reptos, too. We killed a whole bunch of them; we took out the System. What if they decide that killing Ki isn't enough, or...or...or he gets away? What if they take it out on the whole city? Billions of people could die!" He is saying nothing that hasn't already passed through my mind. I look down at him, and I make a decision.

I say nothing, but I reach into my boot and feel for the folded news sheet in there. It is crumpled, dirty and torn, but still legible. Archer frowns inquisitively at me as I open it out carefully, almost reverently. I hand it to him, and he turns it over in his hands, inspecting it in the light from the mining helmet that he still wears.

The stings of the Photon Sleds are beginning to have a cumulative effect. Black bruises are spreading across the skin of the semi-organic Repto ship. Its movements have become pained and clumsy. But now, hatchways open in its sides, and an angry swarm emerges.

Reptos fill the sky with their wings—at least thirty of them, even more than I had feared—descending upon the startled Harrowers in their open-topped craft. Two Photon Sleds collide in their haste to take evasive maneuvers. Another hurtles away on an uncontrolled flight path. The Harrowers rally, and a Repto explodes into a ball of shrieking flame as two plasma bolts converge upon it.

As the airborne battle rages around it, the Repto ship is freed to return its attentions to the palace. Its red beams lash out, again and again, until I am certain that nothing can remain, either of the building or of any secret tunnels. But now, a Harrower has brought his sled around and is picking up speed, heading directly for the ship's angular front end. I think the crew has ejected, three tiny black spots against the greater darkness, leaving the vehicle locked into a collision course.

The Reptos are slow to react. Their forward weapons fire when the Photon Sled is only meters away from them—and, although it explodes, its momentum keeps the greater part of its burning carcass coming. It strikes its target squarely across the viewscreens. Normally, the impact would have been negligible, but the Repto ship is already hurt. Blinded and crippled now, it heaves and splutters and shakes, and is dragged earthward at long last, slowly but inexorably, its engines pulling in vain against the greater pull of gravity. More Reptos evacuate, and join their comrades, who fight now with even greater determination.

Above it all, the Time Traveler floats, undisturbed by the explosions, unaffected as sleds, Reptos and plasma bolts pass through his insubstantial form. I wonder what he makes of all this, if he can even see it. He has already lived through the aftermath of this battle, of course. Perhaps it is the cause of his anguish, the silent reversed scream that begins here but ended centuries ago. This slaughter, this carnage, is a result of the Time Traveler's very presence over Micropolis. It is being carried out in his name. And only he knows how it will end.

No, I tell myself, that is not true. I, too, know the future. As does Archer, now.

He has finished reading. He stares at me, neither of us knowing what to say.

Any conversation is forestalled, anyway, by the sound of whining engines. Three Photon Sleds whoosh past our building, a few stories below us, flying without lights. I don't think much of it at first—Harrowers, saving their skins, getting out while they can. But then, would any Harrower, let alone three sled crews simultaneously, abandon his Baron? Ki's soldiers are programmed—more subtly, maybe, but no less thoroughly than the rest of the population—to obey, to be loyal. Perhaps they think their master dead. Perhaps they are more scared of the Reptos than they are of him. Or maybe there is another explanation.

“What are you doing?” asks Archer, as I start up our own sled, lifting us on an antigravity cushion. My fingers flicker across the instrument panel, confidently now, as if I have been doing this all my life. We bank and dive, swooping between buildings, pursuing the escaping craft through a concrete canyon.

“Getting involved,” I reply.

I see him. A brief glimpse, that is all. Something exploded in the upper atmosphere, the light illuminating the three sleds and glinting off green armor. Maruunus Ki is in one of those vehicles! He thinks to escape the destruction that his actions have invited. His paltry number of escorts is a testament to how far and fast he has fallen.

I think we have been sighted, too. The Harrowers lose height, flying low over the flickering fires in the streets. They take one tight turn after another, circling completely around one block in an attempt to throw us off. Below us, rioters run for cover, fearing that retribution has come, emerging cautiously when they realize that we are not interested in them.

I cannot get a target lock on my quarry. They are moving too fast, too erratically. We are climbing again, and I almost lose them completely in the darkness above the rooftops. I turn on my headlights—there is no point in hiding any more—and stick to their tail. Testing their sleds to the limit, they stall their engines and plunge suddenly between two apartment buildings. Somehow, they coordinated the maneuver without me overhearing them; they must have a private communications link. I am not quick enough to follow them; I overshoot.

I dive into a parallel street instead, and tip my sled almost sideways to fit it into a narrow alleyway. I feel Archer's arms, wrapped tightly around me from behind.

There is no sign of the three sleds, of course. I have to think. What would I do in the Harrowers' place? Where would I go? I would double back on myself, I decide. I would try to confuse my pursuer. But I think Ki had an objective in mind—he is too good a strategist to run blind—and, until he saw me, he would have been taking the most direct route toward it.

With a few calculations, and a little luck, I may be able to head him off.

“Enough of the roller coaster ride!” begs Archer, as we return to the rooftops. I pick an area of the city, ten blocks square, into which I think Ki must emerge. I fly a search pattern over it—and, just when I think I have guessed wrong, when I am about to concede defeat, the Photon Sled's searchlight flickers over them. Three dark shapes, speeding through the maze below me. I cannot make them out, but nothing else in Micropolis moves quite like that.

Archer lets out a sickly groan as we dive again, dark windows blurring past us, smoky air hitting us so hard that we cannot breathe it. And now, we are level again, screaming head on toward the three sleds, and I fire the plasma cannon. I was aiming at Ki, but one of his escorts gets in the way; deliberately, I have no doubt. Three Harrowers perish, so that their ruler may live. I do not imagine he will take the trouble to learn their names.

The remaining two sleds make a sharp turn into a side street. I follow them, but they are already out of sight. I do not see them above me, so they must have taken the first turning ahead. As soon as I round it, I sight Ki's sled again. But only Ki's sled.

The remaining escort vehicle drops out of the sky behind me. I throw my craft to one side, and the first plasma bolt misses us, although we are buffeted in its wake. I bank and roll and turn and climb, trying not to lose Ki in the process, but I cannot shake my pursuer. Fire fills the air around us, and, on my instructions, Archer ducks down into the rear of the cockpit.

I shout at him to hold on tight, as I try something drastic.

I pull up the nose of my craft, higher and higher, as close to the vertical as it will go, until the shrieking engine cuts out and the weight of the nosecone flips us the rest of the way. For a dizzy instant, we are upside-down, kept aloft only by our momentum. Fortunately, the engine restarts on my first attempt. We drop out of our somersault behind the other sled. Its plasma cannon cannot target us now, but the two Harrowers in the back of its cockpit send a volley of blaster fire our way, as their pilot weaves in and out of my sights. There is an apartment building ahead of us, and I dare not fire, because if I were to miss, my bolts would burn through its windows. My enemies, of course, do not feel similarly constrained.

The sled pilot outmaneuvers me, another stall turn almost causing me to overshoot him. Our two vehicles are flying almost side by side, making Archer and me easy targets for the occupants of the other.

“Fire back!” I snap tersely. “Aim for the pilot.”

“I'm trying,” comes Archer's strained voice, from behind me.

A blast glances off my shoulder plating, and I peel away from the other sled and take refuge in another dark alley. The Harrower pilot can't turn in time to follow. We shoot out of the other end of the passageway, and I climb and set my sled to hover, expecting the other craft to appear below us. When it does not, I set off in search of it, a feeling of worry eating at my stomach. My quest, as I expected, is hopeless.

“They must be somewhere around here,” protests Archer, as I set us down in a quiet street. “Could it be a trap? Maybe they're lying in wait for us somewhere.”

“No,” I say. “The Harrowers have already achieved their objective. We have lost Ki!”

Rioters have looted a plug-in center, and set fire to its shell. Computer equipment is strewn, shattered, across the street. I do not know what they hope to achieve. Certainly, this will not bring the System back into their lives.

They probably expected to be punished, even as they grew collectively bolder with every minute that the Harrowers did not come. But they did not expect their punishment to come from the sky, borne on leathery wings.

There are only two Reptos, but it is enough to spread panic. They swoop upon fleeing citizens, raking them with their claws. Ki has slipped away from them, so they are taking out their frustrations on his people. One screaming woman is gripped by her shoulders and carried into the air, then dropped like a stone. I am too late to catch her, but at least I can avenge her. As her killer descends, searching for another victim, I leap to meet it, catching hold of its clawed feet. It squawks and struggles in my grasp, flapping its wings, but my weight drags it downward. It gives up the struggle, and lunges for me instead. I let go of it, drop the remaining short distance to the ground, draw my sword, and cut a line across its throat.

The other creature lets out a furious roar, and springs onto my back. I roll beneath it, breaking its hold and hurling it away from me.

We get to our feet and circle each other, warily. Having witnessed its comrade’s fate, this Repto is more cautious, waiting for me to make the first move. I oblige it, but it parries my sword thrust with an arm, sustaining a deep gash but enabling its head to get past my guard. It sinks its teeth into my right arm, and I howl in pain. Whether by accident or because it could smell the dried blood beneath my healed armor, I do not know, but the creature has reopened the wound inflicted upon me two days ago by another of its kind. I have to act quickly, before it can tear the flesh from my arm, or the limb from its socket. I muster all the strength I have to punch the Repto in the snout. Its yellow eyes water, but it takes two more blows to relax the grip of its jaws. I wrench my arm free, but it hangs, dead, at my side. I can no longer feel the sword in my fingers, let alone raise it. And the Repto is coming at me again.

It has its claws around my helmet, trying to pry it loose. Its mistake. It would take more strength than this creature has to do that. It changes tack, trying to push my head back instead, to snap my neck, but I have transferred my sword into my left hand and I drive the blade into my attacker’s stomach.

The second Repto falls, to a smattering of applause from the onlookers. I do not acknowledge their appreciation. I feel sick to my stomach. My arm throbs, and my head spins. If the Harrowers were to find me now, they would surely kill me.

The distance back to the sled seems infinite, although I crossed it in little enough time a few minutes ago, when I first saw the Reptos’ approach. I am dismayed to find the vehicle surrounded by a dozen or so citizens, armed with sticks and knives, their voices raised in an angry chorus. Archer stands in the cockpit, holding them back with intermittent shots from his blaster, aiming for the ground at their feet. I do not think he is their target. They want the sled, to strip it for all it is worth before they destroy this symbol of Ki’s authority. It will not take them long to realize that its hapless guard does not wish to shoot them, and then they will feel free to do as they wish.

I take two lurching steps toward them, then hold myself upright. I clear my throat.

They turn to face me, their voices quieted one by one. Half of them run immediately; the others remain, sizing me up with their eyes.

Another step. I must control my muscles. I must not stumble. I must not show weakness. I imagine that a bolt of steel runs through my spine, two more through my legs.

I raise my sword. This is the critical moment. If this does not work, I have nothing else. Fortunately, it is enough. Three more citizens take flight—and then, seeing that they have been abandoned, the remaining few follow.

I half-climb, half-fall into the cockpit of the Photon Sled. I left Archer with a task, and I ask him if he made any progress before he was interrupted. He does not answer. He is staring, open-mouthed, at my mangled arm. I ask the question again, more forcefully.

“I...I...yeah,” he stammers. He directs my attention toward the sled’s radio, which is breathing static. A tangle of wires hangs from its innards, some of them stretching to the navigation system. “I found the frequency that Ki and his escort are using. I picked up a message, but its content was scrambled.”

“It was to be expected.”

“It sounded like Ki’s voice, but on a stretched tape, played backwards. I couldn’t understand a word of it, even with this translator implant inside me—but I got a bearing on the signal.”

“When?” I ask, curtly.

“A few minutes ago. There’s been nothing since. Look, I found a first aid kit under the dashboard. Let me put a bandage on that arm, at least.”

“It is not necessary,” I say. “My armor will provide. Strap yourself in.”

Archer opens his mouth to argue, but thinks better of it. I take the controls, and start the sled’s antigravity engine. The radio hisses and spits, but no other sound issues from it. Ki must have gone to ground. His palace has been destroyed—and, with the battle in progress above us, it is not safe for him to leave this world. If I know him, he will have found somewhere in the city to hide, until he sees an opportunity to flee from all he has done.

Fortunately, Archer’s instinctive grasp of electronic systems—even those alien to him—is everything he claimed. I follow the bearing he provided, mentally triangulating it with Ki’s trajectory when I first saw him. In this way, I am able to make a rough estimate of his current position. Or, at least, of his position a few minutes ago.

“He is somewhere down there,” I mutter, as we fly over Sector Fourteen. The first sun is rising, washing Micropolis in bright, cleansing shades. The city seems calmer now; a reflective silence has settled. The rioters are tired, and perhaps ashamed of themselves in the cold beginnings of daylight. But they are still hungry, and afraid.

“That’s a lot of buildings to search,” whistles Archer.

“Then, we will have to start immediately.”

“Is Ki so important? I mean, between the Time Traveler and the Reptos, don’t we have enough to worry about? Don’t you think we should...?” He trails off, awkwardly, but I know what he is thinking. He is thinking about the news sheet.

“Ki is the cause of all this,” I growl. “Whatever is to happen in the future, I swear he will pay, here and now, for his crimes against his people!”

Archer does not answer. He does not speak again for a minute, as I continue to search the sector for a sign of my foe. Then he tugs on my shoulder, and says, “Down there. That street over there. You see? I

don't know what...call it my instincts again, I don't know, but..."

"The street is empty," I observe, as I steer the sled toward it.

He misunderstands me. "I know. It's just, I feel..."

"It is a main thoroughfare, and home to many," I point out. "And yet, although many have left their homes, nobody wanders this street."

"You mean, like, it's been...cleared?"

"Maybe," I agree. "By somebody who did not wish to leave any witnesses to his presence. I think our search will begin here."

"But not yet," insists Archer as I put the sled down. "You need to rest."

"There is no time!"

"You can't fight Ki in your condition. He'll slaughter you!"

I sigh, seeing the truth of his argument. I reach into the exposed wiring beneath the sled's instrument panel, grab a bundle of wires, and twist them until they break. I grit my teeth as electricity jolts through me, resisting the muscle spasm in my hand that threatens to fling my fingers open. The lights of the Photon Sled grow dim, and its engine dies as I take its power. There is not much, but it will suffice, for now.

"That...that's how you recharge?" asks Archer, astonished.

"You did not know?"

"No! I mean, I...I don't remember seeing..."

"The armor will sustain me," I say brusquely, "for as long as it has to." I can feel strands tightening around my arm, stemming the bleeding and providing support. Simultaneously, the armor floods my system with endorphins, dulling my pain and taking the edge off my tiredness. I will suffer for this later—but, for now, I can function again.

"So," sighs Archer, looking up and down the deserted street, "where to first?"

As soon as I kick open the door, I know that this is the place. I sense the figures, waiting in the darkness. I spring forward as their blasters fire. I roll, and land on my feet, bringing up my sword. Its glow illuminates a large, empty room. I thought this building was a furniture warehouse, but the layers of dust indicate that it has not seen use in some time.

The Harrowers have me flanked. I charge at the nearest, knowing what my armored weight must look like as it bears down on him. The feint works. He sidesteps a sword thrust that never comes, firing at a space that I no longer occupy. I get behind him, and slip my good arm around his throat, simultaneously choking him and using him as a shield. His partner fires anyway, as Ki's soldiers are no doubt trained to do. My hostage shudders with the multiple impact, and dies in my grip. I plant my foot in his back, and push the body forwards. By the time it falls, and the other Harrower can target me again, I have dropped to one knee, the butt of his partner's blaster weapon pressed into my shoulder. I hit him three times before he can lower his sights. He squeezes off one badly aimed shot before he dies.

I call to Archer, to let him know that it is safe to enter. I do not wait for him. The dust has been disturbed around a trapdoor in the floor, and I cross to it and yank it open. More gunfire greets me from below—two more Harrowers, at least, although I cannot see them. They could maintain their position down there, keeping me at bay indefinitely, were it not for the fact that I still have two explosives left

from the Repto ship.

I roll one through the aperture, and follow a moment later, landing between the dazed Harrowers before they can pick themselves up. Left-handed, I can wield my sword with neither my usual finesse nor my full strength—but my charged armor compensates, amplifying the effort of my muscles as I strike downward.

I stand before a pair of reinforced doors. They sag together, having been partially torn from their hinges by the force of the blast. If I have counted right—and assuming that Ki has only the guards who fled from the palace with him—then there can be no more than one man left between us.

I push the doors aside, and step into a large, well-appointed room. The feel of the deep white carpet, and the sight of a black leather couch and an entertainment console, make me angry. Even here, in his bolt hole of last resort, Ki is more comfortable than his subjects could ever hope to be. Four arched doorways, two in each wall, lead to a kitchen, a master bedroom and two other rooms. I can hear the soft whirr of an air-conditioning system. Hanging to my right, in a gilt-edged frame, is a portrait of one of the old Emperors, in ceremonial garb. Dark red eyes glare out from a black, horned helmet.

The Baron of Micropolis is waiting for me. Considering what I have just done to his guards, he looks remarkably composed, even confident. He holds an energy sword, like mine.

“Still alive, Nanissar?” he sneers. “I thought the Reptos would have dealt with you.”

“Like your Harrowers,” I reply, “the Reptos are no match for a true Acroyear.”

“The future would suggest otherwise.”

“The future has not happened yet.”

He laughs, humorlessly. “We have each tried to alter our destiny. We have been frustrated at every turn. You have seen what is happening up there: the System has been crippled; the Repto attack has begun. Time has brought us to this point, as we knew it would. The manuscript itself has influenced our actions. Its existence in this time has guided us, like puppets, into fulfilling its prophecy.”

“I accept my fate, Ki,” I growl, “but the news sheet says nothing about yours. I will go to the afterlife content, knowing that you have trodden the path ahead of me!”

I lunge at him, striking for his heart. He parries each of my thrusts—not with any great ease, but efficiently—and launches a counterattack that forces me to skip backwards, back to the demolished doors. I curse the injured arm that makes me clumsy.

“Do not be a fool, Nanissar! If you kill me, who will save this city? Once the Reptos have gone, Micropolis will need its ruler more than ever. A firm hand; somebody to command respect. Somebody with the will and the vision to rebuild the System, and the city, and make them both even greater than before. Micropolis needs me!”

“Micropolis needs,” I snarl, “to be free!”

I attack again—and through sheer ferocity, I drive my foe back across the room. Still, I cannot penetrate his defenses to land a palpable blow. The best I can manage is to take a nick out of his green armor, at the shoulder. In return, Ki almost decapitates me with an opportunistic swing. Suddenly, it is I who am on the defensive, our energy blades hissing and flaring as they clash against each other.

“Surprised, Nanissar?” Ki taunts me. “Perhaps I never told you how I raised myself from the lowly rank of Harrower private to become their General. Perhaps you had forgotten that I took the barony by right of combat. Or perhaps you expected that all these years on a cushioned throne would have dulled my instincts.”

For all his bravado, I succeed in fending him off. He disengages, and moves behind the leather couch. Sweat glistens on his bald head. He is tiring. But then, so am I.

We circle around the couch, watching each other closely. “If you are so convinced that the future is fixed,” I point out, “then you already know you can’t win this battle. I cannot die here. My fate awaits me on a Repto ship, at the bottom of a lake.”

“I don’t have to kill you,” says Ki. “I can leave you, defeated, for the Reptos to find.”

I shake my head, adamantly. “We fight to the death!”

“So be it,” he rumbles.

And with that, he leaps up onto the couch, places his foot on its back and shifts his weight so that it topples toward me, and suddenly he is upon me again.

I am taken by surprise. I have seen such a maneuver only once before—in a System-approved movie in which an actor played the Baron as a swashbuckling hero—but I never imagined he was skilled enough to execute it in real life.

I try to protect my chest and throat, but Ki aims for my sword. A flash of energy as the blades meet again, and the weapon is torn from my weak hand. He presses his advantage, charging me with his shoulder, gouging me with the horn that rises from his armor there. I hit the wall hard; I might have fallen, except that Ki has me pinned, his face almost pressed up to mine, his eyes flashing with a zeal I have rarely seen in him.

“Maybe you’re right,” he hisses. “Maybe it would be best to end your life right now. After all, the future would hardly be affected. Let the Reptos unleash their virus! This suite is equipped with food, water, respirator masks, vaccines—everything I need to survive a biological attack. The only victims will be the lowlife inhabitants of this city, and history will not miss them!” The tip of his sword presses into my throat, burning through my armor.

But then: a flurry of movement in the corner of my vision; a blaster weapon fires; Ki winces, hit in the small of his back. I seize the opportunity, delivering an uppercut to his chin, thanking the stars for my good fortune. Fate, taking a hand again, saving me for the future? Maybe the outcome of this combat was predetermined, after all. But no, I tell myself sternly, *I* furnished Ryan Archer with a gun, and brought him down here. I made my own fate.

Ki stumbles backwards, and is tripped by the overturned couch. I land heavily on top of him, winding him. I take his wrist and twist it, until he drops his sword. As he scrambles to retrieve it, I drive an armored fist into his head. His face is bright red, blood trickles over his lower lip—but his jaw is set, teeth gritted in determination. He gets a hand around my throat, and pushes up from beneath me, unseating me. I try to push him away, but my weak arm betrays me again. Ki brings up a horned knee, and punctures my stomach. I double over, the iron tang of blood in my mouth, and he punches me in the jaw. Suddenly, he is on top of me, but I roll with the momentum of his leap, taking him with me.

The red mist descends upon me again, and I welcome it. I give in to instinct, heedless of the white hot pain that lances through my right arm. We wrestle in the thick carpet, each trying to get a hold on the other, divested of our weapons and our words, reduced to snarling savagery.

Ki’s fingers lock about my throat again; I grab what hair he has, and pull his head back viciously. He must have seen how I favored my injured arm, because he takes it in both hands and twists, almost wrenching it from its socket. Screaming with the agony, I lash out blindly. My helmet crashes into the unprotected dome of Ki’s skull, and he buckles like a rag doll. He does not resist as I follow up with a series of resounding punches. He is on his hands and knees, shaking, gasping for breath, blood dripping

from his nose, helpless.

I am shaking, too, as I disentangle my body from his, finding myself barely able to stand. There is an energy sword at my feet—I don't know if it is his or mine—and I pick it up. I line up the blade with the back of Ki's neck, and raise the weapon above my head.

The sound of a clearing throat reminds me that I am not alone. I am not prepared, however, for the sight that greets me as I turn.

"I'm sorry, Acroyear," bleats Archer.

Persephone is standing in the doorway. Her arm is coiled around Archer's throat. She is holding a gun to his head.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Nothing to say, Nanissar?" Persephone's lips twist into a smirk. "Surprised to see me alive?"

"Surprised, no," I say. "Disappointed, maybe." It is a lie. Even now, facing her like this, I do not know how to feel about her. I should hate her.

"I am a survivor," she says, "and the key to survival is knowing how to use others."

"As you have made quite clear," I growl.

"I made Ki believe I was valuable to him. When you destroyed his airship, we shared an escape pod. As his palace began to fall, he allowed me into his underground shelter. And, as this, too, crumbled, we fled together."

"And now you intend to return his favor? You think that, by threatening Archer, you can stay my hand? You think I will weigh his one life against the lives of billions?"

Persephone raises an amused eyebrow. "I said nothing about sparing Ki. Quite the opposite. I would like you to kill him."

I regard her through narrowed eyes. I cannot read her expression. She could be bluffing, but what would she gain from it? I am beginning to realize that it was not Archer who shot Ki, as I assumed, but she. As usual, she has her own private agenda, and I am loath to help her further it. But then, on the matter of the erstwhile Baron, at least, we seem to be in accord.

I bring down my sword, and part Maruunus Ki's head from his shoulders.

Archer, I note, flinched and closed his eyes in the instant before the blade hit. Persephone watched the execution, her expression staid.

"Now," she says, "I will require the head."

I frown, although she cannot see the gesture behind my helmet. Still, I see no reason to refuse her request. I stoop, and lift Ki's head by its black hair. I throw it to her, and she lets go of Archer to catch it.

He makes a break for it. He runs to my side, and pulls his own gun to cover her. "All right, lady," he snarls, "drop the weapon and put your hands in the air!"

Coolly, Persephone returns her small pistol to a pouch in her jumpsuit. "I wish I had time for this amusing distraction," she says, "but time is in short supply. We have work to do!"

“Hey, hold on a minute!” protests Archer. “In case you hadn’t noticed, you don’t have a gun to my head now. We don’t have to do what you say!”

Persephone sighs impatiently. “I took you hostage, boy, only to gain your friend’s attention, and to ensure that neither of you acted in haste. As you have already seen, Kel Nanissar will do as I wish, because he shares my objectives.”

“What do you want of me?” I ask.

“You will come with me,” she says, “and I will take you to the Reptos.”

“No way!” cries Archer, but he falls silent, bewildered, when I fail to back him up.

“Do they still threaten the Time Traveler?” I ask.

Persephone shakes her head. “The Pharoids’ equipment was in the shelter—it was destroyed. Even if the Reptos knew how to move the Time Traveler, I doubt they would bother now. They wouldn’t know what to do with him. They will take their revenge—lay waste to this city, and release their virus into the atmosphere—and move on.”

“And that concerns you?”

“Of course it does!” she retorts, apparently offended. “Do you believe me so hard-hearted as to not care about the lives of billions of sentient beings?”

“I think you care about *one* life, at least. You want safe passage off this world, and so you will deal with its attackers.”

“Maybe, when they see that Ki is dead, they will consider vengeance satisfied.”

“And maybe,” I counter, “they will unleash their weapon, anyway. Maybe Ki was right. Maybe there is no hope of changing what is to come.”

“That is why you must accompany me,” insists Persephone. “The manuscript from the future places you aboard the Reptos’ spy ship at this time. You can stop them!”

“What can I do?” I ask bitterly. “A ‘pathetic creature’ like me, unfit to wear this armor?”

She flicks her blonde hair back over her shoulder, and lets out a scornful snort. “I said those things for Ki’s benefit, can you not see that? You don’t have to trust me, Nanissar; the manuscript tells its own story. Only you can save this world. We considered a hundred ways of attacking the Reptos, once Ki found their submerged vessel, but the risk was too great. We may have prompted them to unleash the virus early, or released it ourselves by accident. We need somebody on board that ship. We need you. We need Acroyear!”

“You’re asking him to die for you,” says Archer, in a quiet voice.

“I am doing what must be done to safeguard our future. Given the stakes, would you have me constrained by misguided sentiment?”

I turn to Archer. “She is right,” I say. “I must do this.”

“But...” He flaps his hands, vaguely. “The Time Traveler...”

“You are quite resourceful,” I compliment him, “and it is to you that the Time Traveler chooses to speak. I believe you can succeed in your quest, without me. Maybe you will even put history to rights, and we can be comrades again in another reality. In the meantime, I was wrong to imagine that I could ignore the loss of innocent lives, whatever the circumstances. It is my destiny to stop the Reptos, and I am glad to die for that cause.”

Archer looks miserable, but he says nothing. He just nods. I think he knew, from the moment I showed him the article in the news sheet, that it would come to this. I only wish I had not been so slow to achieve that same clarity of thought.

Persephone produces an electronic wrist clamp. She takes a step toward me, but I fend her off with a warning growl. “I will not be shackled!” I state, flatly.

“Don’t be a fool, Nanissar! I have to present you to the Reptos as my prisoner!”

I glare at her for a long moment, unwilling to trust her. But I am forced to concede the logic of her argument. I deactivate my sword, and hand it to Archer. “I have no further need of this. Maybe you can put it to good use.”

It is too heavy for him. It sinks in his grasp, its tip scoring the carpet. “I’ll keep it safe,” he vows, his lower lip protruding stubbornly, “until you come back for it.”

“You have seen the future,” I say. “I will not return.”

“I don’t accept that! If you know what’s going to happen, you can...you can do something. Fight it! I’ll come with you. Maybe, together, we can—”

“No! You have your own mission, Archer; your own destiny. I will not take you from it. Wait here until the space battle is over. You should not be disturbed.”

“And wear a respirator,” adds Persephone.

“But—”

“The worst may yet happen. We may already be too late!”

“We are not,” I say, more confident of this than I have been of anything in my life. “Everything has unfolded as it should. This is the way it had to be.”

Persephone frowns, skeptically, but she does not question me. I hold out my hands, wrists together, and I let her fasten her clamp around them.

Ki’s Harrowers brought their sleds into the building through a wide loading bay door on its second floor, designed for just such a purpose. Heaped in a corner are a dozen corpses: the unfortunates who observed the arrival of their Baron.

“I see you have not always been so concerned about preserving lives,” I remark to Persephone.

“Ki ordered his men to kill them,” she says, dispassionately. “I could not have helped them. I have learned to choose my causes.”

She helps me into the cockpit of the first sled, then takes the controls. She operates a hypersonic signaling device, and the door slides open with a screech of protest. Watching quietly from the top of the stairs, Archer catches my eye, and mouths “Good luck!”, then grimaces as if realizing how inappropriate the sentiment must seem.

Persephone starts the antigravity engine, and backs the sled out over the street. “Once the Reptos have you,” she warns me, “I won’t be able to help you.”

“I know,” I say.

“You must escape, and find the container that holds the virus.”

“I am sure an opportunity will present itself.”

“Ki tried to find out where the virus came from: He believed that the Reptos obtained it from a biosmith in the Centaurus system. They also doublecrossed the ’smith, killed him and destroyed his notes. We don’t know much about the virus, except that it must be fast-acting. Everybody aboard the ship must die within minutes. Why else would the pilot not take the ship to the surface, open its hatches, and spread the virus to its intended victims?”

“I know what I must do,” I reiterate.

“But you must do it while the ship is still on the lake bed. That point is crucial, Nanissar. The ship must not be discovered and unsealed until the virus itself is long dead.”

“The future will unfold as it must,” I say.

“I wish I could share your optimism,” mutters Persephone. “Where are the Reptos?”

We have climbed above the rooftops, the city spread below us, but the yellow morning sky is empty. I look for leather wings between the smoke plumes, my helmet polarizing against the light of the suns, but I see none. I stare upwards, searching for the flare of an exploding vessel or a trail of vented fuel, but there is nothing.

“They have called off the attack,” I breathe.

“Their fleet must have been unable to get through the blockade. But what of the Reptos already in the city? Surely Ki’s dull-witted subjects could not have outfought them?”

“If they chose to withdraw,” I say thoughtfully, “there is only one place they could have gone. Only one Repto vessel remains on this world.”

“Their spy ship,” deduces Persephone grimly, already changing course, “at the bottom of the lake. We may be too late, after all!”

“You think I’m a monster, don’t you?”

The question comes unexpectedly. We have crossed most of the sprawling city in silence; I imagined that Persephone’s thoughts, like mine, were on the trials to come. It is unlike her, however, to strike up a conversation. She must have more than the Reptos on her mind.

“We are not so different, you and I,” she says.

“That is a matter of opinion.”

“Neither of us chose to be who we are. Like you, I barely remember the life I once led. We were taken by others, shaped by them. We became what they needed us to be.” Is there a hint of resentment in her voice? I cannot tell. Seated behind her, I cannot see her face.

“I became a warrior, Persephone,” I say. “I am still not sure what you have become.”

“I was taught the cold logic of the scientist,” she asserts. “I was brought up to view each individual life as a part of a much bigger picture. When you are dealing with events on a cosmic scale, compassion is a luxury you can ill afford. My mentor learned that through bitter experience, and he passed the lesson on to me. Surely you were taught that, too, Nanissar? Of course you were! To the men who gave you that armor, you were no more than a tool. They programmed you to fight for the greater good of your people, and you were expected to deny your own feelings, your own needs, in that cause.”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. I want to tell her that she is wrong, but I cannot think of an argument. She is speaking with such passion, as if it matters to her that I believe her. As if she needs me to validate her life’s choices.

“Tell me, Nanissar: If we had been able to save the time travel machinery, if you could use it, just once... Imagine that Maruunus Ki is in front of you now, as an infant. Could you kill him? Could you take that child’s life, to prevent the suffering he will cause as an adult?”

“If Ki hadn’t taken Micropolis,” I rumble, “it would have been somebody else.”

“Somebody weaker! Somebody who could not have defeated and humiliated you as Ki did. Would you do it, Acroyear? That child’s life, for the pride of your people?”

“Yes.” My voice catches on the word, rendering it hoarse and feeble. I repeat it, more strongly: “Yes. I would do it.”

“As would I,” says Persephone, satisfied, “without hesitation.”

“Then let me ask you a question in return,” I say. “What if you were in my situation? What if it was you who had to die, so that a world of strangers could live? How important is your own life to the bigger picture, Persephone? For whom would you sacrifice yourself?”

And after that, there is silence again.

Lake Wherle is a large, misshapen body of water on the western edge of the city. It is, I believe, manmade: An early attempt to capture some of this world’s scant rainfall, to keep it from seeping into the thirsty ground. It was unsuccessful. The brown sand of the desert trickled into the water, and poisoned it. It is dark in color, its surface coated with scum.

On one bank of the lake, ten Reptos are gathered in a circle, talking animatedly. I recognize the grizzled Nest Leader, which appears to be chairing a council of war. The decision to unleash the virus, the decision that will doom me, is probably being debated as I watch.

The approach of our Photon Sled ends the discussion. Two Reptos fly up to meet us, and the first of them lands on our nosecone, forcing Persephone to compensate for its weight. It lowers its snout and bares its teeth in her face. She returns its gaze, squarely.

“My name is Persephone,” she announces boldly.

“You are an aide of Ki’s!”

“A business acquaintance, at best.” She reaches down by her feet, and I can hear the smug smile in her voice as she holds up the Baron’s severed head. “This should tell you where my allegiances lie now.”

The creature hisses in delight. It looks at me, and sees my shackled hands for the first time. “And you have brought us a live prisoner, too.”

“The terrorist known as Acroyear. You have heard of him, I’m sure.”

“Another enemy of our people.”

“Indeed. I intend to hand him over to your Nest Leader.”

A pause. Then, the Repto says, “We will take you to him.”

The sled rocks as it takes flight again. The two Reptos form an escort, guiding us down to a spot some way behind their comrades. They do not wait for Persephone to climb out of the vehicle. They sink their claws into my arms, and lift me from the cockpit.

I am marched toward the lake, flanked by my captors. The other Reptos spread out across its bank, awaiting us with curiosity. I hang my head, hoping to appear defeated and subdued.

Persephone walks beside us, Ki’s head swinging casually from her hand. She quickens her pace, pulling

ahead of us, and addresses the Nest Leader before the Reptos can. “I have defeated your enemies!” she proclaims. “I have proof that Maruunus Ki is dead—and I have brought you Kel Nanissar, Acroyear.”

The Reptos pull forward, impatiently, and I hear my name repeated in sibilant whispers. My escorts propel me into their midst, and they surround me, snarling at me, clawing me, turning me around and pushing me from one to the other like a spinning-top. My instincts scream at me to fight back, not to bear this humiliation, but I override them.

The Nest Leader looms over Persephone, its eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You think to ally yourself with us? How typical of a mammal, to turn against its own kind!”

“I have turned against no one,” she says. “My concern is for the people of this city. They had no part in Ki’s actions; you have no quarrel with them. They don’t have to suffer!”

The old Repto hisses, angrily. “It is for us to judge what price must be exacted for the crimes of these warm-bloods! We were betrayed. An example must be made.”

A Repto takes hold of me, and twists me around until its claws are at my throat. “May we kill him, Nest Leader? May we?” The creatures close in around me, panting thirstily, eyes gleaming with eagerness, saliva dribbling from their jaws.

The Nest Leader opens its mouth to respond, but Persephone interrupts. “That would be very foolish!” Ignoring the old Repto’s warning growl, she continues. “He is an Acroyear. Do you not see what that means? He is the greatest warrior of his people, perhaps of this galaxy. For years, he was a symbol of Ki’s power. Now, he can become a symbol of yours! Take him to your world. Show him to your enemies. Execute him if you must, but do it on a public telecast. *He* can be your example!”

The other Reptos fall silent, as their commander lapses into thought. Its ever-vigilant water-bearer sprays its head, as if to cool its brain. Finally, the creature nods. “There is merit to your suggestion. We will keep the prisoner alive, for now.”

“A sensible decision, Nest Leader,” Persephone compliments it. She takes a deep breath. “Now, there is one boon I would ask of you, in return for my help. I have important business to attend to, away from this miserable planet. I’m sure you have many warships in this system. I would like you to instruct them to allow me on my way.”

The Nest Leader glares at her for a long moment, then its teeth stretch into a malevolent grin. “That can be arranged. We may even spare the mammals of Micropolis, as you wish. But first, you must give us what is rightfully ours.”

Persephone does not know what the creature means, at first. But, as she realizes, doubt creeps into her eyes for the first time. “You mean the time equipment from the chamber?” She shakes her head, and tries to sound firm—but the Reptos can sense her anxiety as well as I do. She is lost. “It was destroyed! There is nothing left of it.”

The Nest Leader lets out a mighty roar, and strikes, raking its claws across her face. Persephone shrieks, and falls to her knees, clutching her hands to her cheek.

“Take them both to the ship!” barks the old Repto. “In time, they will beg to reveal the truth to us!”

“I’m *telling* you the truth, Nest Leader!” insists Persephone, but the Reptos do not want to hear her. As they crowd around her, an emotion wells within me. I cannot explain it; I do not know why I care so much. But I am afraid for her.

If Persephone is taken to that submerged ship, she will die alongside its crew. Alongside me. I have accepted my fate. But she does not have to die, too. I will not allow it.

I hurl myself at the nearest Repto, looping my arms around its throat and my legs around its chest. I am trying to break its neck, but I am still weak. Weaker than I thought. Its comrades tear me from its back, snapping and slashing at me from all sides until it is all I can do to remain upright. Still, I keep fighting, swinging both arms together—despite the pain from the right—and clubbing my foes with my heavy wrist clamp. I am trying to summon the red mist, but I cannot find it. I am borne down by the weight of four Reptos, my head pressed into the dirt, my hands pinned underneath me.

When the fight has gone out of me, they lift me again, and drag me to the waterside. I crane to look back over my shoulder, and see Persephone, similarly held. I had hoped to distract the Reptos long enough for her to flee. She could have joined Archer, waited with him at Ki's safe house for all this to end. She could have lived. I failed.

And now, my captors beat their wings and lift my feet from the ground, tipping me headfirst as they dive into the lake. I barely have time to take a breath before my helmet is filled with cold, black water.

Down, down, ever downward. I feel as if I am sinking into a pit from which I can never return. My lungs are starting to ache. I can see almost nothing, but the Reptos' course is assured. They know where they are taking me.

I do not see the spy ship until we are almost on top of it, and then it is only a shapeless patch of deeper shadow. I cannot tell if it is black, or simply reflecting its dark environs. It bears no resemblance to the spear-shaped Repto vessel that I saw destroyed. I suspect it was not built by the Reptos at all, rather, acquired by them from some more advanced race. It is not semi-organic, as is much of their technology. As we approach it, I make out a sleek, metal construct with elegant curves. Wires bristle from its spine. I recall that it slipped through Ki's blockade undetected, and I am beginning to see how it managed such a feat. It *is* black. The perfect blackness of oblivion. Somehow, it seems to absorb what little light surrounds it. The wires, I suspect, belong to some type of anti-detection array—a radar baffler.

A hatchway opens ahead of us, and I am taken into a small airlock. Pumps drain out the water, leaving a musty scent. I breathe, gratefully. The bedraggled Persephone sucks in air, wheezing like a pair of bellows, and succumbs to a spluttering fit. Showing no sympathy, the Reptos haul us both through the inner hatchway.

The interior bulkheads of the spaceship are fashioned from the same black metal as its outer shell. The effect is disconcerting. A faint green light comes from somewhere, but it is swallowed by the walls. Our footsteps are deadened, too. Patches of water spot the floor, reflecting the image of my blank-faced helmet back at me a hundred times over. The cell to which I am taken, however, is depressingly similar to the last one.

The Reptos search Persephone's jumpsuit. She does not protest; she looks pale and ill. They take her gun, and locate the key to my wrist clamp. Then, on the Nest Leader's instructions, four of them bundle her away. After my previous escape, they don't intend to take the risk of imprisoning us together. Likewise, as the shackles fall from my hands, the remaining six creatures crowd around me, denying me the chance to run. My stomach sinks as I am locked into a pair of manacles, which are chained in turn to sturdy metal rings, sunk low into the cell wall. I try to reassure myself that the future is on my side. Hopeless as my situation seems, I will escape it.

The Nest Leader, of course, is of a different opinion. It leans over me, so close that its saliva flecks my helmet. "It is a long journey back to our home world," it hisses. "You will be extremely uncomfortable. You may take solace in the fact that, once we reach Sauria, your discomfort will soon end." It straightens, and glares down at me, evidently disappointed not to have provoked a reaction. "Of course," it ventures further, "ultimately, none of this will matter at all. Once we have the secret of time

travel—”

I interrupt the creature with a mocking laugh. “Do you really believe that? Do you believe that, even if you could find the Pharoids’ machinery—even if it hadn’t been destroyed—the Reptos, of all the species in the galaxy, would be the ones to unlock its secrets? Everybody knows that Reptos don’t have the brainpower to write their own names!”

The Nest Leader bristles. “Those who make such claims will learn their folly! With a time machine, there is no insult we cannot avenge, no setback we can’t reverse! For example, you—” it stabs a claw toward my face “—will not have the chance to threaten us. We will track you down, in a time before you have that cursed armor. I will personally tear your head from your body. I will ensure that all those you have killed will live again!”

I recall my conversation with Persephone, and suppress a shudder. Defiantly, I spit, “It is true, then, what I have heard about your kind: that you are cowards, without honor! You have never won a battle that you fought fairly! You would attack me when I am weak, unaware of you, because you know you could not beat me otherwise!”

“We *have* beaten you,” insists the Nest Leader, “with cunning and intelligence!”

I shake my head, scornfully. “Twice, you have had me in your custody, Nest Leader. Both times, you have had to rely on a ‘mammal’ to bring me to you, because your soldiers were too weak to do the job. They couldn’t even hold me!”

“That is not true!” barks the Nest Leader, in defiance of all evidence. “My people were genetically bred to fight. No soft-skinned mammal, no matter what technology it has, is a match for the least of them.”

“Then set me free, Nest Leader! I will face any one of your soldiers—no, any *three*—in fair combat, unarmed, for my freedom. Or are you afraid that I would win?”

The Repto hesitates. It is tempted, but I can see its fear. Reluctant as it is to admit it, it knows the truth of my words. “I have nothing to gain from such a contest,” it says stiffly. “Our superiority over your kind is amply proven by your presence in this cell.”

“As I said,” I mutter under my breath, “no honor!” But my attempt to rile my foe further is futile. The Nest Leader has already turned its back on me. Its attendant is calming its nerves with a liberal spray of cold water. Within seconds, the old Repto and its entourage have left, locking the cell door behind them. I will have to find another route to freedom.

After a few minutes, I give up straining against my bonds. Even at full strength, it would be a struggle to break them. I will rest, and save what little energy I have, until I can find a more productive use for it. I slump against the wall, which is surprisingly cool, and lapse into an unsettled doze, disturbed by the constant sounds of activity from outside my cell. Repto claws, scraping the metal floor.

Unintelligible words, spoken in low grunts. Everything sounds so faint, so distant, and yet so close.

Somehow, in between short spells of darkness, I find time to dream. Strange, unsettling dreams, in which I see myself cut down in battle, over and over. I wake with a start, time and again, with a mixture of relief and dismay to find that nothing has changed. I stare at the four black walls, and listen to the sounds outside. And I drift back into my dream world, where the next sword is poised, waiting to find my heart.

The armor, I realize, has died many times before. I wonder if my death will be the last. My body will lie here, on this ship, for many years—but the armor, I know, will not tarnish. Maybe, in the future, there will be another Acroyear. Maybe he will hear my voice in his head, learn from my experience. I

hope he will be proud of me.

And I see the Time Traveler. He stands in the Pharoid chamber, surrounded by its machinery, at the beginning of his long journey. Sensing my eyes upon him, he turns to look at me. I cannot see his expression through his mask, but I am sure he is smiling, offering me encouragement. I try to call to him, try to ask him why it must be this way, but I have no voice. He would not answer, anyway. But he knows I am doing the right thing. Somehow, by saving Micropolis, I will set him free.

And then he is gone, leaving me to wonder if he was ever truly there, if he really tried to contact me, or if I dreamed him. Perhaps it does not matter.

I am drifting towards unconsciousness again, hoping he will still be there, when I hear the scream. It jolts me back to reality, jerking me bolt upright, her name on my lips.

“Persephone!”

They are torturing her, as the Nest Leader said they would. She screams again, the sound reverberating in the suddenly hollow cavity of my chest. What are they doing to her? What have they done to her already, to break her like this? I cannot bear it. She should not be here. I tear at my chains again, but they hold fast. I spit furious threats at the Reptos, but they sink into the black wall between us. Another pitiful wail galvanizes me. I pull the chains to their limit, until I can reach the wall with the sole of my foot. I kick at it, and the metal vibrates. I pound it again and again, and yell until my throat is raw.

“She can’t help you! Do you hear me? I’m the one! She doesn’t know where Ki took the time travel equipment, but I do. I saw it! Are you listening to me, you cold-blooded bastards? I can give you what you want. Leave the woman alone!”

Eventually, the screaming stops. And then the Reptos come for me.

As soon as they open my cell door, I see what is to happen. The missing pieces of my fate fall into place, and the future is set out before me.

Three Reptos wheel a battered trolley into the room, its wheels squeaking. Suspended within its rusted framework is a black and silver box, which stinks of ozone and burnt flesh. Two terminals—one red, one black—protrude from its top, and wires are tangled around these, leading to two sharp-toothed clamps. The device looks old, at odds with the technology of the spy ship. It looks like something Ki would have used. It is still effective, I am sure.

“Tell us what you know!” demands one of the creatures—the oldest, if I can judge. Its subordinates are already unraveling the wires, paying them out across the floor.

“I want to make a deal first,” I stall. “The Pharoid machines, in exchange for my freedom.”

“You are in no position to barter! Your death is certain—the Nest Leader has decreed it—and those machines are ours. Keep us from them, and you will suffer!” The clamps are now attached to my chains, and the other two Reptos withdraw to a safe distance.

I brace myself as my interrogator—my torturer—throws a switch on the side of his apparatus. A low humming noise begins, inside the battery, building in pitch and intensity until the box can contain it no longer. It throbs in the ground at my feet, rumbles in my stomach, and plays with my nervous system. Just when I think the suspense itself may finish me, a white-hot shock slams into me. The pain starts in my hands, shoots up my arms to meet in my chest, then erupts to consume my entire body. I thought myself prepared for it, but this is far worse than anything the Harrowers did to me with their batons. My head snaps back, and my eyes roll into their sockets. I fight the impulse to cry out.

“Now,” hisses the Repto, “give me the machines, or there will be more pain.”

“Go to hell, lizard!” I spit.

It operates the switch again, leaving it depressed for longer this time. I feel as if I am on fire, inside. My eyes are still open, but I cannot see. It is several seconds before I realize that the pain has ended. I have rolled myself into a ball, but slowly I straighten my back and look my interrogator in the eye. Its scaly head seems blurred at first; I blink it back into focus.

“You know the deal,” I stammer, my voice cracking. “The machines for my freedom.”

“No deals,” barks the Repto. And it throws the switch again.

I expected no less. These creatures will not give up their prisoner now, nor would I wish them to. My false offer was made only to keep them focused upon me. I can bear their torture, where Persephone cannot. Of course, I have another, less selfless, reason for volunteering myself for this punishment. The electric shock treatment is having an effect that my captors could not have anticipated.

As the fourth jolt subsides, I realize that I am screaming. My skin feels as if it is cooking inside my armor. As the fifth rips through me, I try to concentrate my mind, to think of something beyond the pain. With a detached interest, I note that the black metal from which the spy ship is constructed cannot be conductive, else the electric charge would travel up my chains, down the wall, through the floor and into the Reptos themselves. I imagine them being fried where they stand, and my stomach cramps with laughter.

Enraged, my interrogator makes the sixth shock the longest yet. I black out for a blissful instant, until one of the Repto attendants empties a bucket over my head. Cool water trickles through the seams of my armor, soothing me as it streams down my overheated body. But the seventh shock is heightened, conducted by the liquid. My nerves are fried, itching as they await the next onslaught. I can feel saliva dribbling down my chin. I cannot take much more before my conscious mind withdraws beyond the Reptos’ ability to revive it. But then, I do not have to take much more.

My armor is almost fully charged.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Three broken bodies lie at my feet, twisted into impossible positions.

I have no memory of the last few minutes; they passed in a red blur. But this carnage tells me all I need to know. My gauntlets are caked in black blood and entrails. I think the Reptos must have been dead for some time before I stopped hitting them. Certainly, my torturer was in no condition to remove the clamps I attached to its wings. I must have thrown the switch on the battery, and left it to fry. Light-colored pus oozes from beneath charred scales. The torture machine is smoking and rattling, still pumping electricity into the corpse, but close to overload.

I am still wearing my manacles, although I pulled the chains out of the wall. I fasten my hands around each wristband in turn, and squeeze with the full strength of my armor until the metal shatters. The machine gives out at last, filling the air with an acrid stench as its motor whines down. In the ensuing silence, I feel alone and cold.

The door to Persephone’s cell offers little resistance. She does not look up as I enter. I am dismayed at the sight of her: The woman I always thought so strong, curled into a fetal position, sobbing to herself. There are strings of blood in her beautiful blonde hair, and the Nest Leader’s claws have left three scars

across her cheek. They will never heal fully. I suppress the animal urge to howl. I want to go back to my torturer; I want to tear his already dead body apart for what he has done to her.

I control my emotions. I crouch beside her. I brush hair from her face, as gently as I can. She flinches. But then she looks up, sees me, and weeps tears of gratitude.

I break her manacles, and help her to her feet. She can't stand unaided, at first—her legs give way—but, slowly, her strength returns. We stumble out into the cell corridor, Persephone leaning on me. She begs me to leave her. She says that she can only slow me down. I ignore her.

"Where are you taking me?" she asks.

"To the airlock. I will not have you on this ship, when I...I do what must be done."

"Are you insane?" she explodes. "The Reptos could release that virus at any moment. You can't afford to waste time with me. You have a world to save!"

She tries to pull away. I tighten my grip on her. "The world can wait!"

Persephone laughs hollowly. "Compassion, Nanissar? Are you trying to make a point? Why do you care about me? I used you!"

"You gave me hope. You gave me strength. You reawakened my true self. Whatever your motives, I am grateful for that."

A short, awkward silence follows. Then, Persephone says, "I apologize for what I said to you on Ki's airship. You *are* a worthy Acroyear. Perhaps the most worthy there has been."

The compliment leaves me with a bittersweet feeling. I want to believe that it was sincere—and I think it was—but what difference does it make now? I feel I ought to say something more, before we part forever, but I have no words. Perhaps it is best we leave it this way. I have come to understand Persephone. I think I have seen her true self: The one that she conceals behind her protective shell. We are more similar than either of us would acknowledge. I will think fondly of her, for whatever short time I have left. And maybe, in return, she will think of me, too, occasionally.

We encounter only two Reptos on our short journey. We try to hide from them, ducking into an adjoining corridor, without success. One of them gets curious, and drifts in our direction. I leap on it, wrestle it to the ground, and constrict its throat with my elbow until it stops trying to breathe. The other creature, uncharacteristically for its species, has fled. Its Nest Leader, I assume, has given orders that I am to be handled with caution—and in overwhelming numbers, if at all possible. Indeed, seconds later, a wailing siren strikes up.

Persephone has recovered a little, but not enough to run. I hoist her over my shoulder, and hope that no more Reptos find me while I am thus burdened. We reach the airlock, gratified to find it unguarded. I spin the locking wheel, pull the circular door open, and push my charge through. She looks back at me with haunted eyes, and I hesitate for a second, although I told myself I would not.

Footsteps approach from each end of the corridor. Urgency overrides sentiment, and I slam the door shut between us. That final image of Persephone's face is burnt into my retinas. The knowledge that I will not see her again is a weight on my heart. I should have said something.

I turn a wall-mounted dial, to fill the airlock with water. She will be able to open the outer hatch herself, once the pressure has equalized. Hiding inside a packed storeroom, I listen as four Reptos converge in the corridor outside. They attempt to drain the airlock, but find that they cannot because it is open to the lake. Persephone has gone. I only pray that she is strong enough to reach the surface

unaided. I will never know.

Hissing angrily, the Reptos stomp away. Their words make it plain that they think I have escaped, too—and, after a minute or so, the alarm falls silent.

Beads of hot sweat prickle my skin. I knew that this moment was inevitable. I accepted it. And yet, now that it is here, my stomach is a yawning chasm. This is it. This is where I face the remaining Reptos, alone and unarmed. This is where I find their flesh-eating virus and release it, in the airtight confines of this ship, before it can infect a city. This is where I die, sacrificing myself so that billions may live. This is where I ensure that my name will become legend. This is where it ends, at last.

It is time.

I wait in the storeroom for as long as I dare. Long enough for the Reptos to relax, thinking me gone. Not long enough, I hope, for them to unleash destruction.

The corridor is empty. I creep along it as quietly as I can, although my armor was not built for stealth. I am beginning to realize the magnitude of my task. The spy ship is smaller than the last Repto vessel on which I found myself, but still I have several decks to search. I did not give much thought, before, to how I would find the virus. I assumed that, because the news sheet said that it had happened, it would happen. Now, I am less confident. I do not even know what type of container I am looking for. I should have asked Persephone's advice when I had the chance.

I have no option but to start searching. I open each door that I come across, listening first to be sure that there is nobody on the far side. Apart from the prison cells, this deck seems to comprise mainly crew quarters. The Reptos sleep on beds of damp leaves, and feed off fat insects, which they breed in glass-sided hatcheries.

I find a staircase. There is only one deck below me, so I check this out first. As it transpires, much of it is taken up by a vast, open space, flooded to a depth of a few inches with brackish water. The Reptos, I imagine, come here to relax. It also serves as a hangar for two squat, semi-organic shuttle pods, which crouch on spider legs.

At the far end of the deck, a dry, raised area has been fenced off with wire mesh. This is where the ship's reactor core is housed. Consoles surround a vertical glass tube in which raw energy coruscates, its hue shifting from one end of the spectrum to the other. I take the remaining explosive device out of my boot. If Persephone's charade had one positive outcome, it was that, believing me her prisoner, the Reptos did not bother to search me.

I turn the tiny sphere over in my fingers, knowing that it packs enough force to shatter the toughened glass; knowing that, in so doing, it would likely spark a chain reaction that would blow this ship to pieces. I am tempted to do it. I could end the Reptos' threat to this world, once and for all, without having to die. With luck, their virus would be sterilized by the blast. But what if luck was against me? What if the virus was not destroyed, but released?

With a sigh, I return the explosive to my boot. I managed to delude myself, for a second, that I had a choice. I do not. I know what I must do.

There are no Reptos here, either in the pool or tending to the core. The crew deck, too, was suspiciously empty. I can only assume that many of them have gone in pursuit of their escaped prisoners. Good news for me, if I hope to remain undetected a while longer. Not so good for Persephone, should they catch up with her.

As I climb the stairs again, I encounter a Repto coming in the other direction. I have nowhere to hide, so I lower my head and keep going. The Repto avoids my charge, flapping its wings and leaping above my head. Its clawed feet find my back, and bear me to the floor. I try to roll over, but the creature's weight pins me. I have a second, maybe less, before its jaws clamp onto my neck. I use the strength in my armor to push myself up, unseating it. I twist my head around to find myself staring down its throat. I punch it in the teeth, cracking several of them, drawing blood from its gums. It screeches and flinches away, allowing me to scramble back to my feet. On the offensive now, I pummel the creature until it drops.

I struggle to lift its dead weight. I do not want to reveal my presence here yet, if I can help it. I carry the Repto up to the next deck, and look for somewhere to hide it. I try several doors, finding them locked. This poses a dilemma for me. I could force them open easily, but I would be leaving a trail. And yet, any one of these locked rooms could hold the virus.

I hear more footsteps approaching. I run my hand across the sensor of the nearest door, and, to my relief, it swishes open. I drag my heavy charge into what appears to be a storage room for data cubes. Its shelves are coated with dust, which gives me reassurance that nobody is likely to come in here. I flatten my back against the room's front wall, peering sidelong through a small windowpane in the door. I hold my breath as two Reptos draw level with me. I am struck by the fact that each is carrying a heavy-duty blaster. I have not seen Reptos with weapons before, despite the supplies I found in their other ship. I assumed it was a matter of pride for them that they fought with their teeth and claws. Maybe they are becoming paranoid—after all, enough of them have died this past day.

A sudden noise startles me. A groan. The Repto I brought in here with me is stirring. Damn me for not making sure that it was dead! I left the creature sprawled on the floor. I drop onto it and fasten my hands around its throat, stifling its attempts to cry out. It thrashes beneath me, but it is weak. Still, it manages to sink a claw into my flesh, between my ribs. I grit my teeth, and focus through the pain. The Repto passes out again, starved of oxygen, and I tear myself away from it. Blood pumps from my side, and I stem the flow with my hand until my armor can seal the wound. I stagger up to the door and check through the pane. The Reptos outside have passed, having apparently heard nothing amiss.

I slap my captive awake and question it, with my thumbs on its windpipe, about the whereabouts of the virus. It laughs in my face. I punch it. We repeat the process twice more before it answers my question, seething with resentment. I can't help but feel that it gave in too easily. I choke it back into unconsciousness, and sit beside it, deep in thought.

I wake it again, and accuse it of lying to me. It shakes its head, groggily. It cannot know how long it was out, so I try a bluff. "I went to this laboratory of yours," I snarl, my face pressed up to the Repto's. "It was empty!"

"Impossible!" wheezes the creature, its yellow eyes glazing over. "If you went to the lab, you...you would be dead by now..."

"So, it *was* a trap? You tried to send me into an ambush!"

The Repto's eyes have closed. The floor beneath its head is stained with blood. I hit it too hard. Angrily, I shake it out of its stupor. Its voice is a rasping whisper. "The virus is in the lab. But you...you will never reach it, warm-blood! Our Nest Leader has...room guarded..." It is delusional now, its eyes looking through me, fixed on some imaginary point in the distance. It starts to laugh, convulsively. "The mammals think we Reptos are stupid. They lie to us, betray us. Soon, they will learn. When their most populated city is reduced to..." The creature is wracked by a coughing fit. "When their...putrid flesh rots and slides from their...skeletons...then, they will...respect us. They will...respect the..."

I am standing outside the laboratory. At least, if I can believe my now-deceased captive, that is where the double doors ahead of me ought to lead. The black doors are not labeled, nor are they guarded. Still, my instincts tell me that the dying Repto did not lie to me.

I don't like this. Every fiber of my being warns me of a trap. But it is one into which I will have to walk, because the bait is all-important to me. I remind myself that I know the future. Whatever obstacles lie between the virus and me, I will overcome them.

I had hoped to encounter another Repto patrol, to take their guns from them. I would feel better if I were armed. But a deathly hush seems to have settled upon this deck, if not over the entire ship. It feels deserted, and still. Almost as if time itself is waiting for me to make my move. And I, in turn, know that I can't afford to wait for anything.

There is a sensor in the wall beside the doors. I wave my hand over it, expecting no response. Surprisingly, the doors swish open. I dive through them, with a forward roll intended to confuse anyone who might be lying in wait into firing above my head. No shots come. I find myself alone in the center of the room.

The laboratory is smaller than I expected. Its walls are the same light-deadening black as the rest of the ship, and my head almost touches the ceiling. The work surfaces, in contrast, are a pure white, and seem almost to glow. They are also, for the most part, bare. If there is any equipment in here at all, then it has been tidied away into the cupboards and drawers that line the walls. With, I note, one highly visible exception.

It sits on a table in front of me: An airtight glass box, with controls set into its molded base. Inside the box, attached to its sides, a pair of mechanical arms lie still. Sitting between them, on a transparent pedestal, is a cylindrical canister. It is smaller than I expected—about ten centimeters long—and yellow, with a red lid. A stark warning is stamped on its side, in black alien symbols. It is an innocuous container for death on such a large scale.

This is all too easy. Even the Reptos cannot be so arrogant as to leave the prize on display like this. But then, they are not aware of my presence aboard their ship, nor can they know that I know about their virus. They have not seen the future as I have.

I push my doubts to the back of my mind, and put my fist through the glass box.

I expected to set off an alarm, but there is nothing. Another worrying sign.

I reach for the yellow cylinder.

A flicker of movement causes me to look up, as the ceiling of the laboratory blurs and disappears. A hologram; I should have realized! Above it, the walls rise for several more meters—and Reptos nest in the high rafters. They spread their wings and glide to the floor, hissing triumphantly at the success of their ambush. My hand freezes over the canister. I count twelve of the creatures, each of them holding a blaster weapon. Among them: The Nest Leader, which lands in front of me, albeit keeping a safe distance. Its rows of teeth stretch into a taunting leer. Its long tongue moistens the scales around its mouth.

"Now, who is without honor, mammal? You skulk about our ship; you think to poison us while we sleep, rather than face us! You called us cowards, but it is you who have proven yourself the coward!" The other Reptos strike up a sibilant chorus of agreement.

"It was you who brought an invisible killer to this world!" I growl.

"The virus is a last resort," says the Nest Leader, waving a dismissive claw. "It is only to be used if the warm-bloods force us to do so."

“Force you how? By defeating you? By driving you from this world empty-handed?”

“That will not happen,” snaps the Nest Leader. “Even now, my people are acquiring the Pharoid machines.”

My stomach turns over. What if the creature is telling the truth? What if the Reptos never intended to deploy their ultimate weapon, after all? The future writer of that news sheet article could attest only to the presence of the virus aboard this ship; he could do no more than guess at what led to its release.

No, I tell myself firmly. The machinery from the chamber no longer exists. I do not know what has made the Nest Leader think otherwise, but it will soon be disabused of that notion. And, even if it does not take its revenge upon Micropolis, the virus will always be here. It will be released some time, somewhere; of that, I have no doubt.

“Now,” hisses the Nest Leader, “step away from the canister!”

“Or what?” I retort. “You intend to kill me, anyway. I would rather die now, quickly, than give you the spectacle of an execution. I have nothing to lose!”

My foe narrows its eyes. “My soldiers will not shoot to kill you, but to cripple. Obey me, or you will spend your final days in excruciating pain!”

I feel a smile forming on my face. There is no fear now, no anticipation. I am calm, confident. “Are you sure about that, Nest Leader? Are you so sure I cannot take down twelve lizards? More to the point: Are you confident that they can stop me, without killing me, before I reach you and snap your neck? You are six steps away from me, Nest Leader!”

The creature turns a paler shade of green, and takes a reflexive step backwards. Still, it boasts hollowly, “You have enjoyed a few small victories over mere hatchlings. Now, you face my elite guards—and, as you can doubtless see, they are armed. As am I.”

“Maybe,” I concede. “But I have time on my side.”

I snatch the canister, throwing myself into a sideways dive. Blaster fire blazes around me, and sears my back. I land on my shoulder, twisting my bad arm. My gauntleted fingers scrabble at the red lid. I break the seal, and twist.

Everything seems to freeze. In the sudden silence, even the sound of the plastic lid hitting the floor sounds like a gunshot. It bounces twice and rolls under a table, taking an eternity to fall still. The canister appears empty; there is no outrush of air or smoke, no odor. The moment feels anticlimactic. There should be light and sound. There should be wailing and rejoicing. But I know what I have done; it will have to be enough. I have made history.

I look up, to find that the Reptos have closed in around me. A dozen guns are pointed at my head. Bizarrely, I feel like laughing. With a strange, giddy sense of detachment, I wonder how long I will take to die. I hope my armor will sustain me, at least long enough to see my final victory over my enemies. I wonder how it will feel, and if I will meet those who have worn the armor before me.

I feel suddenly weak. There are spots in front of my eyes, and I am light-headed. My body knows that it does not have to fight any more. But I can hear a strange sound. It is growing louder. I cannot identify it at first, but then I realize that the Nest Leader is laughing—a series of harsh, guttural barks—and its sycophantic underlings are soon laughing alongside it.

“Observe the stupidity of the warm-blood,” mocks the Nest Leader. “It thought we would allow it to take our greatest weapon, to use it against us.” It leans over me, its eyes gleaming, and talks slowly and clearly, as if to a dull-witted child. “The container is empty, mammal. We placed it in this room purely to lead you into our cunning trap!”

I shake my head in futile disbelief, acting like a child myself. “That...that cannot be true. The virus...I have seen the future...”

“I know about your precious manuscript,” scoffs the Nest Leader. “I know what you expected to find when you reached this laboratory. That is why I have had the real virus removed from my ship. You cannot reach it now.”

“You knew? How could you have known?”

The old Repto smiles, cruelly. “Your companion was extremely forthcoming.”

I can’t accept what I am hearing. My mind is in turmoil, my stomach equally so. I am beginning to see that I will have to fight again, but my body is unwilling. It has been through so much. It wants me to lie down, to accept that I have done my best and lost.

“Oh, yes,” continues the Nest Leader, “you thought you had sent the female to safety, but it is not so easy to escape our clutches. She was brought back here. She was brought to me. And, after a certain amount of...persuasion, she told me all she knew.”

“She wouldn’t!” I insist. “She knows how important this is. She knows what you would do if...” My throat dries in mid-sentence. The evidence speaks for itself. The Nest Leader is telling the truth; how else could it know what it does? How else could it have done what both Ki and I failed to do: fought the future and won? I think about Persephone, recaptured and returned to the spy ship, knowing that, soon, all aboard would die. I remember asking her what she would do in my position; for whom she would sacrifice her life. I have my answer.

“On the contrary,” says the Nest Leader, “she was pleased to cooperate. Even now, she is up on the surface of this world, leading four of my people to the Pharoid machines.”

“The machines were destroyed!”

“I always knew that was a lie. You were foolish to think you could deceive me.”

“And they have taken the virus with them?” I guess.

“The female knows the price, should she attempt to betray us.”

“If your people release the virus out there,” I point out, “they will die, too.”

“Does it surprise you, warm-blood, that we, like you, are capable of self-sacrifice? I will lose four soldiers, yes—but they will die gloriously, in the knowledge that they have taken billions of our enemies with them. They will be immortalized as heroes!”

“They will be killers,” I spit.

“On our homeworld,” says the Nest Leader, “there is no difference.” It motions to its soldiers. “Return the creature to its cell. But, first, rend the limbs from its body. That ought to discourage any further escape bids.”

Three Reptos stalk toward me, while the others keep me covered with their blasters. I do not move. I pretend to be cowering helplessly, but there is still power in my armor to compensate for my fatigued muscles. I allow the Reptos to come closer, closer...

I bring my foot up into the groin of the nearest creature, and grip its head as it folds with the pain. I pull it down onto me, obstructing the aims of its comrades. I keep its jaws at bay with one hand while struggling to wrest its gun from its grip with the other. I fail, and am forced to roll out from beneath it as it scrabbles for my throat. I keep moving as fast as I can, denying my attackers the chance to get a bead on me. I tackle a Repto around its midriff, taking it by surprise and propelling it backwards. We

crash to the floor together, behind a bench. I have earned a second's respite, but no longer. More than one of the creatures has taken to the air again; I am about to find myself back in their sights.

I roll again, and a blast meant for me hits the Repto beneath me. It groans, and I snatch its gun while it is distracted. It makes for an easy target. I fire into its eyes. One down, eleven remaining. I make a leap for the door, firing backwards over my shoulder. Two Reptos block my path. I veer off, and find the Nest Leader in front of me. It is squawking in fear, ordering its soldiers to protect it, but they cannot reach it in time. I have a hostage, my gun pressed up to its head. It flutters its wings, trying to beat me back, but I tighten my hold around its throat.

"Drop your weapons, all of you!" I order.

"Do as the mammal says!" screeches my hostage. Its subjects hesitate, exchanging uncertain glances. For a charged moment, mutiny is very much in the air. I can feel the Nest Leader trembling in my grasp. Defiantly, it bellows, "I am your commander! You are honor-bound to keep me safe! Obey me, or face court-martial!"

With visible reluctance, the Reptos drift to the ground and lay down their arms. I start to back out of the room, pulling the Nest Leader after me. "We are going for a walk, now," I announce. "If I see any snouts peeking out of this door, Chief Lizard here gets a new mouth in his head. Clear?"

The Reptos glare at me resentfully. It won't take them long, I am sure, to conclude that their Nest Leader should do the honorable thing, and die.

I am almost out of the room when a quick burst of sound startles me. I turn, fearing an attack. Then I see the Nest Leader's water-bearer, standing to my right. It twists the nozzle of its hose, and discharges a second cloud of vapor over the old Repto's scales. Dumbfounded by its cheek, I shoot it in the stomach. It stumbles backward, its mouth falling open, staring at me with an expression of injured innocence.

I pull the Nest Leader out into the corridor, and along. It struggles, trying to slow me down, and I am forced to fire a warning shot across its temple. In response to the retort, a Repto head appears around the laboratory door. I take a potshot at it, too, and it hastily withdraws.

I didn't expect to be leaving this ship. I did not plan an escape route. I did, however, note the existence of a private elevator in a well-lit nook. The Nest Leader's claw print activates it for me, and I step into a tiny, black-walled compartment. I let go of my hostage; it rounds on me, teeth bared, and I shoot it. It reels, injured but not dead. Its soldiers will surely be here in a moment, and, with luck, some of them will stop to tend to their commander. In the meantime, I know where I am going now, and I can travel faster alone. I press the lowermost button, and the elevator doors close, even as the first Repto comes into sight outside.

The cab drops quickly, but not quickly enough. With an ear-piercing shriek and a stomach-dropping wrench, it is dragged to a halt between floors. The Reptos, I realize, are pulling at the cables above. Gears strain, lights flicker, and the doors remain shut. I back into a corner and turn my blaster weapon on the floor, firing until I have melted a large enough hole in the metal. The cab is filled with hot steam, and shaking violently. The Reptos, in turn, are firing down on its roof; my armor is spattered with hot rivulets.

I jump through the hole, into dank darkness. I cannot even see how far I have to drop. Fortunately, it is not far. There is a pair of doors in front of me, just a few feet above the bottom of the shaft. I reach up and tear them open. Immediately, water pours through the crack, pooling around my feet. I hoist myself up onto the hangar deck, even as a stream of blaster fire hisses into the water behind me. The Reptos are in the elevator!

Behind its wire mesh fence, the reactor core glows a pale blue. I wade toward the hangar doors, and hit the control to open them. They grind and squeal, fighting the water pressure behind them. I hurl my last explosive device, wishing I could lengthen its electronic fuse. I brace myself against the strut of a shuttle pod.

The doors pull themselves apart, and a deluge of black water hits me like a cannonball. Simultaneously, three Reptos soar through the sundered elevator doors, and a small explosion shatters the glass casing of the core, releasing the energy within. A white-hot tendril of fire lashes across the deck like a whip. I am holding onto the pod for my life, but it, too, is in danger of being swept away by the incoming tide. I take a final, gasping breath, filling my lungs before the water rises above my head.

The Reptos are strong swimmers—and, despite the force pushing against them, they are fighting their way towards me. I dare not let go of my anchor just yet. A clawed hand reaches for me. Suddenly, another crackling tendril strikes through my attacker's heart like lightning. The creature's corpse is snatched away into darkness.

Intermittent flashes illuminate my way to freedom. The core is discharging its energy in random, multi-colored bursts, undiluted by the murky water. It can only be a matter of time before one of its tendrils hits a shuttle pod fuel cell. Or, for that matter, me.

The inrush has ceased, now that the deck is entirely submerged. The hangar doors have frozen, half open. I strike out towards them. A Repto appears in front of me. I try to fire my blaster, but it does not work underwater. I let the gun float away from me as I tackle the creature. I do not have time to subdue it; there will be others right behind it. I am just trying to find an opening, to get past it. I manage to throw it off-balance, and push it away. I set my sights on the exit again. I am aware of the Repto's shadow behind me, but the escaping core energy works in my favor again, stabbing out between us, delaying its pursuit.

I pass through the doors, the metal beneath me giving way to the mud of the lake bed. I am clear of the spy ship, and I use all the power in my armor to propel me from it. I risk a glance back over my shoulder. I see no Reptos. Hopefully, in the gloom down here, I can lose them altogether. But my lungs are straining. I will have to surface soon.

They come at me without warning: Two shapes, converging on me from each side. Reptos? How could they have found me so quickly? And then I realize: This is how Persephone was captured. There are sentries outside the ship. Aquatic Membros creatures.

They slam into me, winding me, making me lose my remaining air. I have to make this quick. They have hold of me, turning me around, forcing me back down to the ship. I strike out at both simultaneously, surprising them with my strength. I break free, dive beneath them, come up in an arc, and I'm heading upwards again. Some instinct—whether my own or the armor's, I do not know—makes me twist sideways, even as a roiling bolt of red energy comes at me from below. I avoid it by a hair; even so, it boils the water around it. My armor pumps coolants onto my skin to keep me from being cooked. I have just seen what a Membros hydro-laser can do in its natural element! The water itself seemed to amplify the beam, making it more powerful with distance. That leaves me with only one option. My attackers are used to this environment; their eyesight is far better than mine. If I flee, they will shoot me down. I have to ignore my burning lungs and my cramping stomach. I have to take the fight back down to them, to where my superior strength might give me a slim chance.

They are rising to meet me. I rush the nearer of them—but I am beginning to weaken. Black spots appear in front of my eyes. The armor injects more endorphins into me, but it cannot give me what I really need. It cannot give me oxygen.

Almost before I know where I am, I am held again. I lash out blindly, trusting in the armor to guide me.

I manage a forward roll, tipping my captor over my head even as its partner's laser fires. The creature's head explodes, fragments of red plating and red brain tissue floating in front of me. I hurl myself at the other Membros, like a guided torpedo, before it can gain the distance it needs. We wrestle. I wrap my fingers around its right eyestalk, and yank it out of its head. But the effort is too much.

I breathe in water, and my muscles fail me. My armor, too, is all but exhausted. The creature pushes me away from it, and I can do nothing but flail, helpless even to reverse the direction of my drift. I am seconds away from unconsciousness, and then death. But the Membros creature will not even give me those seconds.

It takes aim at me with its hydro-laser, and I can do nothing but await the killing shot.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I burst through the lake's surface, chest rattling as my lungs heave painfully. Even the air of Micropolis smells sweet! But I am coughing up black water, in danger of being sucked under again. I thrash my limbs, only half aware, through a misty blur, of the shape of the nearest bank. It is all I can do to reach it, to pull myself half onto dry land, and then I give in to fatigue at long last. I lie, gasping and spluttering, in the mud, my legs in the water. My head aches. I still don't know how I can be alive at all.

I think I passed out, just for a second. When I opened my eyes, the Membros was gone. From somewhere, I found a final burst of energy. I do not think it came from the armor: That is little more than dead weight now. I swam, expecting to be engulfed in fire at any moment. I did not think I was strong enough. Even as I saw hope—a shimmer of sunlight above—my metal casing was dragging me down. If I do not recharge it soon—within minutes—I will expire along with it.

That knowledge keeps me awake. It keeps me fighting. I heave myself to my feet, and stagger to the Photon Sled in which Persephone brought me here. I have taken only a few steps when a colossal roar spins me around, wide-eyed.

Lake Wherle erupts like a volcano. A gigantic water spout hovers in the air for a portentous moment, then crashes down around me. Fortunately, by the time it hits, the water has cooled below boiling point. It seeps into the ground, leaving fragments of black metal protruding from the mud. And something else—something that looks like a charred Repto head. I do not look at it too closely. I fall into the sled's cockpit, break open the instrument panel, fumble for a live wire, and steal the vehicle's power.

I am holding something. To my revulsion, I realize that a Membros eyestalk is tangled around my fingers. I unwind it, and fling it away. However, the sight of it has sparked a memory. I remember the mine workings, and the one-eyed creature that attacked from nowhere. It hardly seems possible, but my life was saved by the greatest stroke of fortune. A time break, which whisked my would-be killer away and dropped it into the past, a short distance away, to meet its death at my own hands. I look to the sky. I cannot see the Time Traveler from here, but I fancy I can feel his hand in this turn of events. I feel as if he wants me to live. But why? What does he expect me to do?

As my breathing steadies and my sheer exuberance at my survival subsides, I start to feel the import of my failure. This is not how it was meant to be. It should be over by now. Micropolis ought to be safe. Instead, the virus is still out there, in Repto hands, as is Persephone. And I do not know how to find either. What was she thinking? What was *I* thinking? How could I have misjudged her so badly? How could I have trusted her, when everything told me not to?

I don't have time to regret the past. I have to think about the future: A future that, for the first time in my memory, is uncertain. I want to give up. I want to sleep. Have I not done enough? But Micropolis needs me. The Time Traveler needs me.

The Pharoid machinery. Persephone told the Reptos that it was still intact. Did she lie to me about this, too? And, if so, where is it? Ki could not have taken the consoles with him to his bolt hole; they would not have fitted into his sled. He might have sent them ahead—but then, would Persephone have been so happy to leave Ryan Archer alone with them?

Where else? Ki's palace was razed. The System complex? Maybe. Or the rooms and tunnels beneath the palace? That is where Persephone said the machines were. Perhaps they were not destroyed, merely damaged and abandoned.

Maybe, if I wait here, the last of the Reptos—four of them, the Nest Leader said—will return with their prize. Maybe I can take it, and the virus, from them. I will have to be quick, though. I will have to act before they realize that they have no ship to return to. Fortunately, there is no one left to contact them, to appraise them of this fact. But what if they try to radio in? When they receive only static, will they guess the truth?

Or maybe the machines *were* destroyed. Maybe that is what Persephone intends to show the Reptos: That she was telling the truth, that they have no quarrel with her. But she must know that, if she does, they are likely to react in anger.

Either way, she dies. I die. We all die.

I think I am beginning to see. I think I know what she was really planning. I think I know where she might be now. And the thought of it fills me with dread.

It is late afternoon, but the city is quiet. Most people, I presume, are cowering inside, fearful of a recurrence of last night's violence. They must be hungry, but without the System to instruct them, they do not know what to do about it. When hunger becomes starvation, they will have no choice but to return to the streets, and then the final vestiges of civilization here will have died. I wonder how many have taken their own lives already, unable to face that bleak future.

Time is passing. I am acutely aware of each second, wondering which will be the one to make me too late...if I am not too late already. I was hoping to find a Photon Sled, the fastest way to my destination and one that would give me the vantage of height. I stumble across one, but it is gutted, useless. I inspect its workings, hoping that at least it can provide me with some much-needed power. It is dead.

As I straighten up, I feel a familiar prickle on the back of my neck. I am not alone.

I turn slowly. They are lined up in the road behind me. It is a measure of my weakness, and my preoccupation, that I did not hear them approach. Eight of them: Citizens, their coveralls grimy and torn, some bruised or burnt, all of them with a desperate plea in their eyes. They do not speak at first. They just stare at me, and I squirm under their attention. They make me feel guilty that I do not know how to help them.

At last, one of them—a squat, middle-aged man with gray bristles sprouting from his chin—takes a hesitant, jerking step toward me, arms spread wide in a gesture of appeal.

"Tell us what to do," he begs. His words are a blow to my chest. Why are they asking me? How can I answer them? My function is to fight. I should not even be here.

"I'm sorry. I can't help you," I say, almost choking on the words. I flinch from their pained reactions. I have destroyed their hope. I try to make things better, but I do not know how. "You have to band

together. Support each other. Take the place of the System in each other's lives. Things will get better, I promise. You just have to want it. Fight for it!" It is no use. I know the hardship they will suffer. Some will get through it. Many will not.

I close my eyes, but I cannot block out the accusing stares. I can still see their faces on the backs of my eyelids. And now, I see the flesh sliding from their bones. Their eyes are melting in their sockets, but the hollow eyes of their gray skulls remain fixed upon me, boring into my mind. I shudder, and almost cry out. I open my eyes, and the forlorn citizens are still there, still alive. But for how much longer? The Reptos' virus could be spreading already. These people want me to shape their future, but I have a greater responsibility: To ensure that they *have* a future. That is why, much as it pains me, I must turn my back on them.

I walk away. But I can feel their disappointed, accusing eyes, still trained on me.

I find a working ground vehicle, and drive it to Ki's former bolt hole. I cover the last two blocks on foot, moving carefully from shadow to shadow, losing more precious time, but knowing that a careless move now could cost me everything.

A slight breeze taps the broken door against its frame. I ease it open, and stare into the gloom of the warehouse. To my dismay, nothing stirs within.

I lower myself through the trapdoor, and step over two Harrower corpses to the reinforced doors. Although still partially sundered from their hinges, they have been maneuvered into an upright position, leaving only a narrow gap between them. I look through it. Ki's leather couch has been pushed up against the far side. A pair of easy chairs sit on top of it. Archer has sensibly done what he can to barricade himself into his hiding place. This barrier would not keep out the Reptos, but it might dissuade a hungry citizen. The fact that it has not been disturbed confirms my worst fear. Nobody else has been here. I have guessed wrong.

I knock on the doors, anyway, and call to him. Archer emerges cautiously from a back room, gun in hand, a thick black respirator mask clamped to his face. He tears this away as he sees me, to reveal an exuberant grin. It takes him some time to move the furniture and let me in.

"I thought you were..." he stammers, breathlessly. "What happened? What are you doing back here? I thought I'd never...Are...are you alone?"

"I am alone," I confirm, as I stride into the room. "As for my presence here..." I hesitate. "I did not know where else to go."

"I thought it was all over," says Archer, suddenly glum. "It's not over, is it?"

I shake my head. I tell him what happened aboard the Repto spy ship.

"Well, um..." he says. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you're not dead. Despite, you know, everything."

"Persephone will doublecross the Reptos," I state. "We must be ready."

"How can you know that?"

"If she does not betray them, they will kill her."

"Right. And she's too smart not to know that. Not to mention that she's already taken one insane risk with all our lives, to preserve her own."

"Hmm."

"She must have a plan! But what?"

"I had thought she might bring the creatures here, knowing you were armed and waiting. Failing that, if she caught them by surprise and snatched the virus, this is the only place she could have brought it." I do not voice another possibility: That she might have escaped without the virus, and come here for Ki's medical supplies.

"No such luck. I haven't seen anyone since you left this morning."

"I did have one more option in mind when I came here," I confess. "I thought, perhaps, your intuition could direct us. You could find her!"

"Oh...I don't know," says Archer, apologetically. "This...this gift or whatever, it's not something I can turn on and off like a faucet. It's just a feeling I get, now and then. Like, I know the right thing to do, without thinking about it."

"And what are you feeling now?" I prompt him.

He screws up his face in concentration. "Nothing. I don't know."

"There must be something!" I insist in frustration. I take Archer by the arm, and drag him toward the doors. "We will go outside. Perhaps, if we are actively searching for Persephone, you will be able to guide us."

"No!" He pulls free of me. I round on him, to find him staring, frozen, past me. It takes me a moment to realize why. The doorway is empty, but, now that we are silent, I can hear something. Movement, from the warehouse above us. The beating of wings.

We duck through the nearest archway, into a luxurious bedroom. We flatten ourselves against the wall as the sounds draw nearer. A pair of feet, and then another, landing beneath the trapdoor. The distinctive rasping breaths of two Reptos as they enter the suite. I should have rebuilt the barricade—but at least, this way, they do not know we are here.

I am tense with indecision. Dare I attack? Where are the other two creatures? Does one of this pair hold the virus? Am I strong enough to take them both down before it can be released? A single twist of a claw, that is all it would take.

They are snuffling around the outer room. "This place is warm with mammal stink," one of them hisses. The other snarls its agreement. Their scrabbling footsteps move away from us, and I risk a glance around the edge of the archway. I see a Repto tail disappearing into the opposite room—Ki's kitchen, I think. The exit is tantalizingly close, but we are unlikely to reach it without being heard, or seen through the open arch.

We will be discovered—soon.

Archer has his gun ready. He directs my attention, with a nod, toward the king-size bed. Nestling in its quilted sheets is my energy sword. I retrieve it gratefully, but I do not activate it, lest the flare of light give our position away.

The Reptos have finished in the kitchen. As their footsteps cross the outer room, I tighten my grip on the sword's hilt. They are mere feet from us. Then, they halt and sniff the air. And they change direction, veering away from the bedroom to investigate the room next to it. I hear their voices through the wall, indistinct but clear enough to deduce that they have found Ki's headless corpse. Archer must have dragged it away from where it fell, out of his sight.

I whisper instructions to him and he nods, nervous but determined. I slip out of the bedroom while the Reptos are preoccupied, and take cover behind the couch, which we left sitting at a haphazard angle in the center of the outer room. My back is exposed to the open doors, but I cannot think about that now. A snatch of conversation drifts through the archway in front of me: "So, the female mammal spoke the

truth about this one, at least.”

“But the time machines—where are they?”

“We have two chambers yet to search.”

The creatures emerge from the room. Although they are armed, they do not appear to have the virus. I don’t know if this is a good or a bad thing. I look to my left, to where Archer is awaiting my signal. I let the Reptos draw closer to him.

I nod—and he springs out in front of the creatures, and fires his blaster. His shot finds its mark, and the first Repto throws its claws to its face in agony. The second returns fire, too late: Its target has already ducked back into the bedroom. And, thus distracted, it is also too late to react as I leap over the couch, lighting my sword and severing its weapon hand.

As the second Repto grunts and falls back, the first recovers its wits with a furious snarl. I spin around and try to kick the blaster out of its hands; it holds on to it, but its aim is thrown. A pulse of fire hits the ceiling, and plaster sprinkles my shoulders. My blade scores a line across the creature’s chest, and blood wells through the tear. The second Repto, clutching the bloodied stump of its right hand, slams me with its shoulder. Its comrade lunges at me, mouth spread wide, helping me to the floor. I drive my foot up into its injured chest, hoping to push it away, but its wings catch it and it dives toward me. I cannot get my sword between us; its jaws are snapping fiercely at my throat.

Then Archer appears again, and gets off another uncannily accurate shot. The Repto stiffens and croaks as fire forms a halo effect behind its head. It has taken enough punishment. It sags and rolls off me, gurgling through the blood in its mouth.

To my horror, the second creature goes for Archer. He tries to shoot it, but it is on him too quickly. He struggles to fend it off, but its claws hack into his side, between his ribs. Shock keeps him standing for a long second. I let out a howl, the sound reverberating in my ears as time seems to slow down. Archer crumples, but the Repto keeps him pinned to the wall, its teeth closing around his head...

...until my sword enters its back, to emerge from its stomach. The Repto’s jaws fall open. It stumbles backward, impaling itself further on my blade. Released, Archer hits the ground with a gasp, glassy-eyed, and his gun falls from numbed fingers.

Before I can attend to him, a single word comes from the doorway: “Acroyear!”

She is here. I hesitate before I turn, girding myself for what I will see. I have already heard the weakness in her voice.

She, too, has been hurt. Her clothes are stained with her own blood. The scars left on her cheek by the Nest Leader’s claws seem more vivid than ever. Persephone’s hair hangs in knotted strands in front of her bruised face. She is stooped, as if unable to stand properly, and her left hand cradles her right arm.

Standing behind her, using her as a shield, is another Repto. The creature’s right eye is swollen shut, and the green-brown scales of its head are bruised purple and black. Its right wing has been shredded like paper, and as it shifts its position, it drags its right foot clumsily. Its left arm is looped around Persephone’s neck, and it holds a yellow canister, identical to the one I saw in the Repto laboratory. Its claws are poised to unscrew its red lid.

“Drop your weapon,” snarls the Repto, “and step away from my nest mates!”

I deactivate my sword, and remove the cooling blade from my enemy. I pull away from it, moving deliberately behind the couch. Freed from its skewer, the dead creature falls. It lands heavily on top of the first Repto, which spasms, chokes on its own blood, and stops breathing.

“Oops,” I comment, without feeling.

“The weapon, warm-blood!” roars the creature in the doorway. “Throw it to me! I trust you understand what will happen if you force me to open this container?” I nod. The Repto tells me, anyway. “All life on this planet will be wiped out within hours!”

“Including your own,” I point out.

“A price worth paying, if it helps rid this galaxy of the warm-blooded taint. My death would bring honor to our glorious empire!”

If that is the case, I ask myself, why has the creature not released the virus already? Its body language gives me the answer. For all its bravado, it is afraid. It does not want to die. But even a coward can commit an act of desperation when cornered. I must be careful. With the Repto watching me closely, and Persephone between us, I cannot take the offensive. I toss my sword over the couch, judging the throw so that it lands a couple of feet short of my foe.

It repeats its instruction to Archer, who sits with his back to the wall, breathing heavily, clutching his side, teeth clenched. He needs medical attention. Groaning with the effort, he gives his blaster a half-hearted push away from him. What the Repto does not see—what I noticed myself only a minute ago—is that I have a second sword at hand. When Archer removed Ki’s body from this room, he left his weapon where it fell. By chance, he moved the couch over it, so that only the tip of the blade protrudes. I step on it, and, without looking down, tease it from its hiding place with my foot. Fortunately, the thick carpet keeps it from making a sound.

I clear my throat. “So,” I say, “now that you have us, what do you intend to do with us?” The Repto is nervous. I hope to hurry it into making a mistake.

“You will die for what you have done to my people,” it spits. “All of you!” It points a trembling claw at me. “You will be the first. I don’t know how you escaped from our ship, but the Nest Leader will reward me generously when I take him your corpse.”

“Your leader wants Acroyear alive,” puts in Persephone.

“Silence!” The Repto’s eyes narrow, its lipless mouth flattening into a determined line as it tries to think. Finally, it makes a decision. It waves a claw in Archer’s direction. “You will do it. You will slay the terrorist with its own sword!”

“You have got to be kidding,” he protests, weakly. With a threatening growl, the Repto shifts its grip on the yellow container.

“He can’t lift that weapon,” I intercede. Flattering the Repto’s ego, I explain, “It is too heavy for a mere mammal to wield, without mechanical augmentation. If you want to kill me, you will have to come in here and do it yourself.”

“No!” Fear flickers in the creature’s eyes. It is only young, I think. But then, fear is replaced by cunning. “You will run the sword through your own heart!” Excited by this idea, it hisses, “Yes, yes! You will prove the superiority of the Reptos by taking your life at my command.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You will seal the fates of billions of your kind.”

“Then, either way, I die. What do I care about anybody else? At least, if you release that virus, I will take my killer with me!”

The Repto’s nostrils flare. “You are bluffing!”

“What makes you think the people of Micropolis are ‘my kind’?” I challenge it. “I have been encased in this armor for longer than I can remember. I do not know my own face. I have no reason to believe that I share ancestry with any of them.”

“You...you would have sacrificed yourself for them, aboard our ship. Do not deny it, warm-blood—the Nest Leader told us of your heinous plan!”

“My goal,” I state calmly, “was not to protect them. It was to kill you!”

“Your kind can never defeat the Reptos,” the creature barks automatically. It shudders, shaking its head as if trying to drive out dizziness. Its wounds are beginning to take their toll. It is bleeding, growing weaker. The longer I can keep it talking, the better. I only pray that Archer can outlast it. His eyelids have fallen, and he looks whiter than ever.

“No?” I respond, with a touch of derision. “Your leader sent four soldiers to the surface, I believe. Two of them lie dead, here. Where is the fourth?”

“The female mammal deceived us!” spits the Repto.

“I had a contingency plan prepared,” says Persephone. I think she has realized what I am trying to do. She speaks slowly, and as calmly as she can. Her captor, desperate for more time to think, does not try to silence her. “Remember the mine where we took refuge from the Harrowers? One of the tunnels was rigged to collapse. I led the Reptos into it.”

“They thought you were taking them to the Pharoids’ machines?”

“We were not fooled!” hisses the Repto. “We have learned not to trust warm-bloods. That is why only two of us went down that tunnel, taking the female with us. And I was prepared for a trap. When it came, I was able to fly to safety with ease.”

I deem it best not to point out that the creature’s condition belies its boast. At least I know, now, how Persephone sustained her injuries.

“You’re right,” she says, bowing her head in apparent defeat. “You were too quick for me!”

The Repto purrs, mollified as no doubt she intended. Then its eyes narrow. “And yet, knowing the consequences of betrayal, you thought to lure us into a second trap!”

It tightens its grip on the canister. I speak quickly. “She did not know I was here!”

“How could I have known?” cries Persephone. “We left Acroyear on the spy ship!”

“Then the machines are here as you promised? I can take them to the Nest Leader?”

She looks at me, with a silent plea. I have to change the subject. I have to take a chance. “No,” I say. “You cannot—because your Nest Leader is dead!”

The Repto blinks, unable to take in what I have said. “That...that is not possible!”

I raise my voice, to intimidate the confused creature. “You wondered how I could escape from your ship. The answer is simple, you dull-witted hatchling: Your ship no longer exists. I destroyed it! Your Nest Leader died in the blazing wreck, along with every one of your comrades. I killed them all!” The Repto’s jaws work silently, its protest stuck in its throat. I keep talking, browbeating it verbally, giving it no time to speak, no time to think. “You are the only Repto left on this planet. Think about that. If you open that canister, you will die—and for what? You want to be a hero, but who will be left to tell of your deeds? Nobody will know what happened here. Nobody will know your name!”

The Repto’s eyelids flutter in pain. Its head droops onto its chest, but it catches itself. A tear trickles from its eye. It is almost over. Ki’s sword lies at my feet.

“I can still avenge my nest,” the creature tries to assert.

“And when it is over,” says Persephone quietly, “when there is no life left on this world, what do you imagine will happen then? Ki’s ships are still in orbit; your people can’t get past them. His soldiers will come down here and claim the untouched Pharoid machinery. They will have mastery over time—and how do you think they will use it?”

“They will not forget such an atrocity as you propose,” I add.

“They will destroy your race before it ever learns to stand upright! The Reptos will be wiped out in the past, the present and the future, and you will be responsible!”

“The machines!” The creature clutches at its last remaining straw. “The machines *are* here! You will take me to them. You will show me how to use them. I will be the one to change the past. I will bring back my Nest Leader and restore my ship. The Reptos will be victorious!” It moves into the room, pushing Persephone ahead of it. She squeals as her captor tightens its grip on her throat. “Tell me where the machines are, mammal, or the female will die!”

Silently, I point to the archway behind me and to my left. The Repto maneuvers itself across the room with a limping, sideways gait, its eyes always upon me, keeping Persephone in front of it, always ready to unleash the virus. I watch it in turn, invisibly from behind my helmet, awaiting my chance, alert for the slightest opening. I have only seconds before the creature comes around the couch. Then it will see the sword, and I will be forced to act.

Three seconds. Two. One.

The Repto falters, dizzily, its hand moving from the deadly canister to its own head. Its hold on Persephone weakens.

She struggles free of it. “Acroyear,” she yells, “now!”

I have already flipped up Ki’s sword with the toe of my boot. It spins in midair. I catch it by its pommel and redirect it, with a flick, toward my target.

With a speed born of terror, the Repto goes for the canister lid, and twists it.

In the instant before it can break the seal, a length of cold steel spears its wrist, and pins it to the wall. Regrettably, the creature maintains the strength, and the presence of mind, to keep its claws locked around the canister. Gasping with pain, it reaches for it again with its free right hand. I am charging toward it, but I am not close enough.

Persephone gets to the virus before the Repto does. She wrests it from the creature’s numbed grip. It howls. She ducks away from its teeth. It thrusts its right claw through her heart. She stiffens, and falls.

I am screaming with impotent fury. I reach the sword, still embedded in the Repto’s scales, my mind consumed by the dreadful thought that I am already too late. I activate the energy blade. It cuts through bone and muscle as if through water. I cut a sizzling, weeping line down the Repto’s arm. It has lost too much blood already. It groans, and collapses.

It thrashes on the floor, babbling weakly, tears in its eyes. “The machines...take me to the machines...I must...save my people...”

“There are no machines,” I snarl at it, “you pitiful, deluded animal! The machines were destroyed. You fought for nothing!”

It whimpers, defeated at last. I drive my sword through its chest, and stake it to the ground.

Silence falls.

I turn to Persephone. I kneel beside her. To my amazement, she is not dead. But my joy is temporary. She is clinging to life by her fingernails, and yet she smiles.

“We...did it,” she croaks, flexing her wrist in a half-successful attempt to hoist her prize. “I got...the virus.”

“Do not try to speak. I will find something—bandages, drugs...Ki must have had something here...” My mind takes me back to the System complex, to Persephone lying as she lies now, fading away. I thought I had lost her, then. This time, I know. She had been through so much already. That final blow was mortal. The most expensive equipment, the most skilled doctors in the galaxy could not keep her here.

I think about Bilan Tench. Holding his corpse in my arms. It seems a lifetime ago. My old life. Before she turned me into another man. A better man.

With an effort, she lifts her hand. She runs her fingers across my helmet, almost affectionately. I wish I could show her my true face. “Nothing...you can do,” she breathes. “Tend to Archer. He can...still be saved.”

“It should have been me. I should have died.”

“No...no, you are important. The System has been damaged. We...both know what...chaos, what misery, will follow. The people of Micropolis...know you. They respect you. They will...listen to you. You can...get them through this. They...need you.”

She has said all she needed to say. Her eyes close.

I will not let her go. I am not ready. There is one more question I must ask.

“Why did you do it?” My last chance to know her, my last chance to understand. “Why did you warn the Reptos? Why did you let them stop me? How could you have risked so much, endangered so many lives, for the slim chance of saving your own?”

She smiles again, weakly, her eyes still closed. She almost chokes on a laugh. “You idiot, Nanissar! Do you not see it yet? I didn’t fight the future for my own sake. It was for yours!”

I don’t know how long I have knelt over her. She seems so peaceful. I do not want to leave her, but I must. I have paid no heed to the passing of time. I realize, with a guilty start, that I have neglected my wider responsibilities.

Archer.

I feel a wrench in my heart as I stand up, as I force myself to turn my back on her.

He has passed out, but he still breathes. His cut is not as deep as I feared. The bleeding has stopped. I find bandages and clean water through one of the archways. As I clean his wound, his eyelids flicker open.

“Now is it over?”

“It is over,” I assure him.

“We’re...alive. That’s good, right?”

“Yes.”

“The Repto...?”

“Dead. It threatens us no longer.”

“And Persephone?”

My answer catches in my throat, but my reticence speaks for itself.

He sighs. “Poetic justice, I guess. The games she played, the lies she told...they all caught up with her in the end.”

“Do not speak about her that way!” I growl. Archer looks at me, surprised. Awkwardly, I try to explain. “There was more to Persephone than we knew. Far more. Without her, our future—the future of the billions who live in this city—would be dark indeed.”

I take a deep breath, which fails to fill the longing void inside me.

“She was a hero,” I say.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Someone screams.

Everybody looks skyward. I can see the fear in their eyes—they think it is starting all over again. Some people run for cover. I should have anticipated this. The descending spaceship emerges from the smog, fire streaming from its wing-mounted and rear engines. My citizens are looking to me for comfort, a promise to keep them safe.

I stride through them, my energy sword lit. Ryan Archer has to half-run to keep up with me. The last time this ship landed on this world, it was in secret, on a dusty plain outside Micropolis. This time, its sole occupant is my honored guest. I look forward to meeting him. Ki’s personal landing pad was destroyed with his palace, but I have had a team of laborers clear the site of a block demolished by the Reptos, creating a rare open space in the city center. I try not to think about the bodies beneath my feet. There has been enough mourning.

The ship looks like a great bird of prey, its armored hide gray, its wings spread proudly. It holds a giant golden egg clasped in its strong jaws. I make a show of deactivating my sword, to signal that I foresee no danger. The onlookers have drawn back anyway, leaving a nervous space around us.

“Man,” breathes Archer, as an antigravity downdraft ruffles his hair and weighs down on my shoulders, “is that a sight for sore eyes!”

“So, this is your conveyance,” I say, mildly impressed.

“Yeah. This is the *Sunreaver*.”

I frown. “I believed you called it the *Sunrunner*?”

He looks momentarily confused. “*Sunrunner*, *Sunreaver*...so similar, yet...”

“Another detail from the alternative timeline?”

He nods, chagrined. “It’s getting so as I can’t tell which memories are my own any more, and which belong to...that *other* me.”

The *Sunrunner* sets down, almost noiselessly. A minute or so later, a landing ramp is lowered from its side. An audible gasp rises from behind me as a figure appears at its head.

Our visitor is unmistakably Vaerian. His skin is purple, and four arms protrude from his sleeveless jacket. His head is smooth and hairless, his eyes round and black, and he has gills tucked behind

prominent cheekbones. His race's reputation as organized criminals precedes him. Still, I have been assured that this Vaerian is unique.

"Judging by the fancy knife and the bucket over your head," he says, by way of a greeting, "you must be Acroyear."

"And you must be the one known as Knave."

"It's Ganam Jafain, actually." The Vaerian lopez down the ramp toward us. "But what the heck—call me Knave if you must. I'm getting kind of used to it."

"Good to see you again," says Archer. "It's been a while."

"You're telling me! You get to fight off an alien invasion, overthrow a dictator, and rebuild a world. All I've done for the past month is cool my heels in orbit around some lava planet, waiting for the Reptos to get bored and pull their warships out of the system. Oh, and run like hell a few times, when they came nosing around."

"How is the *Sun...runner*?" asks Archer.

"In better shape than when you last saw it. I'm no engineer, but with time on my hands, I managed to lash a few components together; the self-repair systems did the rest. We're running on empty, though. We're going nowhere until we can recharge the jump cells."

"That is not a problem," I say. "Come, I will show you our base of operations."

"I would say it's good to breathe fresh air again," remarks Knave, "but...well..." He looks into the polluted sky, and his gills ripple in distaste.

"We are working on the problem," I assure him. "However, it is a question of priorities."

"Sure." His gaze is still set above the rooftops. I need not follow it to know what has taken his attention.

The Time Traveler now floats above a pile of rubble. For two nights, he was shrouded in darkness, lost to us—but one of my first acts after the war was to position new spotlights on the rooftops around him. It is important to me that the citizens can see him. The Time Traveler is the heart of Micropolis, a symbol of hope. He encourages us to look forward. He proves that there is a future, after all.

At least, that is what they still believe.

"I've heard a lot about that guy," says Knave. "I always wanted to see him in the flesh—or at least, in the tachyon particles." He turns to Archer. "And how about you? Did you find what you were looking for down here?"

Archer casts a sidelong glance at me, and grins. "Yeah," he says, "I think I did."

We walk the eighteen blocks to our headquarters; I like to make my presence felt on the streets. Knave has no complaints, despite drawing a few stares. He claims to be enjoying the chance to stretch his legs and look at something other than the *Sunrunner*'s bulkheads.

I experience my usual dismay at the sight of a snaking line outside a plug-in center—one of the few that still stand. It was with reluctance that I concentrated my efforts, in the first week of rebuilding, on the restoration of the System, albeit to a reduced state of functionality. The news sheet made me only too aware of the consequences of sudden withdrawal for the computer's erstwhile slaves. They need their release, even if it is now strictly rationed according to resources.

Archer was a great help in bringing the System back online. He also helped me to access Ki's personal fortune. Micropolis is a poor city no longer.

Harrowers patrol the streets, albeit with stun guns instead of blasters and shock batons. Another compromise—but the early restoration of law and order was vital. Many of Ki's troops were killed in the Repto attack. I recruited more, but I needed the experience of the few survivors, whatever their past crimes. I gathered them together, and made it clear what I expect of them. They are more afraid of me, now, than they were of Ki. The same goes for his maintainers and few remaining "captains of industry." I have need of clear heads—people who were never subjected to the System's brainwashing.

I have made one change to the Harrowers' uniform. No longer do their helmets hide their faces. Whatever they do now, it will be as individuals, identifiable and responsible for their own actions. I could almost envy them.

I have set up base in the warehouse above Ki's bolt hole. This allows me to be accessible to the public, but offers a hideaway when it gets to be too much. I never intended to become the ruler of Micropolis—I never thought I would live this long—and I am uncomfortable in the role. But, as Persephone said, the citizens know and respect me. Anyway, I was the one who killed their old ruler and brought down the System. I feel a responsibility toward them.

She gave her life for me, so that these people could have their figurehead, their hero. I won't let her down.

"I see you've gone for the open-plan look," says Knave as we step through the door.

"Décor is—" I begin.

"I know, I know, not one of your priorities."

This floor of the warehouse is teeming with people. They rush between haphazardly arranged desks and cabinets—anything we could find and drag in here. The air is filled with the buzz of conversation; once, the words had an edge of desperation, now they communicate a sense of purpose. I am proud of what my volunteers have achieved.

They are organizing new work shifts at the mines and refineries. Workers' conditions have been improved, their hours cut back: Micropolis still needs power, but with the fuel-hungry System only partly operational and the airships grounded, far less than it did. Coal is also being imported from off-planet, along with emergency food and medical supplies. I have people making the necessary arrangements, via a jury-rigged communications console. Others struggle with salvaged System terminals, transferring some of Ki's billions to our new suppliers, many of whom demand payment in advance. The first shipments should arrive within a day, thankfully before our last food depot is exhausted.

I call over a volunteer, and ask her to arrange the *Sunrunner's* refueling.

"These past few weeks have been amazing," says Archer as the woman hurries away. "It's like we've been watching this city waking up, getting back on its feet."

"There is still a great deal to do," I caution him.

"Yeah, but look around you. These people were zombies, and now..."

"Unfortunately, they are not representative of the majority. You saw for yourself how they still crave the System's embrace. That kind of addiction can be impossible to break."

"Tell me about it," mutters Knave, reminding me of his origins. "I've seen this a thousand times before. Sometimes all you can do is leave people to their own mistakes."

"I do not agree. The System will be reprogrammed. It will no longer teach its users to conform, it will encourage independent thought."

"It won't be enough for some. They'd still rather hide from the real world."

"Granted—but it is my hope that most can be persuaded to rejoin us. Their children should be able to dismantle the System forever."

"So long as the Reptos don't come back," remarks Archer.

"They won't," I say confidently. "Whatever else he did, Ki kept this world safe from outside attack—at least until greed caused him to allow the enemy through his defenses."

"I saw some of the battle," says Knave with a grin. "The lizards threw their best warships at the blockade. They were sent scampering away with their tails between their legs."

"They will make plenty of threats," I predict. "They will vow to avenge their defeat. But they have little to gain from another attack, and much to lose. They will go in search of their next ultimate weapon, instead—something else to earn them the respect and the fear they crave so badly. I don't expect they will find it."

I buried her two weeks ago. As I lowered the casket into the ground, it struck me how little I knew about her. Did she have a deity; somebody to whom she would like me to pray? I assumed not. She was always so pragmatic, so cold and rational. I doubt she would have believed in anything that science could not prove. I said a few awkward words, anyway, addressing them skyward to whoever might hear them; there were few enough people to listen down here. Archer stood, his head bowed in respect, hands clasped in front of him. Behind him, two laborers waited to fill in the grave. Nobody else came.

One day, I swore, I will build a monument to her. I will tell people what she did. She will not be forgotten.

I burnt the news sheet, and sprinkled its ashes over her. The document had become more than a simple anachronism; it was a paradox, sent from a future that can no longer come to be. Like the Time Traveler. I feared, however illogically, that the news sheet's existence might have a corrupting effect, that it might drag the timeline back to its old course.

It is gone now. But The Time Traveler remains.

"What do you mean," cries Archer, "you're not coming with me?"

I sigh and open my eyes. I am sitting cross-legged on the carpet, having moved Ki's leather couch aside to make space. I had hoped to delay this conversation until concluding my meditation, but Archer is persistent. "I am still needed here," I say.

"You can't take a few days off? I thought things were settling down."

"Maybe in a week or two..."

"People are learning to cope, Acroyear. Some of them have shaken off their conditioning altogether. They can keep the food supplies coming, run the moviehouses, keep working on the System. Micropolis won't crumble if you leave."

"I have seen what Micropolis could become," I say darkly.

"But you've changed that!" insists Archer. "The guy who produced that news sheet, he'll be born into a

different world now! You keep telling everyone you're a warrior, not a politician. So leave the politics to someone else. You've done enough!"

"And what if there is more trouble?"

"The Harrowers—whatever they're called now—they can handle it."

"I have fought two Scorpites this week. The time breaks are becoming more frequent."

"I know. I've been seeing the Time Traveler more often, too." Archer's right hand goes to his side; I can see from his face that he is feeling the pain of his wound again. He lowers himself into a seat. "I've been stuck down here, sitting on my hands, for too long—and yeah, I know we couldn't have left before now, I know we had to get this place back on its feet—but I think we're running out of time. I think we're coming to the end. Or the beginning; whichever way you want to look at it. The Time Traveler's starting point."

That gets my attention. "You think he will leave us soon?"

"I don't know what will happen—but, yeah, it'll happen soon. A few days at most."

I thought I had made this decision, but now I find myself torn. Certainly, I would like to pass the responsibility for Micropolis on to somebody else. My war is won. I long to leave here, to search for my lost past. And maybe Archer is right. With Ki and the Reptos gone, volunteers are lining up to come here and help. Many are ex-residents who threw off Ki's chains, but were forced to leave family and friends behind in the city. I have also heard from several computer scientists, eager to get their hands on the System without having to sell their souls to its former master. Even the Galactic Defenders, stretched as their resources must be, have sent a small contingent.

I *could* leave. But there is something else. Something that has been nagging at me since the Vaerian arrived.

"I no longer wish to do it," I say. Archer's brow furrows. I explain, "I wanted to change the past—that is why I agreed to accompany you on your quest. By altering what had gone before, I thought I could spare Micropolis and myself what was to come."

He understands. "But now you've got your happy ending, and you don't want to jeopardize it. You think it was worth all the sacrifices."

"Not quite," I say, tersely, thinking about her again. "But, in the Time Traveler's reality, we would still be under the rule of a despot—a worse one, by your account, than Ki."

"I told you, it might not come to that."

"But it is what the Time Traveler wants, yes? To take us back to the world he knows?"

"I...I'm not sure. I mean, yes, I think so. But that's why I need you with me... One of the reasons. If I have to make that decision, if I have to choose between this reality and the other one, or...or something else altogether, I can't do it alone. I need to know you're on my side, that you think I'm doing the right thing, you know?"

"And what if 'the right thing' is to forget these dreams?" I ask. "I have learned not to interfere in the workings of time. Whoever he is, wherever he came from, the Time Traveler did not heed that lesson. His time has gone; he has no right to reclaim it."

"You could be right," says Archer. "But what about Persephone?"

"She is dead," I say in a warning growl.

"And someone has to tell Karza. He sent her here. He's the nearest thing she had to family. She'd want

the news to come from somebody who knew her. She'd want it to be you."

"Karza...you said he was an evil man, a would-be tyrant."

"Is that how she described him?"

"Of course not!" It is not fair of him to use her against me.

"I see him all the time in my dreams. He was a megalomaniac, a ruthless dictator. To tell you the truth, he scares me witless! But he was never the Emperor in this timeline, and that's got to mean something. If I can just find out what happened to him...He's the only lead I have, Acroyear. If anyone can find out what the Time Traveler wants, it's him. And I have to know. These dreams have brought me a long, long way. I won't give up on them now!"

The speech comes tumbling out of him, as if rehearsed. And I cannot deny that I know how he feels.

"I helped you when you needed it," says Archer. "Now I'm asking you to help me. Micropolis doesn't need Acroyear anymore. I do!"

That afternoon, there is another assassination attempt.

I am presiding over the laying of foundations for the new palace. Although less grand than the old one, it will provide a symbol of leadership that appears to be needed. A large crowd has gathered to watch concrete being poured into a pit I helped dig myself. In a short speech, I promise that, once construction is complete, the identity of the new Baron or Baroness will be decided by a free election. The announcement receives a spattering of applause, but many who hear it are simply dumbfounded. The idea of having a say in their own destinies is new and strange to them. I am hoping it will catch on.

As the concrete hardens, it will serve one more purpose. I buried the canister down there. The one that contains the flesh-eating virus. I did not know what else to do with it. With luck, it will not be seen again, certainly not until its contents are long dead.

The gunshots come from a tenth-floor apartment window. I see the first muzzle flash in time to bring up my arm shields, deflecting the blasts—four in all. Citizens are shouting and screaming, ducking for cover, but I was the sole target of this attack. My Harrower guards—I must find a new name for them—are drawing their weapons. They move to surround me, but I do not need their protection. A shadow moves behind glass as my assailant takes flight. I break through a black-armored cordon, and head for the apartment building. I will cut him off before he reaches street level.

Archer intercepts me at the entrance. "Wrong address!" he warns. I do not hesitate. I trust his instincts. The Harrowers, however, are baffled as I turn and follow him along the sidewalk. Two of them stay with me, while two plow on through the building's steel and glass doors. The final two have taken flight on glider-packs; they are climbing through the window from which the shots came.

Archer leads me into the entrance hall of the next building along. The Harrowers take up positions to each side of me as we inspect our drab surroundings. There is nobody else here, but one of the elevators is grinding its way down to this floor. I see what must have happened: The gunman prepared an escape route. He must have found an empty room next door—there are plenty of them in this area, sadly—and knocked through its back wall. By the time we found the hole, he expected to have walked out of this building and disappeared into the crowd. He is in for a surprise.

I instruct my comrades to stand behind me. They comply, albeit reluctantly in the Harrowers' case. When the elevator arrives, its occupant will find me standing in his path, arms folded, glaring down at him. I will not be able to identify my would-be assassin, but I trust that his reaction will betray his guilt.

"I'm not sure about this," mutters Archer. I don't have time to investigate his complaint.

The doors open. But the elevator is empty.

Simultaneously, I hear a communal gasp from outside, and something falls on the other side of the glass doors. He must have known, somehow, that we were waiting. He leapt from a window above us. I have a fleeting impression of mauve coveralls, but the gunman must be wearing armor beneath them to have recovered as quickly as he has. Already he is weaving his way through the onlookers, his path traceable only by the fear he leaves in his wake.

I take off after him, the Harrowers at my heels at first, though I soon leave them behind. As the crowd thins out, it becomes easier to see my prey, and to gain ground on him. He ducks into a dark alleyway, and I follow him.

It is empty. I come to a halt, certain that he could not have reached the far end so quickly. He must have realized that he cannot outrun me. He is lying in wait.

His gun barrel appears around the side of a Dumpster. He lets off two shots, but again, I am ready to parry them. I stride up to him, cornering him against the wall. He has nowhere to run. He is on his haunches, staring up at me with a mixture of fear and resentment.

I grab the front of his coveralls, and haul him to his feet. The fabric tears, revealing Harrower armor beneath—as I expected. He is not the first person to have tried to resurrect the practice of succession by combat. There are few senior Harrowers who have not had one eye on Ki's job—and the other on their colleagues—for years.

"Go on, then," snarls the gunman, defiantly, "kill me! That's how you deal with anyone who disagrees with you, right? That's how you suppress free speech!"

I am taken aback. "You shot at me," I remind him. "You tried to kill me!"

"As you killed our Baron!"

"Maruunus Ki was a tyrant. A monster!"

"He made Micropolis great. Under his rule, we had order. Everybody worked together. Our city was the envy of the galaxy. Now, our factories stand idle. We have riots and looting. How many people have died since you seized power for yourself?"

"It may have been a comfortable life for you under Ki's rule," I argue, "but the ordinary citizens—the people out there on the street—their lives were miserable."

"They were fed. They were kept warm and safe."

"They were enslaved."

"They were content. Why do you think they came here? Their lives had no purpose. They lacked direction. They needed to be told what to do."

"They knew no better."

"They had the System. What do they have now?"

"Their freedom!"

The ex-Harrower laughs, scornfully. "And what do you think they will do with it?"

I feel resentment boiling up inside me. It is as if this leering zealot, this symbol of the past, personifies all the doubts I have had about the future. He makes me feel I can never make things better, that Persephone died for nothing. My hand moves to his throat. His eyes bulge as I tighten my grip, but I

feel he is still taunting me, laughing at me.

“Whatever they do,” I snarl, “it will be without fear of the likes of you!”

“Acroyear, no!”

A figure is framed by the mouth of the alleyway. The world, I realize, was washed in shades of red for a moment; now, I see it in its true, dull colors again. I focus on the shape of Ryan Archer. Behind him, in the street, a few citizens have gathered, curiosity making them brave.

My enemy’s struggles have ceased; his skin has a blue tint. With sudden, unexpected clarity, I hear the voices of my armor. They are telling me to tighten my grip on him, to end his life or he will surely seek another chance to end mine. I am a warrior, they tell me.

Archer hurries up to me, lowering his voice so that the spectators cannot hear. “We aren’t at war any more!”

“For some people,” I say, “the war has only begun.”

“He’s one man, Acroyear. Just one man.”

“A man who has no doubt taken many lives in Ki’s service.”

“Then let justice be done. We’re setting up courts to deal with guys like this. Let the people decide what to do with him. They’ll keep him locked up for the rest of his life.”

“I can spare them the expense!”

“You can’t rule them by force—that’s what Ki did! Do you want to be like *him*?”

Startled, I let the Harrower go. He drops onto the ground, and his throat whines as he sucks in air again.

“A warrior,” I mutter under my breath. “I am a warrior—not a politician.”

We climb the *Sunrunner*’s entrance ramp together, Archer and I. He shows me my quarters for this trip. The room is a little larger than my old apartment in the city, far more comfortable than I require. We continue on to the bridge, constructed inside the golden ovoid at the ship’s front end.

The Vaerian is already here, seated at a semi-circular bank of consoles. He turns as we enter, and grins at me. “Good to have you on board, big guy!”

“It will not be for long,” I promise. I am no longer sure who I am trying to convince. Despite my reservations, I am almost beginning to look forward to this mission. My stomach tingles at the prospect of getting back into action. Back where I belong.

The *Sunrunner*’s antigravity engines throb beneath the deck plating. We rise vertically, awed faces staring at us through tower block windows, until the tower blocks are gone and there is only the dirty, yellow sky before us. And the Time Traveler, hovering as always, head thrown back, apparently lost in his private anguish, oblivious to us.

The sight of him stirs conflicting emotions in me. Through Ryan Archer, I may learn where he came from, at last—but I am no longer sure I wish to know. Once, the Time Traveler represented the future. Now, he is a symbol of everything that is still wrong with time, everything that could yet see my achievements rendered meaningless. I have a dreadful feeling, in the pit of my stomach, that his continued existence threatens everything I know.

I ask Archer if he has had any more dreams. An attempt to think about something else.

“All the time,” he answers morosely, “but I can’t seem to tune in to the one I really want to see. I

remember the crash landing, the desert, the six of us finding the Pharoid temple. I remember coming face to face with the Time Traveler, and after that..." He screws up his face in frustration. "Nothing! I keep seeing images from before, like the Time Traveler's trying to fill in the details when all I want is to get to the end of the story."

He drops into a seat and sighs. Outside, yellow has darkened to black, as we shake off the pull of a heavy atmosphere. "I keep seeing our first meeting," reflects Archer, "you and me. We were in a cell together, chained up. I'd been having a hard time, I didn't know what was happening to me, and I poured out my heart to the first person who would listen. Then you stepped out of the shadows, and I saw you properly. At first, I thought you were some kind of robot or something. I was terrified. I...I... think I passed out."

"What a beautiful story," Knave comments dryly.

"I will be in my quarters," I say, at length. I need to meditate. I have much to ponder.

We found Persephone's ship ten days ago: A compact one-person pod, which she had concealed in another old mine tunnel. It now sits in our hangar bay. Its flight log gave us the information we needed.

The pod was sent to Micropolis from a space station, two days' travel from here—that is where we must go. To see the only man who might be able to save our universe. A great scientist. A visionary and a philanthropist, according to Persephone. Or perhaps the most evil man who ever lived. A man I have never met, and yet the very mention of his name sends shivers down my back.

A man called Karza.