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Prologue

I first saw the Time Traveler in a dream. It was a bad one.

I don't remember most of the details. They slipped through my grasp and dissolved as soon as I woke up. There was cold sweat on my forehead, and I was halfway out of my bed and still moving as if I was trying to escape from something.

That was just a few minutes ago. I'm still shivering, although my skin is burning up. And one picture, one terrifying moment, is imprinted upon my mind in more vivid detail than I would have thought possible from a simple nightmare:

I'm surrounded by flames. I'm trying to fight my way through them, but the smoke and the furnace-like heat keeps driving me back. I'm helpless. There are other people here. I'm aware of them, I can see them out of the corners of my eyes, but I can't turn my head to look at them. I'm sure I know them, that they're friends of mine, but I can't see who they are. I only know that they are as trapped as I am. My chest aches, there are acid tears in my eyes, and every time I try to breathe in, the hot smoke claws at the back of my throat.

I might have died, in the dream. I don't know.

I don't know where I am. For a moment, that realization fills me with panic. I force myself to calm down. It's not as if I've woken up in some prison cell or torture chamber. I'm not strapped down to an operating table on an alien spaceship (and I'm not sure where those images come from, but they resonate with something and send a chill through me).

I'm in a bedroom. Small but homely, obviously decorated by an older person. Some time ago, at that. Flock wallpaper. White lace. Bulky old cabinets with curved legs, made out of dark-stained wood. Every detail seems fresh to me, and that starts the fear rising again. It's as if I've lost all connection to my past, as if I *should* have understood the dream and I *should* recognize this room, but somehow my memories have been blocked from me. Amnesia? I can feel a dull pain in the back of my skull. Maybe I got hit on the head. Or it could just be the beginning of a tension headache.

I close my eyes, rub them with my fingers, and breathe heavily. Calm down! Shake the sleep from your eyes, the dream from your mind.

I still know who I am. I still know where I came from. That helps.

And then, I see the Time Traveler again. Just a glimpse, an illusion, a trick of the residual light patterns that slide across the insides of my eyelids. A ghostly figure in metallic but flexible armor. Red plating along his arms and legs and around his torso. Silver gauntlets, boots and a chest plate—a triangle upon a rectangle—with controls and dials inlaid. A full head mask, also in silver, with shallow indentations giving him a hint of facial features. The mask makes him look distant, impassive. But I think the Time Traveler is in pain.

He's trying to tell me something.

When I open my eyes again, startled, I remember.

I remember a flight to Colorado, and a long car journey to the backwater town of Angel's Gift. I remember booking into a rooming house run by a prune-faced old spinster with her white hair tied back into a bun. She charged us—Dad and me—three times her normal room rate, because she could.

Because, suddenly, everybody wants to stay here.

So, this is where Dad's job has brought us this week. Well, actually, we've been here for almost a month now. Can't blame me for being disoriented, though. For as long as I can remember, it's been like this: one new town after another, never having a chance to settle in, to make friends. Never having a place I can really call home. Always waking up in the morning to find myself in unfamiliar surroundings.

I mean, jeez, I'm twenty years old, you'd think I'd have planted roots of my own by now. You'd think I would have worked out what I want to do with my own life. It's not as if my dad—"the famous Dallas Archer"—doesn't lay into me about it every chance he gets. He thinks I'm drifting along, just wasting time. He might be right, too, although I'd never admit that to his face. But you know, right now, I don't think there's anywhere I'd rather be. A lot of stuff is going down in Angel's Gift these days, and it's quite a buzz to be at the center of it all, even if it is only as an observer.

That's me, I guess: an observer of life, never a participant.

Whoa! That's pretty heavy stuff for—what time is it, anyway?—4:14 on a Wednesday morning in late November. It's the dream, I guess. It got into my head and stirred up all kinds of feelings. But it's gone now, and those feelings are draining away. I can go back to sleep.

At least, that's the plan. But I can't keep my thoughts from racing.

I feel uncomfortable, and I keep shifting my position. I must look at the clock on the bedside cabinet a thousand times, and each time only a few minutes have passed, but a few minutes are slowly adding up to a few hours, and dawn light is already trickling through the faded, flower-patterned curtains.

Three times, I doze off. But my sleep is haunted by the heavy feeling that I can't rest, that I have

something important to do, and I find myself awake again and chasing fleeing dreams, just trying to work out what that vital task could be.

I can't shake the image of the Time Traveler from my mind. So, sometimes, I give in. But I can't quite bring him into focus either. I can't hear what he's trying to say to me.

I'm not even sure why I call him "the Time Trav-eler." It feels right. As if he doesn't belong here, in this place, in this time. Don't ask me how, but I know—somehow, I just know—that he's crossed the years themselves to be here. Whether from the past or the future, though, is anybody's guess. And why? To reach me? What does he want to tell me?

I'm analyzing this too much. It was only a dream, I tell myself. Why can't I forget about it? Why does it disturb me so much? Why can't I sleep?

Because I'm afraid of going back to where I was, of being trapped by the flames again.

And now, the little backwater town is coming back to life around me. I can hear people talking, wishing each other a good morning. Engines revving, shutters being rolled up. There's an ache behind my eyes, but I accept now that I'll get no more sleep. I'll shower in the guesthouse's cold water, try to shock myself awake and alert, and turn in early tonight. As soon as I can muster the energy to drag myself out of this warm bed, that is.

And I know that, by noon, the dream will have been forgotten; it always is. It'll melt in the weak winter sunlight, having had no substance, having meant nothing. I mean, I'm already thinking about how crazy it all is, this lame idea that some cosmic being would travel through space and time to make an appearance in *my* dreams. Why me, right? What have I ever done?

Through the tissue-thin wall, I can hear Dad starting to stir in the next room. He'll be knocking on my door soon: I might serve no useful purpose around here, as I'm sure he'll remind me again, but that doesn't mean I get to sleep in late. So, I throw back the sheets at last, push the Time Traveler from my thoughts, and I start getting myself ready for a new morning in Angel's Gift. Another day in "The Home of the Micronauts."

Another sixteen hours to drift through, just watching. Achieving nothing, doing nothing that could matter to anybody.

My name is Ryan Archer, and this is my story.

Chapter

One

By the time I stumble blearily downstairs, Dad's already left for the research facility; probably just grabbed a slice of toast and shot out the door as usual. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd had less sleep than me. Mrs. Mulligan's always complaining, under her breath, about the time he rolls in each night. Each morning, rather.

I'm glad. I don't need another lecture right now. I stare at the plate that our gracious host slams down in front of me. I chase two shriveled sausages and a fatty slice of bacon around in their own grease, and I feel my stomach turning. I don't eat much, but I down three cups of black coffee. Mrs. Mulligan looks at me like I'm dirt when I ask for a second pot—but if I'm going to get through today, I'll need as much caffeine as I can keep down.

Dad knocked on my door on his way past. "It's Moving Day," he reminded me, calling through the white wood. "Pack your bags and come by the facility at six. I'll get someone to meet you at the main gate." That leaves me with time to waste.

As soon as I step out onto the street, I wish I had a thicker jacket. The wind cuts straight through this one, and through the T-shirt beneath it. I don't go back, though. I want to be outside. I need fresh air and I need to be doing something, even if all I can think to do is take another aimless stroll round town. I move like a zombie, almost bumping into a couple of people. The sidewalks are busy, and long lines have

already formed at most of the small shops. The air is thick with exhaust smoke as hundreds of cars grind along roads built for dozens, in search of parking spots that don't exist. By early afternoon, there'll be total gridlock, and the blaring horns of impatient drivers will make this tiny, mid-western town sound like New York City on a bad day.

To make matters worse, Appleton Street has been closed off. There's bunting up, and a small crowd has formed. Posters and fliers explain that Mayor Delaney and "a special guest" will be here at eleven o'clock to open a new gift shop. It's called The Microverse. Cute. Yesterday, it was a bar; the day before, another guesthouse. New businesses are breaking out in Angel's Gift like zits on a teenager. A couple of months ago, this was a dying town, but the venture capitalists didn't waste much time moving in after the Micronauts turned up. Seems like every once-abandoned building is having its boards pried off right now. I'm amazed they can find enough shop fitters to go round. Even when the work is all done, though, I figure the town still won't be able to cope with its newfound fame. There's a six-week waiting list for a seat at any half-decent restaurant, and tourists are having to sleep in their cars, blocking entrances to garages and loading docks.

I suppose things will calm down in time. They'll have to. Perhaps once the novelty has worn off, once everybody has seen our visitors, and we all get used to having aliens among us. For now, I can pretty much guarantee a capacity crowd—and probably three times that—for the Microverse's grand opening. That's why everybody's here, after all, to see a Micronaut or two for themselves, and this'll be one of their few chances. They'll even put up with yet another of Delaney's self-serving speeches if they have to. Anything, so long as they can go home and tell their families and friends that they saw a genuine alien being in the flesh. Or in the metal casing, more likely. It's usually Ordaal.

I pass the poster as I turn onto Main Street. Angel's Gift, it says in big, cheerful letters. The Gateway to Innerspace. And there's a photograph of some Micronauts: the performers from the circus. The poster's ten feet high, which makes the figures about a dozen times their actual size. They're a varied bunch, and that probably adds to their attraction. Usually, when you see aliens in films and on TV, they're all like clones—you see one, you've seen them all. But the Micronauts come in all shapes and colors. They're mostly humanoid—and some of them could even pass for human, apart from their size—but on the poster, there's a creature that looks like it's made out of hardened sludge with a single eye in the center of its forehead; there's a gangly thing with spiny hair and a face like a chimpanzee's; and there's something I can only describe as a bipedal, green-blue elephant.

And there's a little purple guy dressed in black trunks and a padded sleeveless jacket. I haven't been to the circus yet—can't get tickets—so I don't know what he does, but he has the wiry build of an acrobat. He has four arms and a short tail. And his eyes are round and black, but they still seem to shine out of his nose-less, hairless head.

And I think for a second that I know this guy—he might've been one of the people in my dream. My friends, who I couldn't see, who couldn't save me or themselves. Only he'd have to have been bigger.

And I think I should know his name, but I don't.

I scowl, irritated with myself for thinking about the dream again. Of course I recognize the purple guy—I see him on this poster four, five times a day. I don't even give it a second glance any more, most times. It doesn't mean a thing.

There are four separate news crews on Main Street. I know a couple of faces from the TV. You'd think they'd have found something else to talk about by now. It's still interesting to watch the technicians setting up their lighting rigs, though, and the reporters having to cope with a curious and excited public as they wait to do their pieces on camera. It makes me feel like things are really happening here.

They're all after the same shot. The one they always use, on every news bulletin on every channel. The one with the white dome in the background.

It could almost have been deliberate that, when the Rift appeared six weeks ago, it was halfway up Gabriel's Hill, on the outskirts of town, in the one spot that can be seen between the rundown buildings

on the main shopping street. Mayor Delaney managed to keep news of the Rift, and of the strange beings who came through it, from the government for about a week. But once the advertising campaign started, even they couldn't fail to notice what was going on under their noses. The army moved in and cordoned off the entire hill in about five minutes flat. It didn't take them much longer to throw up a prefabricated building around the Rift itself. Delaney's filed all kinds of lawsuits, claiming that it's harming the economy of the town to hide its biggest attraction. He's just doing it for the publicity, though. I mean, it's not as if you could physically fit any more people in Angel's Gift at the moment.

And in the meantime, the white dome stands on the side of Gabriel's Hill, ringed by soldiers in camouflage gear, in full view of everybody. It's probably become the most photographed landmark in the world over the past few weeks.

There are soldiers around here, too, and police drafted in from neighboring towns. Uniforms everywhere, but they're only adding to the congestion.

"Ryan! Hey, Ryan, wait up!"

Bill Dempster is pushing his way along the sidewalk towards me. He's a few years older than I am, with straggly black hair resting on his shoulders, a full beard, and intense, staring white eyes. A baseball cap, which he wears back to front, conceals the top of his head where I know he has a big, round bald spot. He's overweight, and he's struggling along with a bulging knapsack on his back and a camera slung around his neck, brandishing a tape recorder. Everybody calls him "Klingon Bill" because of his obsession with aliens, and because... well, because he looks a bit like a Klingon, I guess. He's what a professional psychologist might describe as a "Total Nerd." But he's harmless enough, and friendly. I met him in the newly renamed Gateway Bar about two weeks ago, and he's kind of latched on to me ever since. My dad's fault, really. Klingon Bill's fascinated by his work; keeps telling me how lucky I am to be related to the great Dallas Archer, one of the very few men trusted to get up close to the Rift. And he keeps asking questions about what Dad's up to now, not that I'd know a whole lot more about that than he does.

"Have you heard the news?" he asks when he reaches me, out of breath but grinning like a loon. I shake my head. "More Micronaut sightings. Two in New York State, and at least four in California. There's a woman in L.A. says three of them broke into her house last night and tried to abduct her."

"Micronauts?" I ask. "And she saw them?"

"Yeah. Well, I mean, they were full-sized ones. Human-size, I mean, like Ordaal."

"Human-size. Right."

"There has to be another Rift somewhere. Probably two, one on each coast."

"I don't know, Bill. They haven't exactly kept their presence in Angel's Gift a secret, have they? Why start sneaking around now?"

"Because Angel's Gift was a mistake. The Rift opened on the hillside, and too many people saw the Micronauts when they came through it. So, they're making the best of it."

"You really believe that?"

"Oh, I haven't decided *what* to believe yet—I'm keeping an open mind—but that's what the guys on the newsgroups are saying. They figure the Micronauts are just pretending to be our friends while they learn about our society. You heard about that tourist from Milwaukee?"

"Don't think so."

"You know, the woman who disappeared. Last heard of heading here."

Bill's face is shining with excitement. It's like he really wants this to turn into an alien invasion just because it'd prove he was right all this time. But it hits me that he could be just what I need to take my mind off how tired I am. And off the dream. So, stifling a yawn, I suggest we go and get a coffee and he can tell me all about it.

Which he does. In blistering detail. While we're standing in a line the length of the Great Wall of China in a coffeehouse called Alien Beans. Which serves "Micro Muffins."

I'm distracted by a chatter of excited voices: "I hope there's one of the elephant dude." "Yeah, he's the coolest!" "No way." "I wanna know more about that robot guy in the ads." "You mean Biotron? He's called Biotron."

Kids in the line behind us, poring over a magazine. Four of them. I say “kids,” but they’re not much younger than me. About fifteen or sixteen. It’s just that those teenage years seem a long way behind me now.

“Do you think he’s really that big?” “That’s not big!” “I mean compared to the rest of them.” “Yeah, that’s like Ordaal big.” “He’s not real, though, is he? I haven’t seen him on the news or nothin’.” “That’s ’cause Ordaal only just brought these designs back from Innerspace.” “You think he’s really a robot? He looks like one.” “Who, Ordaal?” “Hey, take a look at Darth Vader’s badder cousin!” “I want him. I’m gonna get that one.”

As the line shuffles around the last bend before the counter, I manage to sneak a quick peek over the kids’ shoulders. They’re looking at a full-page ad for The Microverse, the gift shop. Apparently, there’ll be a limited number of new Micronaut toys available at today’s opening. They don’t go on sale anywhere else until after Christmas. I try to hide my smile. Micronaut action figures! What next—their own comic book?

I realize I’ve tuned out Klingon Bill. He’s looking at me with that unnerving stare of his, expecting me to respond to whatever point he’s just made. “Um,” I say, fumbling for an appropriate comment, “I thought you’d decided it was all a government plot.”

That does the trick. “Oh sure, the government isn’t telling us everything,” he says with an air of authority. “I mean, that goes without saying—it’s been going on since Roswell in 1947. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were hushing things up in LA and New York, and probably a dozen other places, too. But the thing about Angel’s Gift is—the brilliant thing is—that the Micronauts came through the Rift before the government even knew it was there. They’ve got all kinds of radio telescopes and satellites trained on space, but no one was watching Gabriel’s Hill, were they? I mean, if they had been, the Black Ops guys would have been sent in before you could say ‘Area 51.’ The Micronauts would have been whisked off to some military base in the middle of nowhere and opened up on a lab bench, and we’d never have known a thing about them. It stands to reason, doesn’t it?”

He pauses to let me speak. Or just to draw breath, I’m not sure. “Not much chance of anything being hushed up now,” I point out. “Not with Delaney on the case.”

“You’re right there.” Bill grins. “I wish I could’ve seen their faces at the FBI when they found out a bunch of aliens had made contact behind their backs. And if Ordaal and his people say they want to keep the circus going and they want to keep dealing with Roger Delaney, who’s to tell them they can’t? Apart from anything else, it’d cause a riot!”

We’re lucky enough to find seats, although they’re pretty cramped. The coffeehouse owners have added extra tables to cope with the increased demand, so it’s hard to pull back the chairs far enough to squeeze into them. And our table, which has only just been vacated, is filthy.

“Is it today you’re moving in?” asks Bill as I suck the foam off my mocha.

At first, I don’t know what he means. Then I remember. “Oh, into the facility, you mean? Um, yeah. I suppose it is.”

“Aren’t you excited?”

I shrug. “It’s no big deal.”

But it obviously *is* a big deal to him. “What are you talking about, man? That’s where it’s all happening. And you’ll be right there, right at the center of it all!”

I shake my head. “I’ve lived in places like that before.” Once Dad gets his teeth into these projects, he likes to be based on site if he can. That way, he can keep his own hours—which usually means working through night after night until he drops. To him, having to stay at Mrs. Mulligan’s—less than half a mile away—until our quarters were ready was the worst kind of inconvenience. “They’re not as interesting as you think. They’re full of gray men in gray suits, shuffling papers and not doing a whole lot else.”

“As if. You’ll probably get to watch them sending the probe into the Rift. This afternoon, it’s scheduled for. At 1600 hours.”

“Who told you that?”

Bill taps the side of his nose. “I have my sources.”

“Well...yeah, I think Dad did say something about a probe.” Actually, it’s all he’s talked about for the

past two weeks. He makes it sound like that probe is more of a son to him than I'll ever be. Not that I've seen much of him to talk about anything. That's why I suppose it *will* be good to get into that research facility today, to see what's going on for myself.

I try to downplay it, though. This guy would give his entire *Star Trek* collection to be in my shoes, and that makes me feel kind of guilty. I've always taken my life, and Dad's job, for granted. Other people don't see the downside of it.

"But I don't move in until six," I say. "And they probably wouldn't have let me in the lab, anyway. Not for something that big."

"But you'll get to see the Rift, at least."

"Maybe." I try to sound nonchalant. Any second now, the oh-so-subtle hints are going to start again. Bill lives in hope that I can get him into the facility some day, but I'm not sure I can. I'll only be there under sufferance myself, because I'm Dallas Archer's son, and because I've signed like a zillion agreements with confidentiality clauses. I can just imagine Dad's face if I turned up at his workplace with Klingon Bill in tow—although, come to think of it, that might be reason enough to see what I can do.

"I wish I'd seen the Rift," sighs Bill, right on cue. "I wish I'd known about it before the government got here and took it upon themselves to hide it from us."

"You can see photos of it," I point out. "We know what it looks like. Heck, you can even get Rift postcards in that shop across the road." Delaney's photos. He shouts loudly enough about our rights being infringed, but he's making a fat enough profit from it.

"It's not the same."

"So, fly out to L.A. if you think there's another Rift there. You might just find it first."

From the pained look on Bill's face, I know he's considered doing just that. But he shakes his head. "It's too much of a risk. I might not find anything. At least here, I know where the aliens are." Something occurs to him, and he checks his watch quickly. "Speaking of which, I'd better get moving if I want to see Ordaal at that gift shop opening."

"It's not for another hour and a half," I protest.

"I need to get a good place."

"And you must have seen Ordaal a hundred times!"

"I want another chance to talk to him," says Bill, hefting his tape recorder and finishing off his hot coffee with one gulp. "I've got a few new questions, and I bet I can catch him this time, trick him into giving something away."

I laugh at that; I can't help myself. Fortunately, Bill doesn't seem to take it the wrong way. "Give me a second, then," I say. "I'll come with you." Well, why not?

To be honest, I admire his enthusiasm. Klingon Bill knows what he wants to do with his life, and he's out there doing it. He has a purpose.

For the next hour and a half, I have a purpose, too. My purpose is to keep my blood from freezing and my lips from turning blue. I can stamp my feet and move about a bit at first, but as the crowd in Appleton Street grows, I'm hemmed in by other people. I benefit a little from their body heat, but my nose is starting to feel numb. I'm not even sure what I'm doing here. Like Klingon Bill, I've seen more than enough of these ceremonies—mostly from some distance, though. I've only bothered lining up like this once before.

The usual white wooden podium has been erected outside the gift shop. It's empty for now, apart from a microphone on a stand. Rope barriers and policemen keep us from getting too close. Bill and I aren't in a bad position, but we're still a few rows back. To have gotten to the very front, we'd have had to have been here last night with sleeping bags.

Delaney turns up twenty minutes late. His black limousine with its blacked-out windows glides into a prepared spot behind the podium, and cops swarm all over it. The applause starts as soon as the Mayor of Angel's Gift heaves himself out of the car, but my bones ache with the cold and I just want to knock the smug expression off his pasty face.

He shuffles onto the podium, looking like a ton of lard poured into an expensive suit and left to congeal. The tourists are cheering and whooping like he's some kind of rock star, and Delaney's waving his arms as if to calm them, but you can tell that he's really enjoying this. It's two or three minutes before the fuss dies down enough for him to speak. Then, he steps up to the microphone, adjusts the striped tie around his thick neck, clears his throat, and launches into the usual barrage of clichés.

There's nothing in the speech I haven't heard before, but it plays well all the same. There's the usual bit about the Micronauts choosing Angel's Gift as their arrival point on our world because of the famous hospitality of its decent but struggling people: that gets a smattering of applause, where once it would have earned an ovation. The locals don't turn out so much for these things any more. Delaney also rails against the government who, according to him, would deny us all a chance to meet our visitors. Bill pipes up, "Hear, hear!" And, of course, the Mayor slips in his advertising slogans at every opportunity. We're left in no doubt that Angel's Gift is "The Gateway to Another Universe" and "The Home of the Micronauts." I wonder what he'd do if they all upped and moved to Florida. Or, for that matter, if the government decided to seal the Rift.

Delaney seems to think that this might happen, that our elected representatives might send the Micronauts back where they came from—and the audience reacts to his ranting with appropriate boos and hisses. That's not what Dad says, though. He and his team have come here to understand the Rift, not to close it down.

At the fifteen-minute point, the Mayor makes his first mention of the "special guest" who will cut the ribbon on The Microverse. That gets the crowd even more excited, but we have to wait another ten long, grinding minutes to reach the end of the introduction.

Ordaal, says Delaney, guided the Micronauts here. Ordaal is sharing their wondrous technology with us. Ordaal has brought prosperity to this poor town and taught us about other worlds, other races. Ordaal is our friend.

Why, then, as Ordaal climbs out of the mayoral limo, do I feel my skin crawling with an inexplicable dread? And I'm not the only one. His arrival draws sharp intakes of breath from the crowd, and a general murmuring that's two parts curiosity and one part fear.

It's just the way he looks, I tell myself. I haven't been this close to him before, and I hadn't fully appreciated how imposing he is. He's about six feet tall; he looms over the squat form of Mayor Delaney as he joins him on the podium, and he's just as bulky. One of the reasons, I guess, that people have been so quick to take to the Micronauts is their size. Alien they might be, but they don't look like they could pose a threat to us. Ordaal is different.

I've never seen his face. He always wears his containment suit in public. In itself, that worries me a little. There are no weapons visible in Ordaal's sturdy-looking silver armor, but there must be plenty of room in there to conceal a space-age blaster or four. If I could see any facial features at all—anything that betrayed an emotion—then he might not seem so cold, so dispassionate. But his shoulder plates are attached to a large golden dome, which covers his head or whatever else he might keep under there. Ordaal might be able to see out, but nobody can see in; the polished surface only reflects Delaney's proud expression back at him.

The crowd is beginning to warm to this alien monster, though. They were uncertain at first, but now they're giving him a big reception. They might still be afraid of Ordaal, but it's a good kind of fear. Fear like you might get on a roller coaster, or from watching a scary movie. The kind of fear that goes hand in hand with a powerful attraction.

Ordaal just stands there with his gauntlets clasped behind his back. And Delaney throws an arm around him, grins, and basks in the flashlights of a hundred cameras.

"Thank you," says Ordaal. He doesn't need the microphone; his words are amplified by systems inside his own suit. His voice is flat and electronic, which further reinforces his inhumanity. I half expect him to bark out "Exterminate!"

Instead, he says, "My friends and I are honored to be here. We are grateful to the people of Angel's Gift, and of the planet Earth, for your generous welcome."

He's answered by another swell of appreciation—in the middle of which, he turns and stomps back

down the steps from the podium. Speech over, apparently. A man of few words is our Ordaal. If only Delaney could be half as concise.

The customary red ribbon is strung across the double doors to the gift shop, and Ordaal takes hold of it. "I declare The Microverse open," he says. The first time he did one of these ceremonies, some gray-suited official leapt forward at this point to hand him a pair of scissors. Unfortunately, he didn't know how to use them, and his metal-encased fingers were too big for the handles anyway. So, he took the ribbon in both hands and snapped it with one yank. He does it again now, for about the hundredth time. It's become something of a trademark for him, and the crowd couldn't be more delighted by it. He steps back, then, as the shop doors are thrown open from inside, and a couple of guys scuttle forward to unhook a rope barrier beside the podium. Our way into The Microverse is clear now, and everybody surges forward, a terrifying mass of people moving with one mind. I almost lose sight of Klingon Bill, so eager is he to elbow his way to the front. But the police have learned their lessons from much recent experience, and they don't let the crowd get out of control this time. They form a line to funnel us along the sidewalk and keep us away from Ordaal. A few people are waving autograph books at him over the cops' shoulders, but he doesn't seem to see them. I catch the expression of disappointment on Klingon Bill's face as he's swept through the doors, still waving his tape recorder. A few seconds later, I'm carried over the threshold myself. I'm not sure I wanted to come in here—but if I'd gone against the crowd, I'd probably have been trampled to death. At least it's warm inside, but as the shop fills up, "warm" soon gives way to "stifling."

I didn't even get a chance to look in the display window as I passed it. For the first time, I take in the contents of The Microverse, and I'm disappointed—if not surprised—to see the usual cheap junk: mugs, key chains, calendars, posters, trashy tie-in books, all with photographs of Micronauts slapped on them and being sold for a small fortune. Doesn't stop anyone from snatching them off the shelves, though. Delaney's name appears in small print on each and every piece of merchandise. He claims to have created the name "Micronauts," and he owns the copyright to it and to associated logos and likenesses. I wonder if Ordaal knows what he's signed away, and how much money his so-called friend is making off him. I doubt it. Our money has no value to the Micronauts, anyway. Sometimes, I wonder what they *are* getting from this partnership, but then I have to stop myself before Klingon Bill's conspiracy theories start to sound attractive.

I can't see Bill any more, so my thoughts turn to getting out of here. I set my sights on an open back door, which seems to offer the easiest escape route. I'm struggling towards it, trying not to mind as a dozen people stamp on my feet, when I see the action figures.

Most of them have gone already, leaving bare hooks where they once hung. I can't even get close to them. But a middle-aged woman with a headscarf has fought the good fight and come away with a six-inch figure on card backing, which she's holding up to her nose to inspect with narrowed, probing eyes.

And I feel it again: The same sensation of recognition that crept over me when I saw the purple guy on the circus poster. Only it's much stronger this time. And, this time, I *know* I haven't seen this toy before, nor anything or anybody like it.

Acroyear. The figure is called Acroyear. And it's the name, I think, more than the figure itself, that connects to something buried in my subconscious mind. Suddenly, it's as if I'm floating out of my body. The world is tunneling around me, sounds distorting as the gift shop shrinks into the distance. But that's cool, because I'm going to a different world, the world where I'm supposed to be. The world with all the answers to my questions.

I see a red helmet. Not silver, like the one on the toy, but it's a similar shape. Those big fins sticking up on each side are distinctive enough. The helmet conceals the face of its wearer, and I feel an echo of the same fear that tingled in me when Ordaal took to the podium. But, whereas my fear of Ordaal was heightened by distrust, my fear of this man—this Acroyear—is tempered by respect. Good thing, too, or else the sword he's wielding would terrify me out of my wits. I remember seeing it with the action figure, in its own blister on the card—but that sword was about two inches long and cast from dull gray plastic. This one must measure at least four feet,

and it's on fire. Dark globules of energy collect around the edges of the incandescent blade. My stomach is pitching and rolling. I put it down to nerves at first, but I realize now that I'm floating. Or rather, gliding. My feet dangle about a foot off the ground. Something is pressing into my back, and automatically I know that this is what's countering my mass. Acroyear—the toy Acroyear—was wearing something like it. A white bar across his back, with circular silver panels like solar collectors attached to each end. My glider feels more streamlined, but I can't turn my head to get a look at it. I can't keep my balance; I flail about with my arms and legs, but I can't control myself. The guy in the red helmet barks orders in a voice like a stuttering chainsaw, but I can't make out the words.

I'm spinning back down the tunnel.

And the gift shop shoots back into focus with a suddenness that makes me gasp. I almost lose my footing, but the press of people around me keeps me from falling.

The woman in the headscarf has turned the figure over in her hands. She's carrying it away from me, but not before I make out some of the words on the back of the card. Something about an army of evil Acroyears who are the sworn enemies of the Micronauts.

"That's not right!" I blurt out.

Some people stare at me, and I half-turn away from them, cupping a hand over my face in embarrassment. I don't know what got into me. But I have to see "Acroyear" again. I have to take a proper look at him—at *it*—to reassure myself that I'm being stupid, that it's only a toy.

I head for the rack of action figures, barely hearing the mutters of protest from the people I barge out of my way. I'm just in time to see the last Acroyear falling into the hands of an eager, blonde-haired boy. There's only one figure left, hanging right at my eye-level as if it's been placed there by fate. I feel my jaw fall open, and suddenly it's hard to breathe.

And, in that moment, I *know*. I know that I'm going to have to accept what I've been denying to myself all morning: that the dream *did* mean something.

I'm staring into the blank, silver eyes of the Time Traveler, and I realize now that everything I know is wrong.

Chapter

Two

It's about two o'clock when I get back to the rooming house to find that Mrs. Mulligan has emptied my room and hauled my suitcases down to the small reception area. I wonder what she'd have done if I hadn't packed last night; flung my clothes out of the window, most likely.

"Checkout was at ten o'clock," she snaps at me. "I've other guests waiting for that room, you know. I've a good mind to charge you an extra night."

I had planned to take a quick nap, and to get some shelter from the icy needles of rain that are starting to spot the sidewalks. Instead, I find myself on the street with all my worldly goods—all two cases and one backpack full of them. Fortunately, I've learned to travel light.

I've nowhere else to go, so I head up to the research facility. To be honest, I'm also thinking about what Klingon Bill told me, about the launch of the probe at four. I'm wondering if I might get a look at it after all. And, more than that, I'm beginning to feel like the facility—and being near the Rift in particular—is where I ought to be.

I bought the Time Traveler figure in the end. A little boy started wailing as I took it to the checkout, leaving the rack empty, and I felt like dirt. But I had to have it. Don't ask me why, I just had to. It's in the inside pocket of my jacket now, pressing against my chest, and I feel as if that little lump of plastic is guiding my footsteps somehow.

Gabriel's Hill has become a hot picnic spot. There are blankets laid out across the hillside, almost right up to the high metal fence around the facility. A little lower down, there are even a couple of tents. There's not much to see here, but that doesn't stop the cameras from clicking, recording every detail of that ugly

white dome. Which, by the way, is a whole lot bigger than it looks from Main Street.

I pick my way through the tourists, my arms aching with the weight of my luggage, to the gate. A freckle-faced young soldier—younger than me—stares at me through the wire mesh. She informs me that this is a government facility and I should keep my distance. She's carrying a rifle.

"Ryan Archer," I introduce myself, indicating my cases. "I'm expected." When I get no response, I add: "My father works here."

The kid's expression clears. "You're Doctor Archer's son."

"Yeah," I sigh. "I'm Doctor Archer's son." It was too much, I suppose, to hope that I could be somebody in my own right, just this once.

The kid announces my arrival into a radio handset, listens to a buzz of static, and then informs me that I wasn't due until six.

I nod politely. "I know that," I say.

I end up waiting on the hillside for about forty minutes, as the rain gets heavier and most of the picnickers pack up and leave. Finally, someone from Administration appears at the gate, checks my ID, and lets me in. As he escorts me across the compound, he apologizes for the delay and reminds me again that I'm early, as if this selfish act of mine has thrown his entire department into chaos. I keep my mouth zipped.

A white door is set innocuously into the side of the dome. It has no handle. The admin guy unlocks it by swiping a keycard through a reader. Then he leads me through a maze of blank, white-walled corridors, pointing out the canteen as we pass it, until we reach a small office. It takes another thirty minutes for him to tap my details into a computer and issue me with a pass and keycard of my own. And I have to sign another three contracts. I've been through all this before, of course—but this time, I'm screaming inside with frustration. I just want to get all this paperwork out of the way and get on with finding the Rift, with finding out what my dream meant. The Time Traveler feels almost unbearably heavy in my pocket.

We climb to the upper floor via a circular staircase twisted around a white plastic pole. The admin guy shows me to my basic quarters and then leaves at last, promising to tell Dad that I've arrived. Somehow, though, I can't see him tearing himself from his work to come and greet me. I throw my bags into the freestanding wardrobe, drape my jacket over the back of the chair, and sit down on the bed, thus making use of every piece of furniture in the room. If I spread my arms out, I can almost touch all four of the plaster-board partitions around me.

The head of the Time Traveler sticks out of my jacket pocket. It seems to be looking at me again. I pick it up and cradle it in my lap, just staring at it as if it might start talking. As if it can tell me everything.

Eventually, I make a decision. I tear at the card, bending and twisting it until its transparent blister starts to peel away and I can get my fingers underneath it. I toss the packaging aside. It isn't important. I've read the stuff on the back about the Time Travelers being foot soldiers to the Micronauts, and it's all crap. Made up by Delaney or the toy company, I guess, to sell more figures: this one, I see, comes in three other colors.

I think there *was* another Time Traveler. I remember a cave on an alien world, and a man glowing so brightly I could hardly look at him. But I can't remember what he exactly looks like—just a vague impression of indistinct features.

For now, though, I'm only interested in one Time Traveler. The red one. *My* Time Traveler. The plastic toy, however, maintains a stubborn silence.

It doesn't take long to find the main lab. I've always had a good sense of direction, so despite the tortuous layout of the facility, I don't lose my bearings. I keep aiming for the center: the dome was built around the Rift, after all. I pass plenty of people in the corridors—some in uniforms, some in suits, some in white coats—but nobody challenges me. That's normal. It's a hell of a job getting into one of these places, but once you *are* in, you're past all the security and what you get up to is nobody else's business. I've developed the habit of walking with a purpose, like I'm just where I ought to be. Combined with the pass, which I've clipped to my shirt, this renders me invisible to most people. Story of my life, you might say, but right now it suits me just fine.

I'm wearing my jacket again. Warm air blows through grilles in the prefabricated walls, but there's still a chill in the air. More than that, though, I couldn't bear to leave the Time Traveler behind, and it wouldn't fit in the pockets of my jeans. How embarrassing is that? Carrying a toy around like some child's comforter.

I soon forget about that, though. I can see the entrance to what has to be the dome's main chamber. Two white-coated women are approaching it from the other end of the corridor, so I slow my pace enough to allow them to reach the double doors first. That way, I get to use them as cover as I stride confidently into the room, just hoping that Dad doesn't look too hard in my direction at the wrong moment.

I don't see him at first. The chamber is buzzing with activity. And it's big: About three stories high right up to the apex of the dome, with technicians busying themselves on platforms and galleries at all levels. The walls are steel-reinforced, sturdier than those in the rest of the facility. I guess they have to be. Who knows what alien energies—or worse—might bleed through from Innerspace without warning? If it comes to it, the scientists need to be able to make this area airtight in a second.

I shiver as I set eyes upon the Rift itself. Not just because of the danger it could represent, but because I have that feeling of *déjà vu* again.

Dad described the Rift to me as a tear in space, speaking in a worried tone as if the tear might grow wider and rip the world in two. On Delaney's photographs, it looked like a smudge of white light in the air, like a trick of the camera, a reflection of its flash. Since those pictures were taken, Dad's team has constructed a containment grid around it: A rectangular frame bristling with sensor devices and dampening equipment. It confines the Rift to an area of about seven feet high by ten feet wide, and probably detects and controls any fluctuations in the energy grid. And if you're wondering how I can know so much about it from one glance... well, I can't explain that. I've always had a knack for anything technical, a kind of intuitive understanding. I guess, when you live with the great Dallas Archer, a few things are bound to rub off on you eventually.

The Rift looks like a portal now—which I suppose it is. You can't see what's on the other side of it, though. I can't even look at it for too long: that white light is intense.

But you can see what's come through it, all right. Ordaal's ship sits on a kind of landing platform, probably built for it on this side of the Rift. I recognize the *Sunrunner*, of course, from Delaney's posters and his licensed model kits. It's about my height, long and boxy. An oval bubble juts out at the front, held in place by struts on each side. The bubble is gold, like Ordaal's helmet—and, like Ordaal's helmet, it's probably a one-way screen. The bridge, I imagine. The rest of the hull is gray and flat, and there are no portholes. From each side of the fuselage, wings curve outward and upward to a point: they wouldn't have fit through the Rift in their present positions, so I guess they must be retractable.

For that matter, the only way Ordaal could have gotten his human-sized form into that ship is by lying down in its rear compartment. One more thing to ponder.

I find myself a chair in an inconspicuous corner, behind a console that nobody appears to be using. From here, I only have to crane my neck a little to see what's going on. And if anyone does challenge me, I'll say I'm waiting for my father. So long as he doesn't spot me himself, I should be okay.

There are Micronauts in the lab. Flying Micronauts, buzzing around like big insects on glowing wings of pale blue energy. I count about ten of them. All women, I think, wearing a kind of uniform armor, sort of lavender around the arms and torso, with blue-tinted steel plating everywhere else, and T-shaped backpacks, from which their wings appear to be generated. Their helmets leave only their mouths exposed, so I can't say much more about them other than that they all appear to be humanoid and fair-skinned.

I can see Dad now. He's standing by the Rift with a clipboard, issuing orders to a small group of people. They're dressed in padded blue environment suits, their helmets hanging behind them like hoods. As Dad turns his head, white light illuminates his face.

And I feel an unexpected shock that actually makes me jump. It's like something just pierced my heart. Something cold.

Another premonition. But what is it this time? It's not as if I haven't seen my father before. And he looks like he always did. Short, dark brown hair, like mine, but swept back from his forehead. Lines under his

eyes that tell of chronic sleep deprivation. The beard that makes him seem older and gives him an air of authority, although I suspect he only wears it because shaving would be a waste of his time. Sure, we haven't spoken much recently—but it feels like I haven't seen him for months. And, somehow, like I never expected to see him again.

There's a memory on the tip of my mind, but I can't quite touch it.

Dad claps his hands for attention and, in his gruff voice, he announces: "We're about to send the probe in, people. All nonessential personnel are to leave now."

That means everybody not in a blue boiler suit, apparently. The humans file toward the doors; the Micronauts march into the *Sunrunner* like a military column, tramping up an entrance ramp, which then rises with a hydraulic hiss. I stoop behind my console and pretend to be tying a shoelace until the doors shut behind the last man.

I'm relieved to see that Dad's team doesn't put on their helmets. They're not expecting this to be dangerous, they're just wearing the environmental suits as a precaution. They move into positions around the room, but fortunately no one comes near me. If I'm seen now, that's it, game over.

I was wrong: One of the Micronauts has stayed behind. She looks different from the others; her wings rise taller and prouder. She must have activated them, 'cause I'm sure I would have noticed her before.

She wears a golden jumpsuit, metallic but form-fitting and flexible. I can't see her face from here, but short purple hair sprouts from the top of her head. She hovers at Dad's shoulder, and she's saying something to him. He's grunting and nodding, but I can't quite hear her small voice. Like Ordaal, she must have a translator built into her armor. That is, unless Dad can suddenly speak "Micronaut-ese."

There's a clattering sound behind me. I whirl around, losing my balance and falling against the console. It's a robot. It's white, with red trim and a blank, golden oval for a head. Vaguely humanoid in shape, but truncated at the waist. Instead of legs, it trundles along on a pair of wheels. Stumpy arms, hinged at the elbow, end at two-fingered hands with opposable thumbs. A box juts out of the robot's back, like a knapsack—that should be where the bulk of its monitoring equipment is stored. A thin white antenna protrudes from it. The robot must have detected me, but it doesn't react to my presence. It rolls up to Dad, the top of its head coming up to his hips, and he welcomes it with a proud smile.

»Microtron unit reports all systems functional,« it bleeps.

So, this is his famous probe. Kind of cute. It's also kind of familiar. Like the woman. Like a lot of things. It must be important. Another piece of this increasingly complex puzzle.

I try to remember what Dad told me about Microtron. The Micronauts helped him build it, I recall. They improved his original design, making the probe more compact and maneuverable. He was really excited about that, but I think he was worried, too. Worried that he was learning so much from these aliens so fast that he might forget half of it. Worried that he might not understand. So much for him to take in, so much to do.

I had dinner with him a few days ago: The only time since we arrived in Angel's Gift that I've been able to drag him out for a proper meal. There was a big fight. I'd had to make the reservations four days ahead, I'd changed them twice, and I was damned if I was gonna let him cancel on me again. And, in between the usual bickering and barbed comments, he talked about the probe as if it were the only thing going on in his life at that moment.

"With the equipment we're giving it," he said, "the Microtron unit should be able to analyze Innerspace down to the atomic level."

"Can't Ordaal give us that kind of data?" I asked.

Dad shook his head. "Apparently not. We've got some information from his ship's sensor logs, but it isn't enough. We don't know if human beings could survive on the far side of the Rift. We don't even know if we could pass through it safely."

The thing is, I like talking with Dad about his work. It feels like we're bonding, like he's there for me. It's when we discuss the personal stuff that we end up yelling at each other.

"The Micronauts do," I pointed out.

“The Micronauts aren’t human beings.”

“They’re that different, huh?”

“In some ways, yes. There’s the size differential, for a start.”

“Yeah. I had kind of noticed that.”

“To Ordaal’s sensors,” said Dad, “his world might have an oxygen-rich atmosphere—but we don’t yet know if it could sustain a living being with the equivalent mass of King Kong. The very molecules of Inner-space are smaller than ours. We don’t even know how the Micronauts can exist in our universe and breathe our air, except that they evidently can.”

“I guess we could just collapse under our own weight.”

“Indeed.” He was in full flow now, ignoring his food. “And that’s before we even consider the possible effects of alien radiation and viruses.”

“I wondered about that. What happens if Ordaal or somebody else is carrying some kind of Micronaut flu?”

“Or worse. Don’t get me started. Those aliens should have been quarantined as soon as they set foot on Earth. Mayor Delaney has a lot to answer for!”

“They’ve all been checked out now, though—right?”

Dad scowled. “That’s not the point, Ryan. How many times have I told you about taking responsibility, about considering the consequences of your actions?”

“Jeez, all right, I get the point.” Sometimes, I don’t think he even realizes he’s doing it: taking a shot at me is just second nature to him. “So Delaney’s a jerk! So what?”

“So, while he was busy thinking up ways to turn a profit, he was putting all life on this planet at risk! That’s why we need to know more about what we’re dealing with. Ordaal’s people might have been happy to leap through the Rift and see what happened, but the U.S. government is a little more cautious with the lives of its employees.”

“So, how long before we *can* send someone through?”

“A few weeks, maybe. It all depends what the probe can tell us. We’ve got astronauts on standby. It doesn’t help, though, that the Rift opens into space on the Micronauts’ side.”

“It does? I didn’t know that.”

“Why do you think they come and go in a spaceship?”

“Shame we can’t just hitch a ride.”

“They have talked about developing a miniaturization device,” said Dad. “If we could reduce our astronauts to their size, it would make things a lot easier. I don’t know, though. It sounds like science fiction to me.”

“But if their technology is so much more advanced than ours...?”

Dad nodded. “Maybe.” A faraway look came into his eyes. “We weren’t ready for this, Ryan. I’ve got a dozen Micronaut technicians working with me, but it’s still taking all we’ve got to keep the Rift remotely stable and its energies contained. The aliens are already here. We’re rewriting the laws of physics every day, but we’re ten pages behind. And if we make a mistake or simply overlook something...”

He left the sentence unfinished.

The preparations are taking forever. I imagine what it would be like to be in Microtron’s place, staring into the white energy of the Rift, waiting for a signal to take the long walk into it. Or the long roll, in its case. As if I’m not already tense enough. This feels like the defining moment of my life, as if this is where it all starts to mean something. And I can’t shake the feeling that it will be something very, very bad.

The scientists take readings at their consoles, calling information to each other in voices that are edgy but controlled. I understand about half their jargon, enough to catch the gist. They’re doing what they can to control the Rift’s energy flow, lessening the chance of turbulence as the probe passes through it.

Everything is going well. So far.

Dad gives the Microtron unit a paternal tap on its shoulder. It gives a short acknowledging bleep and rises about four feet into the air, leaving its wheels behind it. Its truncated legs now end at pulsating

globes of light. Micronaut technology, no doubt: less flamboyant than the energy wings, but with a similar function.

And that's when the Time Traveler gets into my head again, screaming a wordless warning that feels as if it's going to blow my brains out. I scream in pain.

And I remember.

Images crashing into my mind:

The probe is swallowed by the Rift, the white light flaring as if in greeting. I'm arguing with my dad when suddenly the alarm klaxons sound, and the white light is turning yellow, like fire. The containment grid shorts out, and I want to yell in Dad's face, I want to tell him to get out of here before it's too late. But he can't see it yet. He's more concerned with bawling me out for sneaking in here. He has his back to the Rift, and he doesn't have a clue what's about to happen to him. How could he? But I know.

They step from the flames. Five figures, our size. No, bigger. They wear gray and silver armor. Golden bubbles like Ordaal's cover their heads, and suddenly I know what they are. They're not head plates, they're cockpits. These battle suits are what the Micronauts wear to make themselves a match for us. More than a match. Their left arms are blaster weapons, and they have missile launchers on their backs. They don't need them.

Their blasters scythe through Dad's team. Six men dead in less than half a minute, steam rising from their fried organs, their environment suits melted and wet with blood. Dad bellows at me to get out of here. He's going to reboot the grid and try to cool down the Rift, to stop more of those monsters from coming through. I freeze, stunned by the suddenness of it all, touched by his unexpected concern in the heat of the moment, and knowing that the last thing I want is for him to die a hero.

It happens anyway.

The first shot destroys the console in front of him. As it blows up in his face, he's hurled back, blinded by light, hit by shrapnel. He's on the floor and I'm racing towards him, but a metal arm shoots out into my path. It wraps itself around me, three steel claws like drill bits digging into my ribs. I'm kicking and yelling as I'm lifted off my feet and hauled away. I can still see Dad's chest moving, see him twitching, hear his rasping breaths. He's alive.

And then one of the armored guys stands over him, and raises his blaster arm.

My throat is raw. I don't want to watch this, but I can't tear my eyes away.

The final image is of Dad's death, his back arching from the floor as flames explode around him. It seems to happen in slow motion, but too fast for me to do anything. And it occurs to me for the first time that I'm probably next, but only for about half a second before this weird darkness slams in around me and the world disappears, and I realize what's happened, that the armored guys are taking me into the Rift with them.

Into the fire.

"Ryan? Ryan? What are you doing in here? Ryan!"

Dad's voice. He's alive. Oh, God, he's alive! And he's angry. I grit my teeth and try to fight down the pain that's almost blinded me. I succeed in driving it into the back of my skull, but it waits there.

"Where...where's here?" I don't know what I'm saying.

"You were supposed to wait at the rooming house. I told you not to come here until six!"

"The...the rooming house?"

"And what did you think you were doing, sneaking into a secure area?"

"No...no, I remember the rooming house. Angel's Gift. But that's not right. That wasn't here." I know I'm not making sense, but I can't get my thoughts in order. The words are pouring out of me, and I'm clinging to the faint hope that Dad will understand them, that he'll see the danger he's in. "Nevada," I

gasp, as if I've just realized something important. I think I have—but by the time I've said it, I've forgotten what it means. "Aren't we in Nevada?"

"What are you babbling about?" Dad grips me by the shoulders, and a trace of concern enters his scowling features. "Are you feeling all right?"

A cold sweat breaks over my forehead, and I'm looking at Dad and I can see the Microtron probe over his shoulder, hovering in front of the Rift. Suddenly, I know what I have to do. "No. No, I'm not all right. You can't let them come through. You've got to seal up the Rift!"

"All right, Ryan, that's enough. What is this, some kind of childish joke?"

"I'm *serious*, Dad. I've seen them. I've seen the Harrowers."

"Because if it is, it's not funny. You're embarrassing yourself and you're embarrassing me."

"They're going to kill you!" I yell. "They're going to kill you, and...and take me away and I won't be able to get back and..."

There's an explosion. From the direction of the Rift. It's started!

I hurl myself at Dad with a howl. All I can see, in my mind's eye, are the armored monsters—the Harrowers—marching out of the Rift, their weapons raised. I'm trying to propel Dad toward the doors, to safety—but he resists me, and instead we fall together. For an instant, facedown on the floor, my limbs wrapped around his, I feel exposed. I expect to hear the percussion sounds of the blasters and the screams of the dying, and to feel fire on my back.

Dad's body is shielded by mine. I think I'm going to die in his place.

But then, looking more furious than I've ever seen him, he drags himself out from under me. For a second, I'm staring at the bare floor, paralyzed with dread. I've lost him. I should have held on to him, but I've lost him forever.

Then I hear his voice behind me, barking out orders. I climb to my feet, feeling dazed and shaky, to see that I was wrong. Wrong about everything.

There are no monsters here.

The Microtron probe is on the floor, two scientists kneeling beside it. Its globes have darkened, and one of them is cracked and charcoal-blackened from the inside. The purple-haired Micronaut woman is there, too, and I'm disconcerted to see that she's looking at me although I can't see any emotion in her rigid features. The rest of Dad's team is damping down the Rift on his instructions, and its harsh white light is softening.

He hurries over to the woman, and I want to tell him not to trust her, but I've said more than enough already. He was right: I've made a fool of myself. I don't know what got into me. I'm still tired. Maybe I fell asleep behind that console. Maybe I had another bad dream. But it was more than that—I know it was.

Azura Nova. I think that's her name. But Dad never told me that. Did he?

"An antigravity pod misfired," she reports to him, her eyes still fixed on me. "It discharged its energy straight through the probe's circuits. Most of its systems were blown out. It will take us days to repair the damage."

I cringe inwardly, knowing how Dad will react. Sure enough, he rounds on me.

"Now do you understand, Ryan? Do you see? If I'd been paying attention instead of..." He lets out an exasperated sigh. "You know what? Forget it. Once again, your reputation for irresponsibility precedes you. Right now, I've got more important things to worry about."

The same words. The exact same words from my dream.

I cast a fearful glance at the Rift, but the monsters have missed their cue.

"I...I'm sorry, Dad," I stammer, confused, after his receding back. "I thought..."

What *did* I think? That I'd had some kind of precognition? That the Time Traveler had shown me the future?

Later.

I'm lying in my bed in the tiny room. It's only nine o'clock, but I'm praying for sleep.

I took a quick walk back into town, partly for the fresh air and to tire myself out a little more, but also to pick up some industrial-strength painkillers. I swallowed two about half an hour ago, and they're starting to dissolve some of the knots in my brain.

I dropped the Time Traveler figure into the bottom of my deepest suitcase, and closed the wardrobe door on it.

For a while there, I thought I was going crazy. But I'm rational now. I've gained some distance on all the weird stuff that's happened, and I figure I can put it all down to stress, sleep deprivation and a few freaky coincidences.

I've been trying not to think about my "vision" in the laboratory, but sometimes it sneaks back into my head. Actually, though, that's not such a problem. It's kind of comforting to realize how many details of the dream were wrong. And I don't mean just the big things, like the fact that Microtron never went into the Rift and the armored guys—what did I call them? Harrowers—never came out. Those things could still happen tomorrow, or the day after. No, I mean the small details.

The Microtron probe, for example. In the dream, it was bigger and bulkier, almost spherical. And it didn't hover under its own power, it was carried through the Rift by a crank arm, still attached to our world by a dozen tubes and wires. Even the laboratory itself was different. The same reinforced walls and the same equipment, mostly, but the layout was all wrong. And there was no sign of the *Sunrunner*. I smile to myself as I sink into a warm, welcoming darkness. What kind of a precognitive vision is it that can't even get the *present* right?

Of course, the Time Traveler is waiting for me in the dream world.

"No," I insist, covering my ears. "I don't want to hear what you've got to say. I know where you came from. I must have seen you in a magazine or on a poster. An ad for those stupid action figures. I mean, I don't remember it, but that must be what happened. You got into my subconscious, and if you don't mind, I'd like you to leave now."

But he just shakes his head.

When I wake up, I don't know where I am.

At least, not for a few seconds. Nothing unusual there.

It feels like I've been sleeping for days, but it's still dark, and I fear that this is only the beginning of another long night.

Until I remember that there are no windows in this room, no way for daylight to get in. And I can hear activity outside my door. Footsteps and voices, distant and muted.

I fumble for my watch on the chair beside my bed, spilling my jacket in the process. I press the little button that lights up the digital display, and I grin. 10:24. I've been asleep for over thirteen hours. And I don't remember any dreams.

But something has happened. Something is different.

I flick a switch beside my bed, and wince in the electric glare of the overhead light. I haul myself up on my elbows until I'm sitting with my back against the pillows.

And I think about what I know.

It's as if my mind sorted out the clues by itself last night, set everything in order for me. Well, that's what happens when you sleep, right?

My vision *was* real. I don't know how I could have doubted it. But it wasn't a vision of the future. It was a memory.

There *was* another facility like this one, built around a different Rift. It was in the Nevada desert, and I went there with Dad. And he was killed, and I was taken into Innerspace (although I don't think we called it that) for reasons that aren't clear to me. And I met Ordaal there, and Azura Nova, who headed up a squadron of airborne killers with uniforms like those worn by Dad's so-called technicians. And then there was Acroyear, and the purple guy from the circus whose real name begins with a G, I think, but we called him Knave. And something bad happened, and I was surrounded by flames.

But I never met the Time Traveler. Not this one. He's new to me.

Memories of things that never happened—but they *should* have happened. That’s what the Time Traveler has been trying to tell me.
And somehow, I’m the key to it all.
I thought I was nobody. But suddenly, I’m the most important person in the universe.

Chapter

Three

They found the missing tourist from Milwaukee. You know, the one Klingon Bill told me about. They fished her body out of Lake Seraph, just outside town, late last night, and identified her about an hour ago. So, she reached Angel’s Gift after all, and died here—although the police are keeping the cause of death to themselves for the moment.

I hear the news on the radio, which plays over buzzing speakers to an almost empty cafeteria. The failure of Dad’s probe makes the broadcast, too; I don’t know how the media found out about that. A “government source,” probably a junior secretary in a Washington press office, dismisses it as a “minor setback.” But, undaunted by the truth, the newsreader speculates that it will be “some time yet before Mankind achieves its dream of exploring Innerspace.”

I haven’t seen Dad since yesterday afternoon. I’ve been keeping out of his way, and he’s certainly made no effort to find me.

Another cooked breakfast goes cold in front of me, and I’m barely aware of the kitchen staff clattering around the neighboring tables. I’ve got a lot to think about, but at least I can do so calmly, now that I know I’m not going out of my mind.

Trouble is, my thoughts are going in circles. I need more information. And I need somebody to talk to. Somebody who might understand.

The first time I met Klingon Bill, he gave me his business card. I slip it out of my wallet now. He printed it on one of those machines at Office Max, and it describes him as a “UFOlogist and Free Spirit.” On the back, Bill scrawled his number and the address of the house in Angel’s Gift where he’s staying. When I try calling on my cellphone, a recorded message tells me that the network is busy and I should try again later. And I doubt I’ll have much chance of finding him in his room.

But I know where he’ll be at two o’clock this afternoon.

The familiar podium stands in Melrose Square today. The bunting is out again, and a huge banner has been strung across the arched entranceway of the austere town hall building—it reads GALACTIC CITIZEN OF THE YEAR. A moronic title dreamed up by some crackpot organization that Bill probably has a lifetime membership in.

I read about this award in the local paper. They’ve been presenting it for years, but I bet the organizers never dreamed of getting so much publicity before. Whoever had the idea of honoring Mayor Delaney this year knew what they were doing. Anyone else might have accepted his certificate and “alien statuette” with quiet modesty, but not the esteemed mayor.

The ceremony begins at three, and the paved square has already begun to fill up. But there’s more room to move here than there was in Appleton Street, and it doesn’t take me too long to find Bill at the side of the podium, where he’s managed to get right up to the police barricades.

“Ryan!” He greets me with a big grin. “You got my message, then?”

“What message?”

“Tickets for the circus, man!” His face falls. “They didn’t tell you? But I went up to the dome.” He scowls. “I knew I couldn’t trust that uniformed bully at the gate. I said to him, I said, ‘I’ve got a Constitutional right to contact my friend, and I’m not gonna let you stop me.’”

“I’ve been in and out all morning,” I say quickly.

“I mean, I could have told you myself if they’d just let me go—”

“You really got tickets?”

“Two of them, for tomorrow afternoon. I’ve been trying to call you on your cell all morning, man. What *is* it with the phones around here?”

“Too many people, maybe, all wanting to call home. Not enough bandwidth.”

Bill gives me a knowing look. “Or maybe somebody’s trying to limit our contact with the outside world.” I frown. “What for?”

“To keep us from telling what we know, man.”

“Bill, ‘what we know’ is all over the newspapers every day!”

“It’s been in *some* newspapers for years. Some people won’t believe until they have to.”

“So, uh, how’d you manage to get tickets?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Some guy I ran into last night. His wife’s sick or something, so they’re going back home. Their loss, our gain.”

“How much?”

“Well...less than the scalpers are charging.”

I narrow my eyes. “How *much* less?”

“Hundred and sixty bucks each. Interested?”

Two days ago, I would have told him no. I’d have said I could wait. But the circus offers me one of the most tangible links to my visions: the purple guy. Knave. And, unlike Ordaal and Azura Nova, I have a good feeling about him. I think we might have been friends once.

“You’re on. Want to meet up later?”

“You aren’t staying for the ceremony?”

“I think I’ve heard enough of Mayor Delaney’s speeches for one lifetime.” And it’s another cold day, too cold for standing around here. “I’ll wait in the coffeeshop.”

I take another stroll first, killing some time. With all the tourists at the presentation, the streets are relatively quiet. I even drop by The Microverse to see if they’ve restocked their action figures. They haven’t, and a handwritten sign informs customers that they’re not expecting another delivery for some time.

I scour the newsstands, and find the magazine that those kids had yesterday. The one with the ad for the toys in it. It’s no surprise at all that some of the images seem so hauntingly familiar. But this isn’t helping me. I’m looking in the wrong places.

I swing by Melrose Square on my way back to Alien Beans. I can barely see the top of Delaney’s head from the back of the crowd. He’s in full flow, retelling the inspiring story of how he discovered the portal to another universe, and playing down the part where it was actually somebody else—an old man walking his dog on a Sunday afternoon—who saw the Rift tearing itself open on Gabriel’s Hill and called the police. I wonder who that old man was, and where he is now; Delaney never mentions his name.

I’ve been sitting in the coffeeshop for about twenty minutes when the door flies open and Bill charges in. He looks flustered, his face red and his forehead shining.

“They can’t have finished already!” I say, surprised.

He’s too breathless to speak, so he gestures hopelessly until he can gasp out: “Not Ordaal...the award...one of the others...”

“I’m not following you,” I say. “Sit down. Breathe!”

Bill does as he’s told, gulping in air until he can speak with some semblance of coherence. “It was meant to be Ordaal. Presenting the award, I mean. To Delaney. But he’s not there. They’ve got one of the circus guys instead.”

“And you ran all the way here to tell me that? Whichever one it is, we’ll see him tonight.”

“No, no, that’s not the point, Ryan. It’s not Ordaal. Don’t you see?”

“Not really.”

“*Why* isn’t it Ordaal?”

I shrug. “Maybe he wanted a day off.”

“When his ‘best friend’ is being made Galactic Citizen of the Year? I don’t think so. No, there’s something going on. While everyone’s distracted, you see?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, but I’m on my way to the Grand to find out. You coming?”

“I was hoping we could talk,” I say reluctantly.

But Bill’s already halfway to the door.

The Grand is the oldest, biggest, and most expensive hotel in Angel’s Gift. Doesn’t quite live up to its name, though. Its sandstone façade is stained, the blue paint on its window frames is peeling, and its sign is only half lit. I heard that it closed down about two months before the Rift opened, but no buyers could be found for the building. I bet its owners are glad about that now. With their old staff pressed back into service and every room filled, they must be making money like they never did before.

They can even afford to hire two doormen, who look painfully out of place in their long gray coats and top hats against the shabby background. Maybe, on my own, I could have bluffed my way past them—but, once they set eyes upon Klingon Bill, we’ll never get in.

To my surprise, though, Bill strides right up the four wide steps to the revolving doors. “We have an appointment,” he says to the two guards, not meeting their gazes—and for a second, I think he might actually get away with it. But then, they move to block his path.

“William Roosevelt Dempster,” he says flashing his business card as if it’s a press pass. “Freelancer for the *Cosmic Herald*. And this is Doctor Archer; he’s down from the research facility.” I smile uncomfortably. “We’re here to interview Mr. Ordaal.”

“Nobody told us anything about an interview,” says one of the doormen stiffly.

“I arranged it with Mayor Delaney this morning. Ask him if you like.”

“The Mayor is not available at the moment, sir.”

“He said to meet Ordaal here at—” Bill checks his watch “—three-thirty. I’m a little late.”

He makes for the door again, but a firm arm stops him. “Sorry, sir.”

And then Klingon Bill spoils his whole act by whining: “But it’s the truth this time—I swear!”

“Tried that before, huh?”

We’re leaning against the Dumpsters at the back of the hotel, defeated. From this seedy alleyway, the Grand looks even more rundown. I’m staring up at an expanse of crumbling brickwork, rusted fire escape platforms, and small, dark windows. There’s a door, but it’s made of reinforced metal, and it’s locked. I checked.

Bill nods mournfully. “The tall guy’s new—but the one with the piggy eyes, I think he recognized me.”

“They must have heard a lot of stories like yours. From real journalists, too.”

“I *am* a real journalist.”

“Yeah, right.”

Bill grumbles: “It makes you wonder what they’re trying to hide.”

“So, which room is his?” I ask, not doubting that Bill will know the answer.

He points to the top of the building, where four bigger windows open onto separate balconies. “Top floor suite. Second from the right.”

“Uh-huh.” I can’t see how we’d reach the bottom of the fire escape anyway.

Bill sighs, but he brightens up a moment later. “Anyway,” he says, “you never told me what it’s like inside the facility. Have you seen the Rift yet?”

A resounding thud takes us by surprise. Bill and I leap back from the bins, looking guilty. The noise comes again, and I realize that someone has pulled back the bolts on the inside of the metal door. It opens with a scraping sound, and a skinny teenager with straw-colored hair appears in the doorway. He’s dressed in a white apron and hat, carrying a bulging garbage bag in each hand. He looks at us with open suspicion.

I flash the kid an embarrassed smile, and we draw back further. He's still wary of us, but he seems to have decided that, whatever we're up to, it's not his problem. He trudges toward the Dumpsters, leaving the door open behind him. And, on a crazy impulse, I decide to take the opportunity that's been offered to me.

I nudge Bill in the ribs, and indicate the door with my eyes. His jaw drops in surprise at what I'm suggesting. But, hey, I've a reputation to live up to, right?

Hot air hits me like a physical barrier as I enter the hotel kitchen. Checking over my shoulder, I see that Bill has followed me, his white eyes wide with fear. I glance across the steam-filled room, all gleaming surfaces, and set my sights on a set of double doors at the far side. There are at least a dozen people between us and them, scurrying around in the same sort of controlled chaos that greeted me in Dad's laboratory. None of them have seen us yet, and it takes the kid outside another second to react to what we've just done.

"Hey!" he calls after us. And Bill makes to run, but I hold him back.

We stride across the room together, looking like we've every right to be here. We draw a few glances, but nothing more. At least, not until I'm about to lay my hand on the exit door, at which point an anguished voice bellows out: "Will somebody please tell me what those two men are doing in my kitchen?"

That's when we run. Out into a network of service corridors that's usually hidden from the public. We bypass the dining room, barrel through another door, and emerge into a carpeted corridor. Soft music is playing, and I can see the corner of the reception desk and the hotel entrance beyond it. I hear footsteps behind us, so I tug at Bill's sleeve, urging him to keep going. We almost collide with a tall, gray-haired man in a business suit, causing him to drop his suitcase and make an indignant noise at us.

We crash through a fire door into the stairwell. We run up two flights, and Bill is wheezing and spluttering behind me as we start up the next. I let him rest as I check out the third floor. There's nobody around—and even if there was, we're deep into the hotel by now and could pass for guests to anyone not looking out for us.

We hurry past rows of numbered doors until we reach the elevators. It'd be safer to stay on the stairs, but I'm worried that Bill might explode or something if I drag him all the way up to the top floor. I listen to the grinding of gears as the car rises to collect us. As its doors slide open, I half expect to find the two doormen inside. They've probably been told about us by now, and it wouldn't take a genius to work out where we're going.

"Seventh," pants Bill as I press the button for the sixth.

I shake my head. "It's too easy to get into the hotel."

"You call this easy?"

"For the other guests, I mean. There must be guards on Ordaal's door, too."

"So, how do we get past them?"

"I don't know." I'm hardly inspiring confidence, I know, but I'm making this up as I go along. "But if we stay in the elevator, they'll know we're coming. Walk up the last flight of stairs, and we should be able to see them before they see us."

I take no satisfaction in being proved right.

Through the narrow strip of glass in the stair door, I can see two uniformed guards. They're playing cards at a small table, which at least suggests that they haven't been put on alert for a pair of intruders.

"That's it, then," whispers Bill. "We've done all this for nothing."

"Don't give up yet," I mutter. The corridor makes a sharp turn, just where it meets us. It continues to our left, and there's another door down there. I point it out. "Looks like another suite. It must back on to Ordaal's."

"So? We can't reach it. We'll be seen."

"Maybe. But the hotel's full, right? So, somebody must be staying in that suite. If we move quickly and quietly enough, the guards won't get more than a glimpse of us."

“What, and you think they’ll just assume we’re a couple of guests?”

“Why not? They’re only here to guard one room.”

“You’re nuts!”

“It worked in the kitchen. If they’re gonna see us anyway, it’d be even nuttier to let them see us sneaking around.”

Bill can’t think of an answer to that, and I move before he gets the chance. We slip out into the corridor, and I let go of the fire door. By the time it bangs against its wooden frame, we’re out of sight, making no attempt to muffle our footsteps until we reach the door to Suite A4. Then, we hold our breaths and listen, but nobody comes to investigate.

“You see?” I mouth at Bill, grinning. He nods dumbly. And then his eyes almost pop out of their sockets as I knock softly on the door.

I don’t blame him. I’ve surprised myself, too. And, for the next few seconds, I’m thinking furiously about what I’ll say if anybody answers. Make up some lame excuse and get out of here, I guess. Fortunately, I don’t have to.

“What now?” whispers Bill.

“We have to get in there,” I answer.

“How?”

“You got a pin or a knife or something?” I ask, rummaging through my own pockets.

“You want to pick the lock? That’s breaking and entering!”

“Calm down. It’s not as if we’re going to steal anything.”

“If we get caught...”

“It was your idea to come here. I thought you wanted to know what Ordaal’s up to.”

“I do, but...”

“But you’d rather just stare up at his window and hope he’ll show himself.”

“We need to think about this,” whines Bill. “We need a plan.”

“You’re the one who keeps saying the Micronauts are a threat.”

“It was only a theory! I mean, I don’t know. Nobody does.”

“Then we need to find out,” I say grimly, “because I think the situation might be more serious than even you and your conspiracy theory buddies can imagine.”

All I can find is a credit card. I take it out of my wallet and inspect it dubiously. I’ve seen enough movies where the hero uses one of these to get through a locked door, but they never explain how it’s actually done. For a moment, I wonder if Bill’s right. Am I going too far? I know what Dad would say. But the last few minutes have felt good. I may have acted without thinking, I may not have had any clear plan, but at least I took control. I *did* something instead of letting things happen to me. And I don’t want that to end yet. I’ve come this far; I don’t want to walk out of here without some reward for my efforts.

I slip the credit card into the crack between door and frame, and wiggle it about experimentally. It catches on something. I’m about to crouch down and put my eye to the crack to see exactly what’s happening. But suddenly, by touch alone, I know just how to bend and twist the card so I can force a corner of it behind the latch and draw it back.

It takes me about three seconds. There’s a soft *click*, and the door swings open.

Bill stares at me. “Where did you learn to do that?”

I shrug. As I said before, I’ve always had this way of understanding things, of being able to see how they work. It only occurs to me now that this might have something to do with the other timeline, with the life that I’m convinced I once led.

Inside Suite 4, a couch and two easy chairs are arranged around a coffee table and a television set.

There’s a dining table and three chairs in the corner. In front of us, a short corridor leads to three more doors, presumably two bedrooms and a bathroom. To our left, a French window opens out onto one of the balconies we saw from the alley. Everything is tidy—the hotel’s cleaners must have been in today, which is good; it means they’re not likely to disturb us now—but there are signs of habitation. A coat is draped over one of the dining chairs, and yesterday’s newspaper lies folded on top of the TV.

I ease the door shut behind us, and head for the farthest bedroom. Bill follows me nervously, not daring

to ask what I'm doing now. I gesture to him to keep silent. He nods, his eyes darting agitatedly from one part of the room to another, as if he expects someone to spring up from behind the double bed or out of the closet at any moment.

To my disappointment, I don't hear anything. After a minute or so, I go looking for the bathroom. I find a glass beside the sink, and take it back to the bedroom with me. I place it against the wall that separates us from Ordaal's suite, and put my ear to it. Still nothing.

I suppose it was too much to hope that, by some freak chance, I'd be just in time to overhear an incriminating conversation. I'm sure Ordaal's more careful than that, anyway. The walls here don't look especially thick.

As we return to the main room, Bill screws up the courage to say, "You make it sound as if you know something. About Ordaal, I mean."

"I think we've met before," I mutter distractedly, trying the French window. It doesn't open, but the key is in the lock.

"How? How could you have met him? I don't understand, Ryan."

"Long story. I'm not sure I understand half of it myself."

"Are you saying he's not a Micronaut? Not an alien at all?" Bill looks excited. "This whole thing is faked, isn't it? Ordaal, the Rift, the circus, everything. A con to distract us from the real truth. There are no Micronauts!"

"No. No, Bill. That's not what I'm saying."

He frowns. "But you don't trust Ordaal."

"No."

"So, you've got something on him? Hard evidence? Something we can use?"

"Not exactly," I say evasively. "Call it a hunch." The cold air from the balcony hits me, and I edge forward cautiously, making sure that nobody's watching us from below. The hotel's bins and the back of an old warehouse: Not what I'd call a great view.

"So, what do you think he's doing? Preparing for an invasion?"

I shake my head. "I don't think that's his style. I think Ordaal is greedy for wealth, not power. I think he must want something that he can only find on Earth."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. We can't offer him much in the way of technology," I muse. I'm waiting for another revelation—another buried memory—to hit me, but it doesn't come. I'm out on the balcony by now. It extends a little way to my right, past the smaller windows of the suite's two bedrooms, and I test my weight against the flimsy looking railing at the end. It holds. I reach across it, trying to gauge the distance to the next balcony along: the one attached to Ordaal's suite. It's about five feet away, maybe six.

"We'll never make it over there!" Bill says in alarm.

"I'm not so sure. Look!" I point to a drainpipe, halfway across the gap. Some of its brackets have come away from the wall, but it's held in place by decades of rust and the weeds that sprout between the bricks. "I'm going to try it."

Bill opens his mouth to protest, but thinks again. He's just as keen as I am to get a look inside Ordaal's quarters. So, I hand him my jacket and swing my foot over the railing.

The first stage isn't so hard. It's only when I've left the safety of the balcony and I'm clinging to the drainpipe with hands and knees that I stop to think about what I'm doing. I resist the urge to look down, but I still visualize the concrete surface eight stories below me. The wind ruffles my hair, and particles of rust are skittering past my head.

I've committed myself. It would be just as dangerous to go back now as it is to go forward. Still, I can't move for what seems like years. When did I get brave enough to risk my life like this, I ask myself. And the answer is: When I realized that the fate of the world might rest on my shoulders. Scary thought. It hadn't quite sunk in before now.

Gritting my teeth, I feel for a foothold in the uneven wall. Then, I twist my head around until I can see what I'm aiming for. I take a deep breath and swing toward Ordaal's balcony.

And my foot slips.

I'm still swinging, but I've lost my anchor point. The balcony rail vibrates as I collide with it, and I let out a moan of pain. I catch hold of it, but it feels like I've almost wrenched my left arm out of its socket. For a second, I'm hanging there by one hand, pedaling the air, resisting the urge to give in to the pain and let my fingers spasm open. I hear Bill's sharp intake of breath behind me. Or was that me? I can't tell. If I panic, I'm lost. I try to forget where I am, how far down the ground is, and just concentrate on my objective. My flailing right hand finds a metal bar at last, and I seize it in a desperate grip. My muscles straining, I start to haul myself up. I must look like a fish out of water as I flop onto Ordaal's balcony, lightheaded and shaking. But I've made it.

I made it!

I climb to my feet and glance back at Bill. I wasn't planning to suggest that he follow me anyway, but his body language makes his own feelings on the subject pretty clear. I smile and give him a thumbs-up sign. Then I turn my attention to Ordaal's windows.

I'm disappointed to find the curtains drawn on all three of them. Can't see into the suite, can't hear anything from it. Can't prove that there's nobody in there, though. I should have brought my credit card with me. The wind's strong up here: if I ask Bill to throw the card across, I figure there's a good chance of it being snatched away and ending up with the Dumpsters in the alleyway.

Then, to my amazement, I realize that the French window is open. Just a crack.

A mixture of excitement and fear shoots through me like an electric current. Is it possible that, with all the security surrounding him, Ordaal could have gone out and forgotten to lock his window? Or does this mean that he's in there after all? Do I dare go inside?

I've *got* to see what's in there. I've got to know.

I hold my breath as I slide the window a little further open, wincing at every squeak and scrape it makes. Still, nothing seems to stir inside the suite. Gingerly, I pull the curtain aside and poke my head around its edge.

Ordaal is standing behind it.

I freeze, a startled cry caught in my throat. Ordaal doesn't move, he doesn't say anything, but he must have seen me. He was waiting for me. He's staring right at me.

"I...I...uh, hello," I stammer. He doesn't react. I have to collect myself. I swallow hard. I have to say something before he calls for security. Or does something worse. "I...I...this isn't what it looks like. I mean...well, yeah, OK, I suppose it *is* what it looks like, I have broken into your suite and all, and I guess you must be pretty suspicious of me right now and I don't blame you, but I...I need to talk with you, if you'll just give me a few minutes of your time. You see, I think we might have met before, and...and..."

And weren't you a mercenary, running errands for the despotic ruler of another galaxy?

Weren't you a slave trader?

No. Not slaves. Not quite. Something else...

I can't think of anything more to say. Even my heart seems to have stopped, waiting for Ordaal's response.

And then, I realize how stupid I've been.

Even so, it takes a huge effort of will to drag my unwilling body through the curtain; to force my feet to take those four long steps up to the armor; to reach out to the bubble-shaped head plate, which I can see now isn't clamped down any more; and to lift it.

I reveal a cockpit, just like I saw in my vision. It looks quite comfortable, with padding molded to fit around a small humanoid form. And it's empty. I let out a deep breath.

I wonder where Ordaal is. Wandering around Angel's Gift somewhere in his natural form, whatever that looks like? More likely, sleeping in one of the bedrooms. Maybe he's ill. Maybe that's why he missed Delaney's ceremony. Nothing more sinister than that. Dad was worried about how alien germs might affect us, but it must work both ways.

For a moment, I think about what would happen if the Micronauts—the ones on Earth, anyway—were all wiped out by a common cold, like the Martians in *War of the Worlds*. Bill would blame the government, of course, sounding off about genetically engineered super-bugs. But nobody would listen to

him. And my life would be easier. There'd be no invasion, then, and I could stop worrying about Ordaal and Azura Nova and troubling dreams about dying in flames. But peace of mind would come, I remind myself, at the expense of how many lives? Like the circus performers, who are innocent. Probably. And I'd never find the answers to my questions.

The suite is laid out in much the same way as the last one. The door is opposite the window, and I tread carefully, remembering the guards outside. The bedrooms and bathroom are to my left. But this main room is full of clutter. Newspapers and magazines are strewn about, along with dozens of boxes of Micronaut merchandise. I guess Ordaal gets complimentary copies of everything. But most of the boxes are unopened, and piles of postcards and books have been flung into the corners of the room, or have slipped under the table and been left there.

A full set of action figures in their packaging has been dumped on top of the TV, and some have fallen behind it. My skin tingles at the sight of a green Time Traveler—I left mine back at the facility—but I tear myself away. That's not what I'm here for.

Cautiously, I check out the smaller of the two bedrooms. The bed is unmade, which confirms my theory that even the hotel's cleaners aren't allowed in this suite.

I linger for a long time outside the master bedroom. Am I pushing my luck by venturing in here? Where else can Ordaal be? But the door is slightly ajar, so I put my eyes to the gap and blink as my sight adjusts to the darkness within.

The first thing that strikes me is the fetid stink—like something crawled in here and died. I almost recoil from it. I wonder who could stand to live in this, until it occurs to me that Ordaal has been sleeping in the smaller room. So, what has he been using this one for?

There's nobody in the double bed, but the sheets are in disarray and soaked in something dark. I push the door open softly and take a tentative step inside. Then another. I still don't see anybody, but I can't help thinking that, small as the Micronauts are, a whole group of them could easily hide in here...until they chose to show themselves.

Branches and dead leaves cover the floor at the foot of the bed, like some kind of nest. That's where the smell is coming from, and I don't feel much like getting closer to it. I take a step back, and lift one corner of the curtain to allow some light in.

There's something on the thickest of the branches. Something white, clinging to it like a spider's web. No, more like a cocoon. A hard white cocoon. It's oval in shape, about eighteen inches long.

And I see now that the stain on the bed sheets is blood. A lot of blood.

What the hell's been happening in here?

I hear muffled voices raised in urgency. I run back out into the main room, and try to listen over the hammering sound of my heart.

There are people in the corridor outside. Hurried footsteps, moving away from me. And then, a door opens. The door to Suite 4, I realize. Boy, these walls really *are* thin.

Somebody is jangling keys right outside *this* room. He drives one into the lock, but it won't turn. He rattles the door in its frame, impatiently. I take this as my cue to run.

I fly out onto the balcony, and close the French window as quickly and quietly as I can. Hopefully, it will take my pursuer a minute to think of looking out here. I can't see Bill, but his voice drifts out of the next window, sounding indignant. He's trying to persuade somebody that the occupants of Suite 4 are good friends of his, that they let him in. But a quieter voice asks him the name of his so-called friends, and he can't answer.

"Um...John," he mumbles. "I only know the guy as John. And his wife is called...ah, Gillian?"

By this time, I've vaulted over the balcony rail and practically thrown myself at the rusty drainpipe.

Adrenaline fuels me, and I don't have time to be nervous this time.

But I'm still scrambling to get onto the balcony of Suite 4 when one of the uniformed security guards appears in front of me. He calls over his shoulder. Then, scowling down at me, he grips me by the arms and hauls me up and over the railing. He gives me a push toward the window, and I almost collide with one of the doormen from downstairs and a suited manager type, who looks at me as if he's just peeled me off his shoe. Between them, they bundle me roughly into the suite, where the other doorman is

keeping his eye—and a restraining hand—on a chastened-looking Klingon Bill.

“Well, you can’t blame us for trying,” says Bill. He indicates the camera slung around his neck. “Do you know what the tabloids would pay for a photo of Ordaal’s room?”

“I’m sorry, Bill,” I sigh, joining in the act. “I tried my best, but I couldn’t make it over there. If we’d had more time...”

“This is breaking and entering,” snarls the manager, red-faced with anger, “I hope you both realize that.”

Bill says something in our defense, but I’m more interested in the conversation going on outside the window. The security guard is still out there. He’s talking to his partner, who must have come out onto the balcony next door. Although I can’t make out everything, I’m relieved to hear that he’s found no evidence of my visit to Ordaal’s suite.

But I get the impression that the alien’s absence comes as a surprise to both men.

Chapter

Four

Twenty minutes later, we’re out on the street again.

The hotel manager took our names and addresses (he needed some persuading that I really do live at the research facility) and got his doormen to search us. One of them ripped the film from Bill’s camera, much to his dismay. The other inspected my government pass and keycard with a cynical eye. The manager tried to give us a lecture, but it came out as bluster. He told us over and over again that he had “a good mind” to report us to the police. He might yet do so, if Ordaal or the occupants of Suite 4 make a formal complaint.

“You mean Ordaal isn’t even home?” I said, faking a groan. “Oh, jeez!” I didn’t miss the nervous glance that passed between the two security guards.

Bill seems subdued. I think the manager’s threats worried him. I’m just glad to be out of that situation.

I’ve got better things to think about. My only fear is that Dad will find out about this somehow, and how stupid is that? I’m not fourteen any more.

I still owe Bill for my circus ticket. We find a cash machine, and join a line that seems about a mile long.

As we shuffle along the sidewalk, I describe what I saw in Ordaal’s suite, talking out of the side of my mouth so as not to be overheard. Bill immediately suggests that the cocoon on the branch could have contained eggs. “Like in *Alien*,” he says excitedly.

Which, thinking about it, is a far less sinister explanation than I’d imagined. It just means that one of the Micronauts performed a natural biological function, right? Maybe even Ordaal. I still don’t know what kind of creature he is under that bubble helmet.

“What if they’re breeding monsters to attack us?” asks Bill.

“Then why not breed them back home and send them through the Rift fully grown?”

But then, there’s still the question of the bloodied sheets.

“I bet the blood belonged to that missing tourist,” he states with misguided confidence as I proceed to empty my account. “They must have killed her in that room and dumped her corpse in the lake.”

Farfetched as it sounds, I can’t dismiss the possibility.

We search for somewhere to eat that isn’t too packed. And, as we pass the small police station, I wonder out loud if we shouldn’t report our suspicions therein.

Bill snorts. “They’ll be in on it, won’t they? They’re bound to be in Delaney’s pocket.”

“Not everything has to be a conspiracy, you know.”

“What could they do, anyway?”

“They could send those sheets to forensics, find out where the blood really came from.”

“And you think they’ll listen to us? You think we can persuade them to raid the hotel suite of our most distinguished alien visitor? They’ll think we’re mad!”

“I suppose you’re right,” I concede. We’ve no real evidence after all, and I’m not about to tell the police about my visions. I can just imagine what they’d say. I haven’t even told Bill about them yet. I intended

to, but we got sidetracked by events. Only it's not just that. I've been putting off the moment too, I guess. I'm afraid of what he might say.

"When did you meet him?"

The sudden question pulls me out of myself. "Sorry?"

"In the hotel. You said you'd met Ordaal before. When did you meet him?"

"I..." I don't know what to say. Or rather, I do. I've been given my cue. But I don't want to make that leap. What if my story sounds so insane that even Bill thinks I'm crazy? What if he makes me question myself again?

I take a deep breath, and realize that the silence between us has stretched too far. I'm held by Bill's inquisitive stare, and there's only one thing I can do. I let out a defeated sigh.

"We'd better find somewhere to sit down," I say.

So, we're perched on the low brick wall of an overfull parking lot, eating takeout pizza, and Bill's white eyes are growing wider and wider with each new twist in my tale, until my own eyes start to water in sympathy and I wish he'd just *blink*. And all he can say when I'm done, is, "You're sure you went through the Rift alone? You didn't take any friends with you?"

I burst out laughing. More through relief than anything else. He believes me. All right, so he's the most credulous person I've ever met, but it's a start. I don't feel so alone.

But then, Bill's question triggers another memory, and my mood dampens again. "They brought some of the scientists through with me," I recall glumly. "The dead ones. I think they wanted them for...for their organs." I think about it. "Yeah, that's right. That's it!"

"What?" Bill blinks at me.

"That's what Ordaal trades in. Not people—body parts."

"You're sure about that?"

"Bioengineering. It's what most of the Micronauts' technology is based on. Dad even mentioned it once." My mind is racing ahead of my tongue now. "And to have the organs of an alien species to work with...a species of giants, at that..."

"They're experimenting on us," cries Bill, clenching his fists in a triumphant gesture. "I knew it! I knew it all along!"

"Um...you do know that's a *bad* thing, right?"

"Just wait till I get to the Net café and tell the newsgroups about this. About you!"

"No," I say quickly. "I'd rather we kept this to ourselves for now. Until I've worked out what it all means."

"It means you're a genuine citizen of the galaxy, man. The Time Traveler chose you. Out of all the people he could have contacted, he chose you, and that's because you're important. You belong out there, not stuck on this miserable little world!"

"No, I don't, Bill. That's the problem!"

Bill frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that, whenever I think about it, it makes my blood turn cold. I don't *want* to go into Innerspace, Bill. I don't want to have my life turned upside down. I don't want to get involved in some kind of alien revolution."

"You didn't say anything about a revolution!"

"Don't ask. I don't know what it means. Sometimes, these things just...they just pop into my head. But I know one thing, Bill. I know that, in this other timeline or whatever it is I keep seeing, I've only got one thing on my mind: I want to get home."

Okay, so now Bill thinks I'm crazy after all. "But think of all the worlds you'd see," he protests. "All the people you'd meet."

"All the armored maniacs who'd try to kill me."

"Think of all those kids out there, playing with their Micronaut figures and wishing they could be out there in space with them, fighting alongside them." This is turning into quite a passionate speech. "You've done

that, man. You're a part of their universe!"

"And they killed my dad!" I cry out. "Will kill my dad," I correct myself in a more subdued tone. And then, again: "*Should've* killed my dad. Whatever."

"Oh."

"And another thing: The Rift wasn't in the same place. In the other timeline, I mean. And Ordaal never came through it. Nor did Azura Nova, or the circus. What if there are other differences, Bill? What if Ordaal is a good person in this timeline?"

Bill shakes his head adamantly. "He's up to something. I've sensed it all along."

"We don't know that!"

"It doesn't matter, anyway. None of it matters now, because none of this is real."

"I'm not sure about that, Bill..."

"You believe the Time Traveler, right? You believe that time's taken a wrong turn, that things shouldn't be like this..." A blissful expression spreads across Bill's face, and his voice drops until he's almost talking to himself. "I always knew there was something else. Something more. I knew this couldn't have been my real life."

"Okay, so something has happened to alter history, and my dad should be dead and I should be stranded in another universe. Give me one reason why I'd want to put things back the way they were."

"Maybe... maybe you have to, or time will... it'll collapse or something."

"And how am I supposed to do that, anyway? The damage has been done, right? In the past some time. This timeline exists, and we're part of it. I can't go back and change it."

"The Time Traveler seems to think you can. Somehow."

"And suppose," I say, sticking out my lower lip stubbornly, "I won't do it?"

"Pull up!"

"We're venting fuel."

"Pull up, you imbecile! You've got to pull up!"

"What do you think I'm trying to do?"

The images are more intense this time. I dream of a man so evil that his black shadow falls across an entire galaxy. No matter how far I run, I can't escape his grip. I feel his hatred like a living thing, and it suffocates me.

"Nova's coming around for another shot."

"Our shields won't hold!"

"We've hit the atmosphere. We're dropping like a stone!"

»Ship's systems report a 73% power loss.«

"The controls aren't responding. I can't break free of the planet's grip."

"Well, that's just wonderful! Allow me to thank you once again for including me in your suicidal plans."

"With the greatest possible respect, Princess, why don't you just—"

"We're burning up!"

I wake up in a sweat again, the echoes of explosions and alarm sirens in my ears, images of fire behind my eyes. My heart is racing.

"I won't do it!" I growl to myself in defiance. "I won't do what you want me to do."

But I can feel the presence of the Time Traveler, and sense his determination that I will. I'll sacrifice my father's life and everything I know. And, it seems, my own life, too.

The Time Traveler wants me to die in flames.

It's almost four in the morning. I don't even try to get back to sleep this time. I wish I could just blot out the Time Traveler and everything he's shown me, but it's not that simple. His timeline doesn't exist anymore, but the Micronauts are here in mine, and I can't ignore the fact that they could be a threat to

my world.

I decide to stretch my legs. Just mooch around the facility while nobody's around, check it out a little more. So, I throw on some clothes and step out into the silent but still harshly lit white corridors. And I end up in the empty recreation room: An L-shaped area with scattered easy chairs, a pool table, and a dartboard. And a TV set, which I turn on.

Six old men are having a roundtable discussion. They're talking about nuclear and chemical weapons, and it takes me a moment to realize that they're talking about the Micronauts, too. One balding guy, who leans forward and jabs the air with his forefinger whenever he makes a point, believes that the human race isn't ready for alien technology.

"We already have the capability to destroy this planet many times over," he says. "Now, we're talking about machines that can tear holes in the fabric of space itself. We're going too far, too fast."

"These beings can also teach us about the universe we live in," insists a hawk-nosed professor type.

"You can't turn your back on that. You can't choose to live in ignorance!"

"I'd rather live in ignorance than in fear."

"So long as we apply this knowledge in a responsible way..."

"And you can guarantee that, can you? When our race is still detonating nuclear bombs?"

"What I'm worried about," pipes up a gray-haired man with thick glasses, "is that this science is so new to us, so far beyond our understanding. It might only take one small error of judgment on somebody's part to unleash a holocaust."

"I agree with that. Perhaps we *should* learn these things for ourselves, when we're ready."

"You're burying your heads in the sand."

"And what happens... What do you think will happen if we turn down the Micronauts' technology and they give it to somebody else?"

I try another station. It's showing footage of a woman being interviewed in New York's Times Square.

"I just don't buy this Delaney guy's story, you know?" she shrills. "All this talk about the Micronauts helping us out and teaching us alien science because they're so kind and caring... I mean, get real! What's in it for them? That's what I want to know!"

I switch over again, and I'm startled to find Mrs. Mulligan's pinched, sour face staring out at me from the screen. She's on Main Street, Angel's Gift: I recognize the dome in the background of the shot.

"They've ruined this town, they have!" she complains. "This used to be a nice, quiet place to live. Now, we've got weirdoes and layabouts coming here by the busload, getting drunk and shouting all hours of the night and day, pitching their tents anywhere they please and leaving their garbage behind. You can't get a minute to yourself no more. There are soldiers everywhere you look, telling us what to do, strutting around like they own the darn place. Well, we were here first! And there are people—friends of mine—who've lived here all their lives, who are being driven away, and it's just not right, it's not!"

Elsewhere, a newsanchor is talking about the tourist from Milwaukee. I'm shocked to hear that, since her body was found, about thirty other people have been reported missing, last heard of staying in or heading toward Angel's Gift. A spokesman for the town's newly created Tourist Office—interviewed in Main Street yesterday evening—dismisses rumors of mass disappearances.

"I think people are being too quick to panic here," he says. "It *is* difficult to contact friends and relatives in Angel's Gift at the moment, but our advice is to keep on trying. As you know, our telephone lines and networks have been jammed by the sudden influx of visitors to our small town, and that's something we're working on. But we've no reason at all to believe that Miss Carter's death was anything other than a tragic—and *isolated*—accident. I'd just like to state again that we do have a considerable police presence here: We've drafted in officers from three counties to help us deal with this unprecedented situation. And the U.S. Army has troops based at the research facility. I think it's fair to say that Angel's Gift is one of the safest places in the world right now."

And so it goes, across a dozen more channels. Everybody seems to have something to say about the Micronauts: a suspicion to express, or a criticism to make. Their motives are questioned a hundred times,

as is the government's response to their arrival. The possibilities of invasion and the spread of alien diseases are raised. And I wonder why I didn't see any of this before. Oh, I'd heard Klingon Bill's theories, of course, but I hadn't thought much of them. Standing at the center of the maelstrom, caught up in the excitement of discovery, I never realized that the world was so afraid.

My keycard gets me into the lab, which is empty. Dad must have called it a day—and before five in the morning, too. I'm impressed. The lights are off, and I don't want to turn them on in case somebody happens to pass by. Anyway, the Rift's glow, although subdued, is enough to see by. It casts eerie shadows into the corners of the room—they flicker on the edges of my field of vision, and make me feel as if invisible eyes surround me.

My gaze falls on the *Sunrunner*, and it occurs to me that Dad's miniature workforce probably sleep in there. Azura Nova could be watching me right now, on a viewscreen. The thought makes me shiver, and I give the ship a wide berth as I cross the room.

Those steel blue uniforms...Fragments of last night's dream are bubbling to the surface of my memory. Not Harrowers, I don't think—although the Harrowers *were* smaller beneath their giant-sized armor. They were the ground troops. They wore black, and they were all male. But their airborne division...

"Nova's coming around for another shot."

"We've hit the atmosphere."

"Well, that's just wonderful!"

"We're burning up!"

The Time Traveler is whispering into my mind. I think he'd like me to jump headfirst into the Rift right now. Fat chance of that! Even if there was an atmosphere on the far side.

I'm beginning to think it's a bad idea to be here.

But then I see the Microtron probe. It sits on a bench at one side of the room, comfortably concealed from the *Sunrunner* by an intervening console. Its "knapsack" lies beside it, still connected to it by a jumble of wires, and I can't resist taking a peek at the robot's insides.

I almost leap out of my skin as its golden head jerks up and it talks to me.

»Microtron unit reports systems 62% functional.« The electronic voice shatters the silence, and I cast a worried glance back at the *Sunrunner*. But nothing else stirs.

"Take it down a few notches, can't you?" I hiss, wincing.

»I have reduced the volume of my voice by 40%. Is this new level sufficient?«

"It's better, yeah. Thanks."

The robot cocks its head to one side. »Your image is not registered in my databanks.«

"The name's Ryan. Ryan Archer." Carefully, I turn Microtron around so that light from the Rift shines onto his exposed circuits. To my surprise, the technology doesn't look too unfamiliar. I half expected to find organic components—but then, when Dad talked about his probe, he never mentioned anything like that. Maybes I got it wrong after all...unless the Micronauts are keeping quiet about some of their skills. The inside of Microtron's casing is scorched, and many of his components have been blackened. I find a screwdriver and use it to poke around the damaged area. Some of it has obviously been renewed, but not as much as I would have expected.

"And believe it or not," I mutter distractedly, "I think we once fought in a war together."

»I have no memory of such events.«

"No, I didn't expect you would have. So, what *do* you have in those databanks of yours?"

»Please be more specific.«

"You must have been told something about Innerspace."

»My purpose is to collect such information. However, I have been programmed with limited navigational data, and

with the results of molecular scans taken by Ordaal's ship as it passed through the Rift.«

“Anything else? What about Ordaal himself? He must have had a captain's log or something. Did you download anything like that?”

»I have no personal information about Ordaal.«

“Population statistics, then. How many people live in Innerspace? On how many planets? Do you know anything about their history? Ever hear of a guy called...Karza?” And no, I don't know why the name suddenly popped into my head. But somehow I know that's what the creepy guy in the black armor is called.

»I have no information on any of those subjects.«

“Acroyear?” I ask hopefully. “What about Time Traveler?”

»I have no information.«

“They didn't give you a lot to work with, did they?” I sigh.

Something whirs and clicks inside Microtron's head. Tipping it to one side again, he offers: »My design is based on that of a combat droid, used for training purposes.«

“Yeah? By who?”

»I do not have that information.«

“Right.”

»I am also able to translate the most common languages spoken in the Micronauts' universe.«

I'm getting fond of the little guy; I must be—I've started to think of this bundle of wires and circuitry as a “him.” How much of that fondness stems from my relationship with him in the other timeline, I don't know. I remember the clunkier probe from my vision, the one that was carried into the Rift on cables. It was called “The Micronaut,” ironically. But something happened to it on the other side of that white fire. I don't think I ever found out what exactly, but Micronaut technology turned it into something similar to its counterpart here.

This Microtron isn't as advanced as the other one became. He doesn't have quite as much personality—although, for an Artificial Intelligence, he's pretty darn impressive. I wonder if the other Microtron—“my” Microtron—had organic processors. There could even have been a human brain trapped inside his casing. Not a thought I wish to dwell upon.

The inside of *this* Microtron is interesting enough. I think I'm beginning to figure out how he was able to negate gravity. One of his globes is still burnt out, but the other seems to be in working order—so, by studying one, I think I can see how to fix the other.

The lab bench is strewn with tools and components, and it looks like it might just hold everything I need.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?”

I look up with a start, shielding my eyes as the lab lights come on around me. I got so engrossed that I was hardly aware of time passing. And my dad, of course, has a habit of arriving for work early.

“I thought I made it clear the last time,” he fumes, striding toward me, “that this chamber is off limits!”

“I was just taking a look at Microtron here,” I say defensively.

“Are you completely stupid? I barely understand the technology behind that probe myself. It's not some old transistor radio you can just—”

“I worked it out for myself!” I snap, cutting him off in mid-tirade.

“You did what?” He doesn't know whether to believe me or not. He's always been aware of my gift, my way of understanding things like this—at least, I guess so, to judge by the number of times he's gone on about my “wasted intelligence.” But like he said, Microtron is way ahead of anything I've ever seen. In this timeline, anyway.

There's one way to prove my point, but I'm not sure it'll work. Still, with false confidence, I tap my new robotic friend on the shoulder. “Tell him, Mike!”

»Microtron unit reports systems 88% functional.«

I grin. That's good enough for me.

Dad scowls. “I want a full diagnostic.”

Microtron gives an answering bleep, and his processors whir again.

"I've still got a few joints to solder," I say. "And I've fixed the energy flow problem, but one of those globe things—whatever you want to call it—needs replacing."

"You're lucky you didn't electrocute yourself," Dad grumbles, "messing with things you don't understand. And we'll *all* be lucky if you've done no permanent damage to the probe!"

"Hey, weren't you listening? '88% functional.'"

"Anyone can replace a few damaged wires, Ryan. I'm more concerned with what you might have done to the antigravity unit and the central processor."

I bristle. "Okay, give me another twenty minutes and I'll get it up to ninety-four."

"I'd rather you kept your hands off Microtron altogether. And that goes for everything else in this laboratory. This isn't your personal playroom, Ryan. You can't just come in here and attack anything you feel like with a screwdriver. If you want to play Junior Scientist, I'll buy you a kit from the toy shop. But leave the real work to the experts!"

I feel my cheeks burning. "Experts?" I shoot back. "So, how come these 'experts' of yours didn't notice one of the antigravity tubes working itself loose?"

"We don't know for sure that's what happened."

"Oh, come on, Dad, it looks pretty obvious to me!"

"I checked those connections myself a dozen times over."

"But your probe still exploded!"

Dad narrows his eyes. "What exactly are you getting at?"

"Just that it wasn't me who put your precious project back two days!"

"Accidents happen, Ryan. Which is all the more reason why you shouldn't be in here. You aren't even wearing protective clothing."

"Suppose it wasn't an accident?"

"I beg your pardon?"

The accusation came out in the heat of the moment—but it made Dad blink, so I decide to run with it.

"What if it was sabotage?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he says. But he's lowered his voice and he avoids my gaze, making a show of tidying the lab bench instead. "Every member of my team is—"

"Handpicked by you and vetted by the government. I know. But that only applies to the humans, Dad."

"The Micronauts are sharing their technology with us. What possible motive could they have for sabotaging it?"

"Maybe they aren't sharing as much as you think. You know these people. You work with them every day. How much have they told you about Innerspace?"

"As I'm sure I've mentioned before, they don't have the data to—"

"I'm not talking about its molecular composition, Dad. I mean, about what life is like there! What *their* lives are like, back where they came from."

"They don't..." He searches for the words. "...socialize much."

"Not into small talk, huh? Um...so to speak."

"We discuss work, not our private lives."

"But they must have let something slip. What planet does Nova come from?"

Dad frowns. "I'm sure she must have mentioned... I don't..."

"Who rules their galaxy?"

"Now you're being childish!"

"They've released an action figure. He wears black armor with red nodules across his chest. He has stumpy little horns arranged around his helmet like a crown." And I think his name is Karza. Baron Karza. But that's not what it says on the packaging. "He's supposed to be their Emperor. He rules Innerspace with an iron fist. So, Ordaal and Nova must be working for him, right?"

"It's a toy, Ryan!" groans Dad in frustration. "Part of Delaney's line of cash-in-quick merchandise. If you want to believe his nonsense, that's up to you."

"But my point is, why lie about a thing like that? Why make up stories for the tie-in books and the backs

of the toys? People want to know the truth. They want to know who the Micronauts are, but all they get to see is what they can do in the circus ring.”

Dad shakes his head dismissively. “We’ve more important concerns right now.”

“Ordaal refused to speak to the President.”

»Self-diagnostic complete,« chirps Microtron. »Results as follows:«

“Hold on a minute,” snaps Dad. He turns back to me. “All right, so the Micronauts don’t give much away. For all I know, that’s because Ordaal has promised his exclusive life story to Roger Delaney! It doesn’t matter, Ryan. It’s not my job to interview them. We’ll send a man through the Rift soon. Then I’m sure we’ll be able to tell you everything you want to know.”

“If the Micronauts let you. They’re keeping things from us, Dad. You think they’ve been such a big help? Well, tell me this: If they’d left you alone, if they’d let you build your probe to your original design, then how long ago would it have been launched?”

I must be getting through to him, because he resorts to becoming angry again. “I’ve had enough of this!” he snaps. “This is typical of your behavior, Ryan. You dream up some cock-and-bull theory and just act on it without stopping to think! You *do* know I was dragged away from an important stage of my work yesterday to take a call from the Grand Hotel?”

I wasn’t expecting that. I don’t know how to answer.

“That’s right,” Dad goes on, “I know all about your little adventure there, you and your hippy friend. I had to confirm to the hotel manager that, yes, the young delinquent who broke into one of his rooms was my son. Can you imagine how embarrassing that was?”

Great. So, *that* phone call got through all right. “I didn’t—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Ryan. All I want from you is to be able to trust you. This is a government installation, and I can’t afford to have you running around doing whatever takes your fancy. If you can’t act like a responsible adult, then I don’t want you here!”

“You’re not serious!”

“Try me. You’re twenty years old, Ryan. I’m under no obligation to keep putting a roof over your head. Not if this is how you thank me for it.”

“Okay. Fine.” I storm out because I’ve nothing left to say. Dad’s got me dead to rights this time. About the hotel thing, that is. Not that he’d listen if I tried to explain it to him.

I’m about to slam the door when I’m brought up short by an image. My father, the great Dallas Archer, injured and helpless, staring up into the death that comes from an alien blaster. His body arching in pain as it’s consumed by flames. In contrast, I feel cold.

I look back. He’s turned away from me, hunched over Microtron. He’s probably forgotten I was ever here by now. And I’m leaving him in the hands of someone I think is a killer because I don’t know what else to do. I want to drag him out of here, but I know he won’t come. I want to tell him that I love him and I don’t want him to die, but we’ve never had the kind of relationship where we can say that sort of stuff to each other.

“Just...just be careful, won’t you?” I say to his back, but my voice sounds small.

He just grunts in response. I don’t think he even heard what I said.

I wake to a droning background voice, and I’m not sure if it said something about Angel’s Gift, or if that was a creation of my half-dreaming mind. An intermittent clacking nags at me, until I identify it as the sound of colliding pool balls. One of them drops into a pocket, rattling against wood as it rolls into the depths of the table.

My neck aches.

“Looks like Sleeping Beauty’s stirring.”

I open my eyes to find assorted members of base personnel smiling down at me.

“Not disturbing you, I hope?” grins a middle-aged man in a suit.

Oh, yeah. I came back to the recreation room, and sat in front of the television. I must have been more tired than I thought. I wonder what time it is; I’m not wearing my watch.

I *did* hear Angel's Gift mentioned. On the TV, a newsanchor is saying something about that tourist who died. Some scientist makes another oh-so-funny joke about my sleeping habits, and there's a general outbreak of giggling, which I try to tune out. I want to hear the news. I need to know what's happened. The police, I learn, are now treating the death as murder. They've released some information about the condition of the body in the hope that it will prompt witnesses to come forward. Then, the anchor moves on to an item about tensions in the Middle East, and I have to wait until she announces the time (8:45) and gives a summary of the morning's headlines so far before I can find out more.

"June Carter," she says, "the Milwaukee tourist who was found dead in Angel's Gift two nights ago, was the victim of a brutal slaying. According to police, her body was cut open and internal organs removed with almost surgical precision."

So, that's it. My worst fears confirmed.

I feel a kind of prickling dread all over my skin as I realize that, until now, I'd never fully accepted what was happening to me. Oh yes, I talked about other timelines and alien tyrants—and I was keen enough to investigate what Ordaal and Nova might be up to in *this* timeline—but I don't think I ever quite believed in an immediate threat. The Time Traveler's warnings may have been more than a dream, but they were still one step removed from reality, and I was hanging on to the faint possibility that they might mean nothing.

Now, somebody is dead. Perhaps more than one person. And I know, beyond the slightest doubt, that the Micronauts are responsible.

I'm still thinking about that when I realize that somebody's standing next to me, trying to get my attention.

"Mr. Archer. *Mr. Archer!*"

It's the admin guy who let me into the facility two days ago. He's looking down his nose at me, disapproval in his eyes, and I jump to my feet nervously when I see that he's accompanied by two cops. One of them steps forward: he's short but heavyset, with a thick black moustache.

"Ryan Archer?" he addresses me in a nasal voice.

"Um...yeah, that's right. That's me. Is something wrong?"

"The same Ryan Archer who was at the Grand Hotel in Fairfield Street yesterday?"

I nod dumbly. I can't believe this is happening.

He steps forward and grips my arm. His fingers feel like a vice, and all of a sudden I'm aware that a heavy silence has fallen in the recreation room. Somebody even turned down the volume on the TV.

Everybody is watching me.

"Mr. Archer," says the cop, "I'm arresting you for criminal trespass. You have the right to remain silent...."

Chapter

Five

I'm sitting in a small interview room at the police station. The cop who arrested me—his name is Brannigan—perches on the table in front of me, while his partner stands at the door as if I'm likely to make an escape bid. A tape recorder whirrs in the corner.

"And you never reached Ordaal's room?"

"I've already told you."

"So, tell me again."

"No. Like I said the last time and the time before, I didn't reach his room."

"That unlocked window must have been tempting."

"I didn't know he'd left his window unlocked. I never got that far."

"Are you sure about that, Mr. Archer?"

"*You* try jumping the gap between those balconies!" I suggest through clenched teeth.

I've tried to be patient, but I've been stuck here for hours. I've kept to the lie that Bill and I told the hotel manager, but I'm sick of repeating it. And I keep thinking about what might be happening outside this

room while I'm wasting time. I've come close to spilling everything, but what good would it do? Brannigan would keep me cooped up for the rest of the day while he went through my statement—and I still have no proof to offer. That's why I need to get out of here before it's too late. Too late for my dad, and too late for us all.

"I've told you everything I can!" I insist. "Look, I admit I broke into that hotel room—not Ordaal's room, the other one—so can't you just charge me and bail me?"

"All in good time, Mr. Archer. I have to compare your statement with Mr. Dempster's."

"What, you've brought Kling—I mean, Bill in here, too?"

"Wait here, please, Mr. Archer." Brannigan levers himself to his feet, and his lips curl into a cruel smile. "I'm sure this won't take long."

I wait for him and his partner to leave before I bury my head in my hands and groan.

A minute later, I hear the door opening again, and I look up hopefully. To my surprise, Mayor Roger Delaney has just walked into the room.

He glares at me, and I return the look. We don't speak. My mind races, trying to work out the reason for this unexpected visit. Then, Delaney hauls his bulk into a chair across the table from me, and we stare at each other a while longer until he says: "You must be Ryan Archer." I just nod. "And I assume you recognize me?"

"It'd be kind of hard not to." He smiles. I've flattered his ego, which isn't what I intended at all. So, spitefully, I add: "You like to get your fat face on TV, don't you?"

Delaney's nostrils flare in anger, and he visibly restrains himself from rising to the bait. "I'm here," he says curtly, "as a favor to my police force. I thought we might be able to talk reasonably about this unfortunate business. Unless you'd rather go back to the cells?"

"As a favor to the police?" I echo with a scornful laugh. "More like the other way around. That's why I'm here, isn't it? I didn't hurt anyone at the hotel, and I didn't do any damage. I doubt the manager would have taken things further. I'm here on your say-so, because you're afraid I might have found out something about your armor-plated meal ticket!"

"Whatever you think you've seen," huffs Delaney, "I can assure you—"

"So, you *are* hiding something!"

I'm beginning to realize that this could be a great opportunity. Nobody has been closer to the Micronauts than Roger Delaney. Not that I think he's capable of murder, you understand, much as I might dislike him. In fact, I reckon Ordaal chose him because his greed makes him gullible, easy to deceive and manipulate. But even he must suspect something by now.

"I didn't say that, Mr. Archer. My client values—"

"Your client?"

"I have been employed as Ordaal's publicity agent."

"Of course."

"And my client values his privacy."

"I'll bet he does."

"If you have any information that he would prefer not to be made public," says Delaney stiffly, "I am authorized to offer you a cash settlement in return for your discretion."

"You want to buy my silence?"

"What did you see in that hotel suite, Mr. Archer?"

I'm tempted to tell him, just to see the look on his face. But I know what Dad would say. Think about the consequences. Delaney would scuttle straight back to Ordaal—and what might the alien do to keep his secrets then? Maybe I should take Dad's advice for once.

"What do *you* think I saw?" I ask evasively.

"Don't play games with me, Archer! I could throw enough charges at you to keep you in this station for a month if I wanted to."

"But you couldn't stop me from getting a message out," I counter. "To the press, say."

"I'm making you a generous offer. If I were you, I'd take it while you can."

"And suppose I don't want your dirty money? Suppose I think the public has a right to know the truth

about your alien friends?"

"And what truth, exactly, would that be?" asks Delaney in a threatening tone.

I've worked out how I can do this: how I can rattle him without giving anything away. At least, I hope so. It's a gamble.

"Oh come on," I sneer. "You know as well as I do who killed that tourist." On impulse, I add, "And all the others."

Delaney's eyes widen with fear, and his skin, already white and clammy, pales further. To be honest, I'm surprised. I didn't expect to have this much effect. He knows more than I thought.

He tries to protest, but I talk over him. I have to give him the get-out clause.

"Oh, I know it's not your fault. I'm sure Ordaal didn't tell you about his little sideline, his trade in human organs. But I think you're a clever man, Mr. Delaney, and you've been around the Micronauts enough to have worked out what's going on. Maybe you can't prove it yet; maybe that's why you haven't stopped it."

He can't speak. He's gaping at me, his mouth opening and closing, like a great white whale washed up on a beach, unable to breathe.

"Because I'd hate to think," I say, "that you've been turning a blind eye. The Micronauts have made you famous. Thanks to them, you're making money like there's no tomorrow. What's the odd death compared to that, right?"

"This...this is ridiculous!" he splutters. "Ridiculous accusations..."

"Of course," I say with affected nonchalance, "if you stood up to them, you'd be the big hero. The man who saved us all from the space invaders."

Delaney recovers his composure, and his eyes darken. "I think you'd better tell me what you think you've seen, Mr. Archer," he says gruffly, "because whatever it is, I can assure you that the conclusions you've drawn from it are ludicrous, quite ludicrous."

I've taken this as far as it'll go. Time to pull back. I take a deep breath and prepare to make myself look like an idiot. "I didn't see a thing, Mr. Mayor. Like I told the police officer, I never got into Ordaal's room. But everybody knows what the Micronauts are doing."

"Everybody?" Delaney raises a suspicious eyebrow.

"Yeah, all the guys on the newsgroups. I mean, it can't be a coincidence, can it? We get visited by extraterrestrial beings, and now people are turning up with their organs missing!"

"Ah." He relaxes. I wonder if he knows how much his body language gives away. "I must apologize, Mr. Archer," he says acidly. "It appears you know nothing after all."

"It's only a matter of time," I say quietly, "before somebody *does* get into that room and sees whatever it is you're hiding there. Which side will you be on then, Mr. Mayor?"

He leaves without another word, and I slump back in my chair, satisfied. I reckon I've stirred things up a little, given Delaney something to think about. I only hope I've convinced him that I was just guessing, that I don't know anything for sure. I think I have.

Soon enough, Brannigan returns to tell me I'm free to leave. He doesn't disguise his contempt for me as he escorts me to the door.

"While I'm here," I say cheerfully, more to get a rise out of him than anything else, "how about a quote for my society's newsletter? What are the police doing about these disappearances? Have any more bodies turned up? Will Ordaal be questioned?"

"I can't talk about that particular case," he says tersely.

"Ah, so it *is* a case, then? You believe the reports—that people have gone missing?"

Brannigan's eyes flash angrily. "We have a job to do, Mr. Archer—and we don't need conspiracy-spouting nuts like you going off half-cocked and wasting our time."

"Can I quote you on that?" I ask.

He bundles me out onto the street, turns on his heel, and stomps back into the station. So, he thinks I'm a conspiracy-spouting nut. That's good. Right now, it suits me not to stand out from all the other

conspiracy-spouting nuts in town.

Speaking of which, I should have met Bill Dempster by now. At the circus.

The Micronaut circus is housed in an old theatre on Orchard Street, long derelict but recently bought by one of Delaney's close business acquaintances and hastily renovated. By the time I reach it, sprinting most of the way, the very back of a long line is disappearing through the doors, and Klingon Bill is hopping from foot to foot with impatience.

I explain where I've been, and his brow furrows in puzzlement. "They kept you at the station till now? They let me go hours ago! Hey, you heard about the tourist?" I nod. "The newsgroups are buzzing with it. I spent most of the night in that cyber-café on Rosemont Street; you know it's open twenty-four hours a day now...?"

In the foyer, we're both frisked by soldiers; I can see Bill biting back an indignant protest. There are more soldiers arranged around the stalls, and four lined up in front of the stage. They stand at ease, but they're alert for any sign of trouble, their rifles on show. Delaney, I recall, kicked up a fuss about the army presence—but he was told that, if he didn't agree to it, his show would be closed down. For once, he was forced to compromise.

Fortunately, our seats are reserved. We're in the eighth row, next to the central aisle. As tourists fidget and talk excitedly around us, Bill pores over his glossy, eight-page program. I didn't have time to buy one, and they were overpriced anyway. I look over his shoulder at a two-line bio for the purple, four-armed guy. It doesn't say much, but it does identify him as Ganam Jafain. Yeah, that sounds right. An electric hush settles over the auditorium as the lights dim. A spotlight picks out a stocky figure as he steps onto the stage in front of the red velvet curtains. I groan.

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages," recites Mayor Delaney, "on behalf of the people of Angel's Gift and of Innerspace, I bid you welcome to the Small Top!" He grins as his weak pun is met by delighted applause.

Mercifully, though, it's a short introduction. Delaney tells us how popular this particular circus troupe is in Innerspace, and how privileged we are that they have agreed to perform for us. He assures us that we are about to witness incredible feats performed by living beings the likes of which have never been seen on this world before. And then he steps aside, and the audience baits its collective breath as the curtain rises. And, for the next two hours (not counting a half-hour break at the midway point), I'm as transfixed as anybody else.

The Micronauts' idea of a circus is surprisingly similar to our own. It involves high-wire acts, trapeze artists and slapstick routines, all performed at a chaotic pace while loudspeakers blast out high-energy music that is decidedly American. None of the performers speak, except to shout the odd cue to each other in their alien language. It seems odd that a translator device couldn't be spared even for their ringmaster.

To be honest, I don't know how impressed to be. The performance is stunning, yeah—sometimes, there's so much going on that I hardly know which part of the stage to look at—but how much of it is down to skill and training, and how much simply to biology? Take Ganam Jafain, for example. He spins and rolls with confident grace as he flies between four trapezes, and he has no safety net. He seems almost able to defy gravity—but then, who's to say that he can't? Several of his colleagues can fly, so why not him? And I might have more respect for the tamer's courage if I could be sure that her ferocious-looking pet—a giant lobster creature with huge snapping pincers, which the program identifies as Lobros (somebody's idea of a joke?)—wasn't an intelligent being just putting on an act for the natives.

Or am I being too cynical? It's as if, where the Micronauts are concerned, I can't help but look for evidence of deception. But Delaney, for once, was right: What makes the circus so mesmerizing isn't the stunts themselves, it's the sheer variety of life on show. Seeing sludge creatures, intelligent chimpanzees, and blue elephants on a poster is one thing; seeing them in the flesh and fur, not twenty feet from where I'm sitting, is another altogether.

I become so engrossed that, before I know it, the show's over. The curtain comes down between me and Jafain—the performer I know from another life as Knavé—and I feel a pang of panic as I realize that I haven't prepared for this moment. As I join in the standing ovation, I look around desperately, but every possible route backstage is blocked by men in uniform. And what would I do if I could reach Knavé anyway? He wouldn't recognize me. And I can't even speak his language.

People are beginning to file out of the auditorium: In a minute or two, I'll be back outside, and I won't have achieved anything. Bill mutters something in my ear—a half-baked idea about bluffing our way past one of the guards by pretending to be theatrical agents sent by Delaney. I'm almost tempted to try it, even though I'm sure it won't work. But I shake my head.

"We'd only be drawing more attention to ourselves," I say. "And after what happened this morning, I don't think it's safe to do that."

"But we've got to do *something!*"

"We will. Soon. But we need to think about it carefully. We need a plan." Hey, listen to me. Dad would be proud!

The truth is, though, I've already got something in mind. It's risky, and it needs work, but it's a start. And it doesn't involve Bill Dempster. This is my fight: I've already let him get far too involved. He doesn't appreciate the danger he could be in.

No. That's not quite true, either. I don't want Bill tagging along because he'd slow me down, like he slowed me down at the hotel yesterday.

Out on the sidewalk, I make a vague excuse about needing to get back to the facility, and we arrange to meet again tomorrow. Saturday. Bill suggests a new snack bar called—get this—Dinnerspace. I just nod and grunt, only half listening to him.

I'm thinking about the layout of the theatre. I'm fixing it in my memory—because I intend to come back here later. Without Klingon Bill.

But not alone.

The research facility. Some time after dinner.

I'm walking through the maze of corridors again, trying out a fifth route from the entrance to the main chamber. Unfortunately, this one takes me past too many admin offices, and too many people look up from their desks as I pass their windows. So far, Route #3 has been the best. The quietest.

I should be in my room, resting. And thinking. But I can't settle. I'm too full of nervous energy. And it pays to prepare, right? Even the smallest details. Right. So, now I know how to get out of the dome without being seen by more people than is absolutely necessary. But I still don't know how I'm gonna get into the theatre. Unless I get a lucky break.

But suddenly, I hear voices and footsteps ahead of me, and my heart leaps into my throat as I realize that my luck could be in after all.

It's a happy, joking group of eight people who round the corner ahead of me. Some of them are wearing white coats, and I recognize most of their faces. They've come from the lab.

As I draw level with them, a tall, gangly man with fair curly hair and huge round glasses looks my way. He must have noticed me in the lab yesterday. Or seen me in the recreation room this morning.

"Hey," he says, "you're Dallas Archer's kid, aren't you?"

"Um...yeah, that's right."

"If you're looking for him, best try his room. He left the lab ten minutes ago."

"He did?" I try to hide my mounting excitement behind a joke. "What happened? Fire? Flood? Alien invasion?" Actually, that last bit's not so funny.

The tall guy grins. "We managed to tear him away from his work for the night. We're headed into town for a drink. Your dad's just getting changed. So, if you do see him..."

"I get the idea. Don't give him an excuse to back out, right?"

"Right. Hey, we've got you to thank for this, you know."

"You have?" I ask, puzzled.

“The Microtron probe’s all ready to roll, and the boss says that’s down to you.”

“He does? I mean, he really said that?”

“Are you kidding?” puts in a young woman with long red hair. “You saved us half a day’s work. We’ll be able to launch tomorrow morning. Why do you think we’re celebrating?”

“Looks like you’re a chip off the old block,” says the tall guy. “Hey, why don’t you come out with us? You’ve earned a few drinks, I reckon.” The others murmur in agreement, but I decline politely, explaining that I’ve made plans to meet a friend. Which is true, in a way.

I spend the next few minutes in breathless activity. I find the lab doors locked, and I can’t hear anybody inside. So, I take the winding steps up to my room two at a time—and, once there, I haul my backpack and the smaller of my two suitcases out of the wardrobe and empty them onto the floor. I check that the corridor’s empty before I step out into it. Dad’s room is only three doors down, and I could do without running into him right now.

I take my “quiet route” back to the lab. I only pass one woman, and she doesn’t even look at me. If she wonders at all why I’m hauling my luggage around, she doesn’t show it.

I swipe my keycard through the reader and hurry into the lab. It’s in semi-darkness, like it was this morning. I close the doors behind me and lean against them, weak with relief. But I’ve only accomplished the first part of my task. I’ve a long way to go yet.

Microtron is sitting on the lab bench where I left him this morning. He’s in standby mode, his “chin” resting on his chest as if he’s sleeping. Dad’s people have put him back together—which is a pity, because now I’ll have to take him apart again.

Did Dad really say that? Did he really tell all those people that I fixed his probe? Wow!

Microtron’s arms and head fit neatly into my suitcase, but packing the rest of him into the backpack is a lot harder. It’s a struggle to get the straps fastened. And I have to bend the probe’s antenna almost into a loop; I can only hope I haven’t damaged it too badly. I drop a screwdriver into my jacket pocket in case I need it later.

The wheels, I’ll have to leave behind. Microtron will have to rely on his antigravity unit for mobility: It’ll drain his power faster, but it’ll also make him quieter. I heft the backpack onto my shoulders and pick up the case. They aren’t as heavy as I’d thought, but Microtron’s bulky torso pushes uncomfortably against my spine.

As I turn away from the lab bench, my legs seize up. This is it. Once I leave this room, I’ll be committed. No turning back. I think about what Dad will say if something goes wrong, if I can’t get his probe back before he finds it gone. I’ll be out of the research facility for sure. His bosses might even press charges against me. I’m stealing government secrets here.

I can feel the presence of the Time Traveler. He thinks I’m doing the right thing. I’m not sure how much comfort to take from that.

But, hey, there’s a time for thinking things through and a time for just doing what feels right. And if I don’t do this now, I won’t get another chance. This time tomorrow, Microtron will be in another universe—and I need him to translate the circus performers’ language.

So, I take that first step toward the door.

And I’m brought up short by a harsh voice at my shoulder: “*Si lo ei? Syn hi ei cyn zolo?*”

I spin around and jump back at the same time, the weight in my backpack almost overbalancing me. The voice came from one of Dad’s armored little helpers. She’s hovering in front of my nose, aiming some kind of weird gun at me.

Oh, God, she’s *aiming a gun at me!*

It’s strapped to her lower arm, running all the way to her elbow. Its upper surface is curved and reflective; the weapon looks like it could double as a shield. And I wonder: Is this how it ends? So suddenly? For all the Time Traveler’s warnings, am I destined to become spare parts for some mad alien scientist?

I think about leaping for cover, but I doubt if I could move fast enough. To the Micronaut, my gigan-tic

body must make for an unmissable target.

And she's not alone. "*Ei lo mallazo. Hi zin ne ni tibo,*" comes another voice. I look down to find three more armed women covering me from the bench.

I curse myself for letting them sneak up on me. Okay, I was distracted, and they're small and—I'm beginning to realize—well trained, but I knew they were in here somewhere. Most likely in the *Sunrunner*. I should have been ready for something like this.

"*Syn hi ei cyn zolo?*" demands the first woman again, louder this time, stressing each syllable as if that might make me understand her.

I raise my free hand to show that I don't want any trouble. "I'm Ryan Archer," I try to explain, but I don't suppose she knows what I'm saying either. I point to myself and repeat my name slowly. "My father is Dallas Archer. You know him, right? Dallas...Archer..."

"*Zo hylom nysar ni am em uv co lo mutjo,*" snarls one of the women on the bench.

"*No majuh wuyn gyzin azolmy am,*" one of her colleagues tells her in a calmer tone, "*mi zo nurm co gyzin azolomy zut.*"

"He sent me to fetch the probe for him. He wants Microtron." I lift my case and point to it, then indicate the door, then turn back to the hovering woman with a hopeful expression.

She hesitates for a moment. Then, a thin-lipped smile forms beneath her opaque hood. "*Nyro un,*" she says. "*Sun al formmuz.*" And to my relief, she lowers her weapon arm and the other Micronauts follow suit, turning away from me as if I don't exist any more.

I don't stop to question my good fortune. I just get out of there as fast as I can.

Five minutes later, out on the cold, dark hillside, I can hardly believe I've made it this far.

I managed to get out of the dome unseen, but there was no way of avoiding the sentries outside. I made small talk to one of them as he opened the gate for me, and I just prayed that my bags wouldn't make him suspicious. I could feel the canvas of my backpack straining to tear itself open, and I had a nightmare vision of it doing just that, of Microtron's torso plopping out onto the grass at the soldier's feet.

I take a circuitous route down to the village—I don't want to meet Dad and his team on their way back—and I think about what happened in the lab. The Micronauts, I'm sure, will tell Azura Nova what they saw—and Nova will almost certainly tell Dad. But I can deal with that tomorrow. By which time, hopefully, I'll have the evidence I need to make him understand why I had to do this. More worrying is the thought that Nova might guess what I wanted with Microtron, and from that work out where I'm going. But then, why should she?

And it occurs to me, too, that, if my theory is correct and the Micronauts don't want the probe to be launched, then I've done them a service by taking it. Even if I return it tonight, they've got a ready-made patsy to take the blame for any damage they might do to it. Or might have done already. Damn it, I should have checked the unit before I disassembled it. What if, when I put Microtron back together, I find that I've just been carrying around so much junk?

Maybe I should do that now. But I don't have time.

The circus troupe began their evening performance at eight o'clock. It's almost quarter past nine when I reach the theatre—and, just like it was this afternoon, the foyer is packed during the interval. So much so that, despite the cold weather, a couple of doors have been opened to let in air, and a few people have spilled out onto the steps. A few more have come out to smoke: they stand huddled over the lights of their cigarettes. I only hope that, like this afternoon, nobody thinks to check their tickets again when they go back in.

I shrug off my backpack and carry it in my left hand, the suitcase in my right. Then I stride into the building and try to lose myself in the crowd. It isn't easy. I can keep away from the soldiers because I know where they're stationed, but I can't let them see my bags, either—they might assume they were searched an hour ago, but they might not. So, I hold them low, but people keep bumping their shins on Microtron's solid form and mouthing indignant protests and struggling to get out of my way. I feel like everybody must be looking at me.

Through some miracle, I make it upstairs and reach the men's restroom without being challenged. Then I have to line up for agonizing long minutes until, at last, I can get into a stall, drop my bags, close the door, and slam the bolt home gratefully.

A few seconds later, the bell sounds for the start of the second act—and, over the next few minutes, the restroom slowly empties. I'm alone now.

I climb up onto the toilet seat, and from there to the top of the stall. Balancing on the flimsy partition, I can reach up to the ceiling—which, as I saw this afternoon, is comprised of cheap white polystyrene tiles resting in a wooden framework. When Delaney's friend refurbished this place, he didn't spend any more money than he had to. I push one of the panels—and, to my delight, it comes loose and disappears into a narrow roof space.

My luck's holding out.

It's dark up here, and the air is stale. Dust tickles my nose, and I have to stifle a sneeze. The show is over, and there are voices again in the restroom beneath me. Tourists, still buzzing, talking about the marvels they've just seen. If they ever feared our alien visitors at all, then those fears have been swept aside for tonight. I envy them their carefree ignorance.

I threw my bags up here and climbed after them fifteen minutes ago. The reassembled—and, thank God, functional—Microtron floated up under his own power. There isn't room to stand, so I'm lying on my stomach, trying to keep still and keep my weight evenly distributed across the flimsy tiles. I feel as if I've been lying like this forever, and I ache to stretch my muscles. I knew this part would be difficult—I'm not the most patient person in the world. But, even after the voices have receded and the restroom door has banged shut behind them, I grit my teeth and resolve to stay here for as much longer as I can stand.

Eventually, I hear the door opening again, and the slow, measured footsteps of a solitary soldier come to check that everybody has left. Then the click of a light switch, the door again, and silence. Thick, black, intimidating silence, broken only by the sound of my own rasping breaths.

And the sudden loud chirp of my mobile phone.

I start, and almost bang my head on the low roof. I pull the phone out of my pocket, fumble with it in the darkness and finally turn it off.

The next few minutes are unbearable. I hear phantom sounds of footsteps and doors opening, but nobody comes to investigate.

My heartbeat slows to normal, and silence envelops me again.

Just before 11:30, I lower myself down into the restroom, and pause to rub life back into my numb limbs and massage my stiff neck. The lights are out, but Microtron illuminates my path with a helpful light beam from his chest. I ask him to turn it off as I ease the door open. But he can't do anything about the yellow glow from his antigravity globes; maybe I should have brought his wheels after all.

The theatre foyer is half-lit in dim orange. Standing at the top of the stairs that lead down to it, I can see to the main doors—and, through their glass, the shapes of two soldiers silhouetted by streetlights. There'll be two more in the back. The circus performers rarely leave the building, therefore it's guarded twenty-four hours a day. If I remember right, though, Delaney insisted that the sentries stay outside when the theatre is closed. The Micronauts, he said, need their privacy.

The auditorium is in pitch darkness, and I need Microtron's guiding light again. The door that must lead to the backstage area is secured by heavy bolts on the other side. My credit card won't get me through this one, and I don't want to use force unless I absolutely have to. I scramble up onto the stage instead, and slip behind the red curtain.

I pick my way through the upturned barrels and hanging ropes that have been left in place for the next performance. At the rear of the stage, a scenery flat has been painted with alien stars and planets; from behind it, a short flight of steps leads down into a narrow corridor. It runs the length of the stage before making a sharp turn to the right. I creep along it, and Microtron hovers at chest height behind me. Dust

mites dance in his light beam.

There are four doors in the right-hand wall, each displaying a faded blue star. Dressing rooms. Light bleeds out from beneath the doors, and I think I hear quiet voices like the murmuring of a distant crowd. Each of the doors has been fitted with a shiny new padlock and chain on this side. I think I've found the circus performers—but it hadn't occurred to me that they might be prisoners.

The padlock on the last door is unlocked. I put my ear to the wood, but my own heartbeat thunders through my skull and drowns out everything else. I can't even hear the voices now, and I can't tell which room they were coming from.

I'm paralyzed by indecision. The unlocked door is tempting, almost mesmerizing. I long to open it, to see what's behind it. But logic tells me that, if the performers *are* prisoners, then I won't find them in here. More likely, it's some sort of guardroom. And I don't want to burst in on their jailers, whoever they might be.

I creep back to the first door instead, and inspect its padlock. I remember the screwdriver in my pocket, and I jam it into the keyhole. Just like in the hotel yesterday, it only takes me a few seconds to work out how to trip the mechanism. The rattle of the chain as I unthread it and lay it to one side sounds shockingly loud.

"I think you'd better stand back, pal," I whisper to Microtron. He gives a soft answering bleep and moves behind me. Holding my breath, I reach for the doorknob with a trembling hand. I run through my escape route in my head as I turn the knob slowly and open the door, just a crack. Just far enough to be able to put my head around it.

And, for about ten seconds, I just stand and stare.

The four doors all lead to the same place. The walls that once divided the dressing rooms have been knocked through to create one large, rectangular and well-lit area. In its center, taking up most of the floor space, about a dozen tables have been pushed together. And atop those tables is something that, at first sight, looks like a collection of toy trucks. Until I realize that they're real. Circus trailers, less than eighteen inches high and about three feet long. I count eighteen of them, arranged haphazardly around a small open circle.

And standing at the other end of the table is Ordaal's armor.

I know it's empty this time, because the faceplate hatch gapes open. But its owner must be in this room somewhere. On the table, I suppose. That's why the end door was unlocked: he's come here to visit his captives.

I can see small figures moving between the trailers. A group of six or seven has congregated in the central circle, and they're talking in low voices. Suddenly aware of the danger I'm in, I drop beneath the level of the table. The last thing I want is for Ordaal to glance up and see my face looming over him.

I have to get out of here. I can hide with Microtron back on the stage, behind the scenery, until Ordaal has left. Then we can try to contact Knave.

But even as I make that decision, a light blazes on in the corridor. And I hear something. Footsteps.

I can't move. It's as if the light has frozen me. I'm crouched in the doorway, blinking, feeling exposed. And those footsteps are getting louder. They're coming from around the far corner, past the fourth dressing room door.

And they're coming this way.

Chapter

Six

A shadow falls across the corner of the corridor, and some instinct propels me into action.

I grab hold of Microtron—with his antigravity unit activated, he has an effective weight of zero—and throw myself sideways through the dressing room door, reaching up to quickly ease it shut behind me.

The footsteps have entered the corridor now—I can hear them on the other side of the wall. I think about the padlock and chain lying on the floor out there, and can only hope they're not too noticeable.

Then the footsteps stop, and our new arrival rattles the doorknob at the far end of the row. He's coming in here!

I scramble beneath the tables just in time. A man bustles into the room: From down here, I can only see his tree trunk legs wrapped in a gray suit, but I think I recognize them.

"Ordaal!" he bellows. Oh, yes, I know that voice. Roger Delaney. "*Ordaal!*"

A fierce crack reverberates through the wood above me, making the circus trailers rattle. I think Delaney has just driven a fist into the nearest table. "I've got something to say to you, damn it!" Even when the Mayor's angry, there's a helpless whine in his voice that makes him sound like a petulant child.

"*Syn hi ei cyn zic, ei ewlybnuz mutjoniz?*" Now *that* sounds angry. The voice comes from the tabletop. It sounds...well, smaller than usual, but I recognize it as Ordaal's. Which is odd, because I always thought his mechanical tone was a product of his armor's translation and amplification systems, but he sounds just the same when he's not wearing it. I wish I could see him, see what he really looks like.

"You know I don't understand your alien gibberish," Delaney fumes. "Get up here, can't you? We need to talk."

To my surprise, Ordaal's armor jerks into action. Its knees bend slightly, and it raises a hand above the table level, out of my sight. A moment later, it straightens up again. Its movements are less fluid than usual; I think Ordaal is controlling it remotely. In fact, it's my guess that he's just stepped onto its giant hand and been lifted up to its cockpit.

My theory is supported as the armor turns to Delaney, a more fluid motion this time, and Ordaal's voice rings out again, louder and from a much higher point. "What is so important that we have to discuss it here?" he asks tartly.

"You've done it again, haven't you?" Delaney's voice, in contrast, sounds smaller now.

Belatedly, it occurs to me that this could be the evidence I need. I mime frantically at Microtron, mouthing the words "Record this!" I think I've got through to him, but I can't be sure: his blank face is forever impassive, and I shush him urgently before he can give me any kind of audible acknowledgement. "I don't believe I have done anything untoward, Roger," says Ordaal, somehow managing to sound both reasonable and sinister at the same time.

"You...you...you said you'd put a stop to it!" splutters Delaney. "You said there'd be no more..." He swallows nervously. "No more deaths."

A pause. Then Ordaal says, "Am I to assume that another body has been found?" My stomach tightens.

"No. Not this time. But you let those creatures out again, didn't you? They attacked somebody else. And they were seen, Ordaal. *They were seen!*"

"Calm down, Roger. Who saw them? How many people?"

"Just...j-just one. Well...two, including their victim. He survived."

Ordaal pushes Delaney aside and starts to pace fretfully. Fortunately, he can't get far enough from the tables to see beneath them without stooping. "You were right, Roger," he considers. "We *do* need to talk. We need to discuss how we are going to put this right."

Delaney is starting to sound hysterical. "We *can't* put it right, Ordaal! The victim went to the police. He made a statement. He's under police guard now, in the hospital."

"Then use your influence. Make sure they don't believe him."

"It's not just his word this time. There'll be forensic evidence. I can't—"

"Deal with it, Roger!" snaps Ordaal. "The witness, you can leave to me."

"No."

This time, the silence is much longer and colder. Then: "I think my translator must have malfunctioned, Roger. I'm sure you can't just have refused to honor your debt to me."

"I said I...I can't...my position...I can't have anything to do with..."

Ordaal raises his voice. "You owe me, Roger. Before I came to this world of yours, you were nobody. The ineffectual ruler of a forgotten town on an insignificant speck of dirt. Now, you have fame. You have fortune."

"You...you've done a lot for me, I know... but... but..."

"And now, Roger, I want something in return. I don't think that's unreasonable."

“But you didn’t tell me...when you first came here...you didn’t say...”

“It’s a simple enough transaction, Roger. You have used us to enrich yourself. Your scientists have benefited from our technology. All we ask in return is a few paltry organs.”

“You’re talking about murder!”

“Your world is overpopulated. It has fresh bodies to spare. With the secrets we have shown you, your race will be able to reach the stars. Is that not worth a few lost lives?”

“If you’d told me...I’d never have...I couldn’t have...” Delaney chokes on his words. He’s almost crying. But he’s doing his best to stand up to this armored monster. I’m almost impressed. I wonder if this has anything to do with our chat this morning.

“It’s too late to plead ignorance,” says Ordaal. “The nature of our deal was made clear to you some time ago.”

“Not at first!” splutters Delaney. “Only after I saw that...that poor woman...”

“And we agreed not to let that unfortunate incident jeopardize what we have achieved.”

“You said...you said it wouldn’t happen again!”

“I said what was necessary to keep your conscience from troubling you.”

“I...I shouldn’t have let you...I should have gone to the police the first time. I can’t...can’t turn a blind eye again. I won’t let you...”

Suddenly, Ordaal’s voice is whip-crack harsh. “My people have weapons such as you have never dreamed of, Roger. Reveal what you know, and this town will be awash with blood by dawn! And when the dust has settled and the bodies are counted, I will be long gone—while you will be left to answer for your role in this affair. You will rot for the rest of your life in a human jail. Tell me, who will gain from that scenario? Is that really what you want?”

Delaney is taken aback by the verbal assault. Several seconds pass before he can speak at all, and then he can only stammer weakly. “You...you can’t kill again. Tell me there’ll be no more deaths.

Please...please, Ordaal...no more...”

“It will all be over soon.” Ordaal sounds calm again, his voice almost soothing. “Your scientists are almost ready to enter the Rift; Nova cannot delay them for much longer. Before that happens, my colleagues and I will leave Earth, and close the gateway behind us. You will never see us again. You can blame the interference of your government for our sudden departure, and live happily off your newfound wealth.”

“How...how many more?”

“You should not concern yourself with such details.”

“I need to know. Damn it, Ordaal, I need to know!”

Ordaal pauses before answering softly. “The witness must die. You do know that, don’t you, Roger? He could expose us.” He waits for an answer. So do I. But Delaney only shuffles his feet. He says nothing.

Ordaal continues. “And the Archer boy.”

And my stomach does a double somersault.

“I spoke to him,” protests Delaney. “He knows nothing.”

“We cannot take that chance!”

“He never got into your room. Even if he had, what could he have seen?”

“Enough. He could have seen enough.”

“He’s staying at the research facility. His father is the head of the scientific team there. He’s not like the others, Ordaal. He’ll be missed.”

“I am interested in this human,” growls Ordaal. “His bio-aura was analyzed by members of Nova’s squadron this evening. There is something different about him. Something that connects him to my dimension.”

“How? How is that possible?”

“I don’t know. But I would like to find out before I recycle him for spare parts.”

Delaney turns away from Ordaal and walks around the tables. I think he just wants to get some distance from his so-called ally—but his path brings him uncomfortably closer to where I’m hiding. Fortunately, before he gets halfway across the room, he turns back.

"I won't let you do this," he says with unexpected defiance. But he can't keep the tremble out of his voice. "I can't stand back and..." He falters, but gathers himself. "This has to end, Ordaal."

Ordaal stomps menacingly after him. "You can't stop it, Roger. It's too late."

"What...what do you mean?"

"Nova has probably dealt with the boy already. She is extremely efficient."

A cold sweat breaks out on my face. Dangerous as my current position is, I'm suddenly very, very glad that I chose tonight to get out of the research facility.

Delaney lets out an anguished moan. "I can't...I'm sorry, Ordaal, I can't. I can't risk...I can't cover for you anymore. I'm going to have to ask you to...you've got to leave. All of you. Get off this world. You've got what you came for. Go. Just...please, just go."

"Perhaps I have not made myself entirely clear to you," says Ordaal quietly. And he moves closer to Delaney with slow, measured strides.

And he hits him: A vicious swipe of a metal-gauntleted hand that lands across his cheek. Delaney is flung back against the wall, gasping in pain and surprise. The next blow, I can see from my vantage point:

Ordaal drives his fist into the Mayor's guts, and Delaney crumples, sliding to the floor.

I can see his face now, pale and bloodied, and the only reason he hasn't yet seen me is that he's staring up at Ordaal with abject terror in his glistening eyes. The alien stands over him, planting his feet on each side of the Mayor's corpulent form. I look for a better place to hide, but there is nowhere. I can only hold my breath, keep stock still, and pray.

"We have given much to your world," snarls Ordaal, "and the price is not yet paid. Break our agreement, Delaney, and I will break you. Am I making myself clear?"

Delaney just nods dumbly, and Ordaal steps away from him, apparently satisfied. "It would be a shame for you to lose your nerve now, Roger," he says, sounding genial again. "You are so close to achieving everything you have ever wanted. A few more days, that is all."

But the Mayor isn't listening to him any more.

He's looking at me. Right at me.

I stare back at him, wide-eyed, shaking my head as if I can dissuade him from revealing me. He argued for my life a moment ago, after all. But that was before he knew what I knew. Before I became the only human being alive who could blow the whistle on him.

"O-Ordaal," he stammers, pointing at me with a shaking hand. "There's...he's...Archer..." His voice is a deathly whisper. If I'm going to run for it, it's got to be now. Before Ordaal realizes what Delaney is trying to say. While I can still surprise him.

I scramble out from beneath the tables and lunge for the door I came in by. I fumble with the doorknob, losing a vital half-second. With an explosive *chuff*, a wave of intense heat passes over me and I think, *This is it, I was too slow. I'm dead.*

But then Ordaal yells, "You fool, Delaney! Get out of my way!" And I see that the Mayor has tried to climb to his feet in the alien's path, and knocked him off-balance, sending his shot astray.

So, there *are* weapons in that armor. His entire right fist has opened up like a flower to reveal a gun barrel the size of a cannon. The wall behind my head is scorched and peeling. I only caught the periphery of the blast, and I feel as if I've been left out in the sun for a week.

I let out a scream that's one part defiance and three parts terror as I hurl myself out of that room headfirst. I'm almost surprised to find myself alive in the cool, dark corridor, and I need a second to catch my breath and to let my eyes adjust to the gloom again, but I won't get it.

I know there's a back door to this place, but it must be at the far end of the corridor, past the other dressing room doors, and I can't reach it without giving Ordaal the chance to cut me off. That leaves me with just one way to go. Microtron is already halfway up the steps to the stage. Smart little 'bot. I stumble after him.

The stage seems darker than it was before; I can hardly see my hand in front of my face. Still, I don't ask Microtron to shine his chest light, for some vague fear of pinpointing my position. I rely on the dim glow of his antigravity globes to steer me through the various obstructions, and out through the red curtains at last.

I don't know where Ordaal is. I can hear his heavy metal footsteps, but the acoustics of this old building make them sound as if they're coming from all around me.

I climb down into the auditorium—forcing myself to take care because a busted leg would be the last thing I need at this point—and set off at a run along the central aisle. But something pulls me up short. Some sixth sense, some survival instinct, maybe some buried memory of combat training on another world. Whatever it is, it makes me feel as if all the hairs on my neck are standing on end. Without knowing why, I turn and race back the way I came. I half-leap, half climb up onto the stage again. And, even as I do so, the bolted door beside it explodes. The wood flies from the hinges in about a hundred pieces. And Ordaal strides through the debris in a haze of smoke, his weapon arm raised. “Surrender yourself, Archer!” he bellows. “It will be less painful for you.”

Right now, I'm not thinking about getting hurt. I'm thinking about getting dead—and my pursuer, I note, isn't making any promises on that score. I duck behind the curtains and make the perilous journey across the stage again, hitting my knees three times on the upturned barrels in my haste. I realize that I've lost Microtron. Part of me wants to go back for him, and I have to remind myself that he's not really alive; he can't die like I can.

Then, a light stabs out from behind me, and for a moment I think the little guy's found me again, but the beam is too wide and too strong. I had hoped it would take Ordaal some time to haul his cumbersome battle suit up here after me—but no such luck.

I almost run into the black-painted scenery flat, but I feel my way around it and give it a good push from behind. I'm clattering down the steps almost before it begins to topple, and an almighty crash follows me down the back corridor. I'm just sorry the flat wasn't made from heavier wood: it should delay Ordaal, but not for long.

The corridor is partially lit (two of the dressing room doors are still open), and I make good time along it. Until a shape appears in the shadows at the corner ahead of me. Light glints off a golden helmet, and my heart sinks into my boots. Then I realize that I'm looking at Microtron, hovering at head height as usual. He must have flown past Ordaal and through the shattered backstage door.

»I have found a way out,« he reports matter-of-factly as I get closer to him. »Follow me, please.« I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Smart little 'bot.

Then something cannons into my side, and knocks me into the wall. I feel like I've been hit by a giant marshmallow. I forgot about Delaney!

“What do you think you're doing?” I splutter.

He's hardly an expert fighter—in fact, he's hardly fighting at all, just thrashing his arms around. His face is scarlet, his eyes tightly closed—but he's keeping me pinned by his bulk alone. And he's calling out, in a desperately high-pitched voice, “Ordaal! Ordaal!”

I tear his clammy hands away from my throat and try to wriggle out from beneath him. “He'll kill me, Delaney. You know he'll kill me. And you'll be responsible!” He doesn't want to hear me. Microtron is buzzing around him, and suddenly the probe raises his pincer-like hands and barges into the Mayor's shoulder. Without much effect, unfortunately.

I can see Ordaal. He's just stepped into the corridor.

“Microtron—go!” I yell. “Go back to the facility, and...and avoid Nova and the other Micronauts, but...” But what? “Find Dad, and tell him everything. He'll know what to do.”

Ordaal raises his weapon arm, but I manage to twist around so that Delaney's between him and me. He fires anyway.

I see the telltale flash in the gun barrel just in time. Delaney's off balance, and I take advantage of that to throw us both around the corner as the air behind us combusts. We crash to the floor, but at least I get a soft landing.

My sparring partner lies under me, winded, his eyes and mouth wide open with shock. I guess he can't believe that Ordaal just tried to shoot through him to get to me. It's certainly knocked the fight out of him. He doesn't try to resist as I untangle myself from him.

I catch up to Microtron at the back door. Delaney must have come in this way, because it's unlocked. I barrel through it, out into a narrow alleyway, and only then do I remember that the army has this place

guarded. The two soldiers—a man and a woman—weren't expecting an intruder to come *out* of the building, and I get past them while they stand surprised. But I don't get far.

"Hold it right there, mister!" snaps the woman, and I turn to find myself staring down two rifle barrels. "And put those hands where I can see them!"

The man has just noticed Microtron, and he takes a wary step back from him and jerks his rifle up to cover him. "What the hell is that?"

"Don't shoot him—he's a friend," I gasp, keeping my hands above my head. I'm breathless, barely able to speak, and my eyes flick toward the doorway. I've got a few seconds at most before Ordaal appears again. Or Delaney. And who are these guys gonna believe then? "And he's recorded something you really ought to hear," I blurt out. "Mike?"

Microtron needs no further prompting. Something whirrs inside his head, and Delaney's whimpering voice is played back, tinny but unmistakable. »You...you can't kill again. Tell me there'll be no more deaths. Please...please, Ordaal...no more...«

The female soldier is still looking astounded when she's engulfed in a ball of flame.

I didn't even have time to yell a warning. She collapses, a charcoal-blackened corpse, and her colleague spins around and fires repeatedly into Ordaal's chest. The bullets bounce off, and I flinch as one of them whizzes past my ear. The soldier backs away, still firing until his magazine is empty, but Ordaal bears down upon him like an oncoming tank. With surprising speed, he reaches out and grips the soldier's head in both hands.

I should have run by now, but I feel responsible for this. This slaughter is my fault!

So, I fling myself at Ordaal. I can hardly believe what I'm doing, but I've got hold of his right arm, and I'm trying to wrench it away from his victim and keep that deadly blaster pointed away from me. I last about a second. He shrugs me away with about as much effort as it would take to shrug off a coat, spinning me into the wall. Then he twists the soldier's head in his hands, and a resounding crack makes me wince. I've nothing to stay for anymore, but it's too late to run. I try anyway—what have I got to lose?

I hear the explosive percussion of Ordaal's blaster, and I don't want to look around. I don't to see my death coming, but I can't help myself.

For one terrible, freeze-frame instant, I'm staring into a ball of flame.

Then something blocks it out, and there's a terrible shriek of rending metal. I'm showered in hot shrapnel. Microtron! The little guy got in the way of the blast. He sacrificed himself to save me, and now his burnt-out, half-melted components are strewn across the alleyway. Oh, God...

I can't move. None of this feels real. I watch in disbelief as Ordaal aims his blaster arm again. Delaney staggers out of the theatre beside him, and gags at the sight of the dead soldiers. The other two guards, the ones from the front entrance, appear behind them both, take in the situation, and jump to the logical but wrong conclusion.

A voice inside my head is screaming at me to move, not to let Microtron's sacrifice be in vain. I start to run again, even as one of the soldiers barks after me, "Stop or I shoot!"

I don't stop. He shoots.

His bullet ricochets off the brick wall beside me as I round the corner of the building. I'm safe for now, but I can hear footsteps coming after me.

I've never run so hard in my life before. My heart is straining to get out of my ribcage, and the ground rolls so fast beneath my feet that I don't know how I'm keeping my balance. I race across the street and take the nearest corner, and the first one after that. I don't stop until I've made a dozen more turns, until long after the sounds of pursuit have ceased. Then I collapse into a heap against the crumbling side wall of somebody's front garden in a short cul-de-sac where the streetlights don't work. I press my head into my knees and take great heaving breaths that make my throat and chest feel like they're being rubbed with sandpaper.

I start to calm down, start to breathe normally. The whirlwind of thoughts in my head subsides a little, and I can think straight again. Which doesn't feel like a good thing, because it's only now that the full gravity of my situation settles upon my shoulders.

I've lost Microtron. And I know he was only a machine, but I feel as if a friend has been gunned down in front of me. I console myself with the thought that we can rebuild him. But I can't get back the information that was stored inside him: The recording of Ordaal and Delaney's conversation. After all I've been through tonight, I'm right back where I started. Sure, I've had my suspicions confirmed, but I've still got no solid evidence to back me up. And right now, Delaney's probably blaming me for the deaths of those two soldiers.

Oh, jeez—if that's true, I can't go back to the research facility!

I couldn't have gone there, anyway. Azura Nova and her fliers are waiting for me. How could I have forgotten about them? I roll my head back against the garden wall and let out a groan of despair. An icy panic is rising in my stomach.

No. Stay calm. Think about this.

I need help. I've tried doing this alone, and I almost got myself killed. Ordaal won't rest until he finds me. I can't stay out in the open all night. And if I go to the police, Delaney will find some excuse to have them lock me up in a cell again, where anyone can get to me. Anyone small enough to fit through the bars, that is.

The army. They'll have arrived at the scene by now. I've got to turn myself in to them, counter whatever lies they've been told. It means walking back into Ordaal's clutches, but there'll be dozens of witnesses, right? He won't be able to do anything without blowing his whole scheme wide open. And the army guys have no loyalty to Delaney, no reason to take his word over mine. They'll listen to me. They'll see that one of their soldiers was fried by a weapon that couldn't have originated on this world. They'll investigate my story, at the very least—and in the meantime, they'll protect me. Won't they?

But as I venture back onto Orchard Street—several blocks down from the theatre, so I can scope out the situation before I'm seen—I realize that something's wrong. Everything is quiet. And how can that be? This entire area should be swarming with police. There should be ambulances and tape cordons, and jeeps plowing furrows down Gabriel's Hill.

The theatre itself is dark and quiet, and even from here I can see that it's unguarded. It doesn't take a genius to work out what's happened. Ordaal was more ruthless than I gave him credit for. He didn't lie to the soldiers; he didn't take that chance. He just killed them.

Four more deaths in all. Four more bodies to add to his organ collection.

And all the authorities will know is that four soldiers have disappeared. There might be reports of a gunshot being fired, but what else? People will suspect the Micronauts—of course they will—but once again, there'll be no proof.

Feeling sick, I turn and walk away from that place.

In the end, I decide to call Dad. I need somebody on my side, and I don't know who else to turn to. My hand shakes as I turn on my phone. I note that my missed call—the one that almost betrayed me in the theatre—was from Klingon Bill. I should have guessed! He didn't leave a message, so it can't have been important.

I call Dad's number and press send. This late—it's past midnight by now—the networks aren't so clogged, and I get through on my third attempt. To his answering service.

I wait all of five minutes before impatience drives me to try again. With the same result. He's probably in bed. If his colleagues won't let him work, he'll have turned in early, planning to get up at the crack of dawn and get down to the lab again. I leave a voice message, asking him to call me. But he won't get it until morning—and knowing Dad, he'll probably forget to turn his phone on even then.

He'll be with Azura Nova. At her mercy. All this time, I've been thinking about my own safety—but what about his?

She won't hurt him. I've destroyed his probe. I've put his project back by days, perhaps weeks. Until he can get it back on track, he'll be no threat to her.

I wish I could convince myself of that.

I had a number for the dome's main admin office. Dad gave it to me when we first moved here, and I

wrote it on a scrap of paper but, to my dismay, I can't find it. I return Bill's call, just in case he can find the number on one of his newsgroups or something, but his phone rings unanswered. I was clutching at straws, anyway—the office won't be manned at this time of night.

I've only got one option left: I have to go up to the dome myself. I have to keep out of Azura Nova's clutches long enough to find somebody in authority. And I have to tell him everything I know.

So, I'm at the foot of Gabriel's Hill—and above me, the floodlit compound of the research facility beckons invitingly. Behind me are the streetlights of the town. I'm trying to pierce the shadowy void between them, wishing I still had Microtron's chest beam.

I'm trying to convince myself that Ordaal isn't waiting for me up there. I mean, this is only *the* most obvious place I could have come to, right? But maybe he thinks I wouldn't risk it. Or maybe he's happy for me to reach the dome because he trusts Nova to deal with me.

I've been careful: I crept through the back streets to get here, keeping low behind rows of parked cars, and I've kept my eyes and ears open. I haven't seen or heard anything suspicious. But I can't shake the prickly feeling that somebody is watching me.

Something moves. A hulking dark shape. My mind's eye paints a picture of a monster lying in wait for me. But it's only a tent, its canvas flapping in a sharp breeze.

I use it to cover me as I start up the hill slope. As I crouch in the tent's lee, I hear the sound of breathing from inside. Its occupants are asleep. Part of me wants to wake them, to have the eerie stillness broken by the sound of human life, just to reassure myself that there are no monsters out here. But what if there are?

The people in the tent couldn't help me. Like the scattered groups of late night revelers I passed in town couldn't help me. They'd only die. Like those two soldiers died.

I'm being paranoid. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness now—as well as they can—and I can't see anything but the hillside, litter left by this afternoon's picnickers and a few more tents a little farther up.

Maybe I should just sprint for the dome. Get this over with. Put an end to the godawful anticipation.

But then, somewhere, a twig snaps. I stiffen. My throat dries. I try to convince myself that I imagined the noise. But I didn't. It came from near one of the other tents. Or inside it? Maybe somebody just rolled over in his sleep. I stare up at the tent suspiciously, trying to make out the lines of its silhouette against the dark sky, trying to convince myself that I don't see something lurking behind it. I almost succeed.

And then a lone car rounds a corner at the edge of Angel's Gift and, for a fleeting instant, its headlights illuminate Gabriel's Hill. And I see it.

It's crouching, staring right at me. I get a brief impression of big black eyes and a glistening green carapace. I can't see where its spindly limbs end and the grass begins. I think it was trying to sneak up on me, its coloring providing a natural camouflage.

I don't know what it is—even at the circus, I didn't see anything like it—but my reaction to it is instinctive. I turn and run like hell.

And, from the ground in front of my feet, another creature springs up at me: an identical twin, so far as I can make out, to the first one.

I yell and throw up my hands, barely in time to deflect its lunge. I throw a desperate punch, but my attacker doesn't fall where I expect; it soars up past my left ear as if it's on wires. It has wings, I realize—long, leathery wings. I try to bat it away, spinning around to face it again even as it strikes out with a multi-jointed leg. Its needlepoint end stabs into my right shoulder, and I draw a sharp intake of breath as the pain lances through me.

I'm looking at some kind of insect, but it's the length of my forearm. It's hovering in front of me, its wings beating to keep it in place, the tip of its front leg still embedded in my flesh. It looks like a mutant praying mantis. Huge, multi-faceted eyes bulge from each side of a triangular head topped by a pair of wiry antennae. That head rears up on a long, segmented neck, then darts at me with a chittering sound, its mandibles clicking together hungrily.

I bring my left elbow around and jab it into the monster's mouth, repelling it, but it quickly shifts position

and raises its free front leg. If it strikes me with that, too, it'll have me pinned. And its pal is coming up behind it, soaring down Gabriel's Hill on the wind.

Adrenaline courses through me—and, hardly thinking about what I'm doing, I grab the creature by its thorax, simultaneously reaching up with my deadened right hand to tear its leg out of my shoulder. The tip must have been barbed, because blood spurts out in its wake. The indescribable pain rushes straight to my head, and almost makes me faint. But, as the first mantis creature swoops at me, I hurl the second into it, stunning them both.

And now I'm running again. I don't know how, but I make it back into town. Grass gives way to tarmac beneath my feet, but there's sweat dripping into my eyes and I can't see where I'm going; I don't know where I am. The only certainty is that I won't get far, because the monsters can fly—*oh, God, they can fly!*—and they'll come crashing down on me, skewer me, and lift my helpless, thrashing body into the air. If I'm lucky, I'll be dead by then.

When I can't run any more, I stumble to a wheezing halt and fall against the nearest wall, coughing up bile. Too weak to stand unaided, it feels like forever before I can lift my head to check the sky around me, before it registers in my fear-addled brain that the monsters haven't attacked me. I must have shaken them off. More likely, they never followed me at all. The sound of human voices reaches me on the wind.

A small knot of people passes the end of the road, laughing and joking. The monsters don't want to come out into the light. They don't want to be seen. Delaney and Ordaal said as much, remember?

I'm only beginning to appreciate what's just happened. Delaney talked about "the creatures." They've killed at least once. And I was to be—could still be—their next target.

They've cut me off from the research facility. I can't reach my dad. I can't reach the army. I can't go to the police, and nobody else can help me.

I'm alone.

Chapter

Seven

I drift in and out of an unpleasant doze, never quite able to blank out my surroundings.

I'm freezing cold, even in my clothes, and the concrete floor I'm lying on is unyielding. My bones throb. I folded up my jacket to use as a pillow, but it's too thin. My neck aches.

I don't think I'd sleep at all if it wasn't for the Time Traveler. He's still with me, still trying to communicate with me. He wants to drag me down into the dream world, where his influence is at its strongest. And I want to give in to him, but my situation sits heavy on my mind, and my anxieties keep prodding me awake. Three days ago, everything was okay. How did my life change so fast? How did my choices bring me to this?

I think I hear a sound, and I sit bolt upright, fear stabbing into my chest. I sit in the darkness and listen, but there's nothing. So, I lie down again, my stomach still fluttering.

I thought about leaving town. I even got within a couple of blocks of the Greyhound bus station before I started worrying that Ordaal would have somebody or something waiting there, too. I watched as the overnight bus to Denver pulled out half empty, knowing that I probably couldn't have afforded the fare, anyway. That circus ticket really cleaned me out. And, even though I'd planned to go straight to the Denver police, it still felt like I was deserting Dad and Klingon Bill and everybody else in Angel's Gift, leaving them to the aliens.

All I could think to do was wait. In a few hours, someone will come to relieve the guards at the theatre and find them missing. Ordaal and Delaney won't be able to keep the troops and reporters away then, and I'll find someone to tell my story to. Or, a little later, when the tourists are back out in force, I could simply walk up Gabriel's Hill to the research facility, surrounded by witnesses and protected by daylight. Ordaal must know that, too. He must know that, if I survive the night, I can make things pretty hot for him and his buddies. There's a simple solution to that problem.

So, I've gone to ground for a few hours, finding shelter in this empty shop. The sign outside says it's been

sold for “an exciting new development,” but the refurbishment hasn’t begun yet. The windows are boarded up, allowing only chinks of light into the dusty interior. The electricity is off, and the burglar alarm isn’t working. There’s nothing to protect in here.

There’s also no back door. I’m pretty sure that those mantis creatures aren’t about to burst in and corner me—how would they find me?—but I keep picturing the scene anyway.

I ignore the trilling sound at first.

I’m fighting fire in my dream, and it’s just another blaring alarm to tell me what I already know: that I’m doomed. But it’s insistent. It cuts through the dream and nags at me. It demands my attention, pulls me away from what the Time Traveler wants me to see.

When I wake up, I don’t know where I am again. Sleep took me when I least expected it, and I went in deep this time. It’s a shock to resurface, to realize that I’m still in the shop. To remember everything that happened last night.

It’s still dark. According to my watch, it’s ten to four. The sun won’t be up for a couple of hours.

My cell phone is ringing.

I find it in the folds of my jacket and stare at it dumbly, sleep still clouding my thoughts, until I remember how to stop the device from making that infernal noise.

“H-Hello?” I stammer blearily into the mouthpiece. My tongue feels like cotton wool.

“Ryan? Ryan, it’s me. Bill Dempster.” He sounds breathless. He’s talking too fast, tripping over his words. “You’ve got to help me, man. They’ve got me. They...they told me to call you. They said to tell you...they said...”

This isn’t quite sinking in. I try to blink my tiredness away. “Whoa, whoa, hold on a second. What are you saying? Who’s got you? Bill?”

“You’ve got to go to the library. Alone. Like, right now. If you don’t...Ryan, they said they...they’re gonna kill me, man!” He draws breath to say something else, but before he can get out the first syllable, there’s a short, fierce crackle and the line goes dead.

I don’t react at first. I’m still half-asleep, and I stare at the phone again, as if it can explain to me what just happened. As if the call was another part of the dream and it will go away as soon as I can get my thoughts straight.

But it doesn’t go away. And a cold fist closes slowly around my heart.

The remarkable rebirth of Angel’s Gift hasn’t yet spread to the narrow confines of King Street. This is where the public library is housed, in a decrepit old building with tall, dark windows. After many cuts in funding, it now opens for only two-and-a-half hours, three mornings a week. The building faces a condemned warehouse. I shiver as I realize that no homes or hotels overlook this lonely stretch of road. The streetlights are out for two blocks on each side of the library. An unfortunate coincidence, I wonder, or a deliberate act of sabotage?

As I walk into the dark zone, the icy feeling in my stomach deepens, and I falter. Damn it, all I had to do was survive until morning. I’d have been okay then.

The windows of the library, of the warehouse, of all the empty buildings, glare at me like hostile eyes. I squint at them, searching for shadows behind them. I imagine Ordaal poised with his weapon arm ready to blast me into slag. I imagine myself walking into the crosshairs of his sights. And I find myself withdrawing, scurrying back into the light.

I came here because I thought I had no choice. But I’m thinking more clearly now. Ordaal wants me dead because I know the truth about him—but now, Bill knows the truth, too. I won’t help him by sacrificing myself, I know that. I should walk away. But how can I? If they kill him, if he dies because of me...I can’t let it happen, I just can’t.

I can’t go forward, can’t go back.

My phone rings, ending my indecision. The caller’s number has been blocked.

“Ryan?” comes Bill’s quavering voice. “Ryan, they know where you are. They want to know...they want to know what you’re doing, why you haven’t...”

“Who’s with you?” I interrupt. “Ordaal? Delaney? One of them must be listening to this, right? Well, let them know...let them know I’m not walking into their trap.”

“Ryan...” Bill sounds terrified.

It takes all the courage I have to keep up my front. “I’m not playing their game, Bill. If I turn myself in, they’ll just...they’ll...What if they don’t let you go? I need some kind of guarantee.” I raise my voice.

“Can you hear me, Delaney? You’ll have to do better than this. You want to keep me quiet? Well, make me an offer. You know how to contact me.”

I end the call, stabbing at the button with a kind of malicious glee. Then I turn and run.

I feel good. I feel in control. For about a second. Then I start to ask myself: Did I go too far? I hope to God that I haven’t just signed Bill’s death warrant. But maybe I’ve done the opposite; maybe I’ve bought him time. That was certainly my half-formed intention when I said what I did. They’re going to kill him, I’m sure of that. But maybe they won’t do it yet. Not while I’m still free. Not while they can still use him to get to me.

I need to use that fact. I need to strengthen my negotiating position before they make their next move.

And I think I know how.

The memory of something that Bill said, outside the circus, leads me across town. Sure enough, light shines from the windows of the Internet café on Rosemont Street. A solitary, sullen teenager stands at the counter, and about twenty of the computers are taken, although a few of their users are slumped over them, asleep. About half the people here, I imagine, just couldn’t find a bed for the night; others are typing messages to loved ones across the country or across the world, having failed to contact them during the day. The rest are just insomniacs and geeks. The clicking of keyboards and mouse buttons adds a depressing background track to the hung-over silence.

I order a black coffee, get a ticket from the machine, and seat myself as far away from the other customers as possible. I log on to the computer, access my e-mail account and click on NEW MESSAGE. I fill in the address field of the message window, and hesitate before completing the subject line: INEED HELP. In the message body, I begin: DEAR DAD...

And then I stop.

As so often happens between Dad and me, I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to start.

However, fear is a great motivator. I don’t know how much time I have, and I can’t afford to waste any of it. So, I force my unwilling hands back to the keyboard.

And I start from the beginning.

Finally, I sit back and stare at what I’ve written. The whole story. I could have phrased a lot of it better, sure, but it’s all there. All down in black and white. And if a small voice in the back of my head insists that Dad won’t believe it, that he’ll dismiss my urgent plea as some kind of prank, then I can silence it with logic.

It’s that voice that made me pepper my account with justifications. I even added a new first line: I KNOW THIS WILL SOUND INCREDIBLE, BUT I SWEAR, I’VE NEVER BEEN MORE SERIOUS IN MY LIFE. And, yeah, he’ll shake his head and sigh at first, but as he reads on, he’ll become convinced, I know he will. Dad knows I wouldn’t make up something like this, something so elaborate, on a stupid whim. He’ll believe me.

Especially if, by the time he reads this message, I’m missing or dead.

I stare at what I’ve written, and I wonder how the story will end.

I’m jerked out of my gloomy reverie by the ringing of my phone. I hesitate before I answer it. I swallow hard and gather my resolve. I have to sound confi-dent. “Yes?”

“You know who this is.” It’s not a question—it’s a statement.

“Why not say your name, Delaney? You worried I’m taping this?” If only I could.

“Tell me what you want.”

I didn't expect that. I was ready for another ultimatum. Does this mean I've got the upper hand? Or are they just giving me enough rope to hang myself?

"I want to stay alive," I say, "and I want the same for Bill."

"Then you should have kept your noses out of matters that don't concern you." There's an angry tremble in the Mayor's voice, like he blames me for everything.

"You could be right," I say reasonably, "but that doesn't help any of us now."

"Ordaal won't let you go free. You know too much."

"And I won't turn myself over to be slaughtered by him." I need to move this discussion on. The Micronauts probably have equipment that can pinpoint the source of my transmission. "Look, Delaney, I don't have any proof of what I've seen. Ordaal destroyed it. The only thing you have to worry about is what I might say."

"And?"

"And...and you tried to buy my silence before, at the police station. Maybe I'm selling now. Maybe the price is...that you let my friend go."

"Ordaal won't agree. How does he know you'll keep your word?"

How, indeed? I don't even sound convincing to myself. I try another tack.

"You won't gain anything by killing me. I've..." How do I put this? I don't want to give too much away.

"...left a message with someone. If I...if anything happens to me, it'll be in the newspapers before you can blink. You know how it goes, Delaney: if I went to the press now, I'd just be one of a thousand people with a crazy conspiracy theory about the Micronauts. If I disappear, my story becomes news. People will believe it."

I'm trying to keep my voice low, but it carries across the café, drawing curious looks from nearby cus-tomers.

Delaney's gone quiet. After what seems like an age, I remember my suspicion about the call being traced and I think maybe I should hang up. But then, the Mayor comes back. In a subdued tone, he says, "Ordaal accepts your point. So long as you say nothing to anybody about his business, he will take no further action against you."

"And Bill?"

"The Micronauts are leaving Earth soon—in the next few days. Ordaal will keep your friend until then."

"He can't do that!" I protest.

"He won't be harmed. I give you my word."

"And just how much is that worth, Delaney? Since when have you been able to stop Ordaal from doing whatever he wants?"

"Mr. Dempster is our insurance," insists the Mayor, sounding flustered. "If you stick to our agreement, he'll remain perfectly safe."

Maybe I should quit while I'm ahead (sort of). But I don't trust Ordaal—and, like I said before, I can't let Bill die because of me. "This isn't about Bill Dempster, it's about me. He's done nothing to you. I mean, Okay, he was with me at the hotel, yeah, but...but he didn't come into Ordaal's room with me!"

Oh, nice going, Archer! Give them another reason to want you dead, why don't you?

Another silence, shorter this time. Then, Delaney says, "Ordaal will let your friend go..."

"Really?" I don't believe what I'm hearing.

"...if you take his place as our hostage."

Oh.

"It's the best offer you'll get," says Delaney. And, unfortunately, I think he's right. Plus, I really need to end this call now.

I take a deep breath. "All right," I say. "I'll do it. Where do we meet?"

"Hold on a moment," says Delaney. Then, to someone beside him (no prizes for guessing who), "The library?" To me: "Yes. The library. Come right away. We'll be waiting for you."

"I'll need a few minutes to get back there."

"Five minutes, no longer. And come alone. Otherwise..." An awkward pause. "Otherwise...we still have your friend, and Ordaal says he'll...well, you know..."

“Yeah. I know.”

I break the connection, slip my phone back into my jacket pocket, and turn back to my unsent e-mail. No time to polish the prose now. I just need to end it, to write what could be my last words to my father. I type: LOVE YOU. Then, feeling self-conscious, I delete it.

I stare at the screen.

This is ridiculous. I don't have time for this.

I type the words again, add my name, and click SEND. My stomach does a nervous flip as the message disappears from the outbox. There's no taking it back now; it's on its way to Dad's server, and from there to his laptop. I log off, and the computer automatically reboots, erasing all evidence of my presence here. I just hope Dad checks his mailbox soon. I send a quick text message to his cell phone, reminding him to do so.

I'm already starting to doubt myself. What if Ordaal guesses what I've done? If he does, then my father will become another of his targets, and Bill and I will have lost the only protection we have. But I can't think about that now. I glance at my watch. It's almost five o'clock. I have to go. I've already staked Bill's life on this plan—what else can I do but go through with it, and hope that everything works out? I stand up—and, over the top of my computer, I see two policemen. One of them is the cop with the moustache who arrested me yesterday morning (what was his name again?). They're talking to the kid at the counter—and I think he just pointed in my direction.

I drop back into my seat, stunned. Has Delaney betrayed me? Was he only keeping me talking until his goons could get here? More likely, I think, he sent them after me hours ago, on some trumped-up charge. Either way, I can't let them take me.

I can hear their measured footsteps coming closer. They have to veer off to the left to come around this row of workstations—so I head right, keeping my head down but creating a buzz among my fellow nocturnal surfers. I reach the end of the row, and I can see the glass-paneled door ahead of me and the street beyond it, but there's no cover between me and it. I glance over my shoulder in time to see the cops appearing behind me, and I make a run for it. But a familiar nasal voice yells out, “That's far enough, Archer!”

I come to a halt, one hand on the door, and look back to find myself staring down a gun barrel.

“Get down on the floor. Lie down. Put your hands on your head. Now!”

I do as I'm told, feeling the prickling embarrassment of twenty pairs of eyes upon me. The kid on duty is cowering behind his counter in case somebody starts shooting. And once again, I can only ask myself how I ended up here—in a scene that I've seen a hundred times in the movies and on TV, but never imagined could happen to me.

The mustached cop—Brannigan—drops down beside me, pulls my arms behind my back, and cuffs my wrists together. All the time, his partner is keeping me covered with his gun. Brannigan pats me down, and snarls, “All right, Archer, what have you done with it?”

“I don't know what you're—” My response is stifled as he hauls me roughly to my feet.

“The dumb act again, is it? Okay, wiseguy, you're coming with me.” I'm not sure how I can be dumb and wise at the same time, but I let it pass. “We'll see what you've got to say at the station.” Brannigan bundles me out of the café and over to a cop car. He opens the back door, places a firm hand on my head, and pushes me down into the back seat. As he climbs in beside me, his partner takes the wheel and pulls away from the curb.

The reality of my situation has only just hit me. I remember what Delaney said to me, and my heart sinks. “Um...” I say to Brannigan. “Look, I know this is gonna sound crazy, but you...you've got to listen to me, okay? It's important!”

“You ready to talk?”

“Does Delaney know you've found me?”

“Oh, don't worry about that. He specifically asked to be kept informed about you.”

“But does he know you've found me?” I persist. “He's got to know. You've got to contact him now.” Brannigan glares at me, a cynical eyebrow raised. “Please?”

“You think I'm gonna wake the Mayor at this time of morning on your account?”

“He’s not *in* bed!” I blurt out.

Okay, that must have sounded weird. Brannigan’s eyes narrow, and his top lip curls.

“I spoke to him,” I explain, “just a few minutes ago. On the phone. It’s...look, I can’t explain this to you, but it’s important that Delaney knows you’ve got me.”

“And he will, in good time.”

“A phone call!” I cry out in desperation. “I get a phone call, don’t I?”

“Sure,” the cop sneers. “And since you and the Mayor are such big buddies, you’ll have his home number, right?”

I try again at the police station. Brannigan has taken off my cuffs, and I’m emptying out my pockets for a custody sergeant who doesn’t want to listen to me. I gather, from his muttered complaints, that he’s having a bad night: One of many since Angel’s Gift was filled to bursting with excitable tourists. His cells are crammed full of noisy drunks—and even though the last club closed hours ago, a dozen college students have just been brought in for disturbing the peace. They had plenty to drink, apparently, but nowhere to sleep, so they decided to keep partying until morning.

The sergeant glances at my phone, and turns it off with a decisive jab of his thumb before dropping it into a clear plastic bag with my wallet and watch, Dad’s screwdriver, a pen and some loose change. I protest, worried that Delaney might try to contact me and jump to the wrong conclusion when I don’t answer. But one of the drunks chooses that moment to be sick on the floor, which only distracts the sergeant further from what I’m trying to say.

Once the fuss has died down a little, he completes his paperwork, glances at me and turns to Brannigan. “No sign of the gun, then?”

He shakes his head. “He won’t say what he’s done with it.” Looks like everyone knows what I’m supposed to have done but me.

“He’ll have to wait out here for now,” says the sergeant. “I’ll see about freeing up a few cells once I’ve got the rest of our guests processed.”

Brannigan nods, and takes me over to a long wooden bench. He sits me down next to a white-haired bum who reeks of alcohol and mumbles to himself, his chin lolling on his chest.

“You’re arresting me?” The cop gives me a withering look. “Only,” I press on, “I don’t remember hearing my rights. Or the charge, for that matter. Something about a gun?”

“You know what the charge is: theft. And that’s just for starters. When we find that blaster—and we *will* find it—”

“Blaster?” I must look pretty surprised, because Brannigan stops mid-sentence and frowns at me. “Is that what you’re looking for? Is that what you think I’ve stolen?” No wonder he went straight for his gun at the cyber-café. “Some kind of...of alien ray gun?” I nearly said “laser pistol,” but I don’t want to sound too informed.

“You were the only one who had the opportunity!”

“Oh, I get it. It was in Ordaal’s suite, right? Or so they told you. And I suppose our great Mayor explained what his alien friend was doing with a weapon under his pillow, right? And why it took him over twenty-four hours to report it missing?”

I think I’m starting to get through to him. But then, a skirmish breaks out between two prisoners—and, jabbing a warning finger at my nose, Brannigan commands: “Stay put!” He runs to join the other cops as they fight to separate the combatants, and I look for a way out.

I can see two doors. One opens straight out into the station parking lot—I was brought in that way—but it’s operated from behind the sergeant’s desk by an entry buzzer. The other leads deeper into the building, which is risky—but it’s a small building, and I know the layout. I was taken from here to an interview room, and from there to the main entrance yesterday morning.

For a second, even after I’ve made up my mind, I can’t believe what I’m about to do. But, once again, I have no choice. It’s not myself I’m concerned about: I might be a sitting duck here, but I was going to hand myself over to Ordaal and Delaney, anyway, and I still have the e-mail message on my side. But it’s

been at least twenty minutes since I should have made that meeting at the library (without my watch, I can't be any more precise than that) and I'm scared stiff of what they might do—*might have done*—to Bill.

I don't remember standing up. I'm heading for the door, and I feel as if I'm not really here, not really in my own body, because I can't be doing this, not me. I've never even shoplifted before! Every instinct I have tells me to run but I don't want to attract attention with a sudden movement. And the distance to the door seems to stretch out in front of me, but at last I push it open. And now I'm walking down a corridor, decorated in sickly shades and lined with notices and posters.

A shout behind me tells me that Brannigan has noticed my sudden absence. So, *now* I'm running, around one corner and then another until I reach the interview room, and I know now that I'm almost out of here...

...but something brings me up short. Two people, ahead of me. I think I sense them, somehow, before I hear their voices. They're about to pass the end of this corridor, and I can't see anywhere to hide. I turn and sprint back the way I came...

...and run straight into Brannigan. He stops in his tracks as he sees me coming around the corner, and I don't have time to think, I just keep going, lowering my head and shoulder-charging him. He stumbles, winded, and I help him down with a punch to the jaw. My knuckles sting: The last time I hit somebody like that, it was the high school bully. So, I choose an armed policeman to take my right hook out of mothballs for?

Don't think about it. Just concentrate on what you have to do.

Brannigan tries to resist me as I take his gun from his holster, but suddenly I have it. He's on his hands and knees and I'm standing over him, aiming the gun at his head. He's staring up at me, and the fear in his eyes freezes me. It's like I'm looking, really looking at myself for the first time, and I see what I'm doing. I ask myself again how I got here.

I shake my head desperately. I try to assure Brannigan that I'm not a lunatic, that I've no intention of hurting him, but my throat is dry and the words don't come out right. How can I expect him to believe me, anyway? *I* wouldn't believe me.

I had no choice. Just cling to that, Ryan. Somehow, sometime, I'm gonna be able to sit down with somebody and explain all this, and I won't be the bad guy then. I'll be the guy who did everything he had to do to save himself, his friend, the whole town.

I back away from Brannigan, keeping the gun level, until I reach the corner. The other people, whoever they were, have passed now. So, I stoop, place the weapon on the floor, and run for it. It's only as I burst into the station's tiny reception area that I think maybe I should have kept the gun after all, but it's too late now. The desk officer is a balding guy with a paunch, who was stuffing a doughnut into his mouth as I appeared in front of him: He tries to say something, but he doesn't react fast enough.

The air outside is frigid, but it burns my lungs. The sun hasn't yet dragged itself over the horizon, but the eastern sky is beginning to lighten in anticipation.

I race back into King Street, skid to a halt in front of the library, and look around frantically. Nothing stirs. What did I expect? That Ordaal and Delaney would have waited for me? I call out their names anyway. They might still be in one of the nearby buildings. It's unlikely, though: They must've moved on when they realized I wasn't coming, right?

Maybe they left Bill's corpse behind them. It could be lying only a few yards away from me, behind one of those dark windows. Maybe in the library itself. I shouldn't think like that—but I find myself examining the recessed door, looking for evidence that it might have been forced recently. I don't find any. But I do find a closed circuit TV camera sitting above the doorway, attached to the brickwork by a rusted frame. They were never here! They just wanted to get me where they could see me, to make sure I was alone before they gave me further instructions.

Think, Ryan. These cameras are all over town: some street safety initiative from a few years back. Most of them don't work any more—I remember complaints on the letters page of the local paper—but I bet this one does.

I wave my hands in front of its lens. "Delaney, don't do anything hasty. I'm here, okay? I got held up by

your cops—and they took my cell phone, so you can't call me—but I'm here, I'm right here!" I feel kind of silly talking to myself in the street like this—and I've no way of knowing if my message got through. Think! Where do the cameras send their pictures to? The police station? No, Delaney and Ordaal wouldn't have taken Bill there. Where, then?

Anywhere. They could be anywhere! All they need is equipment to intercept the camera transmissions, and I bet Ordaal could provide that, no problem.

Still, I've got to keep searching. Delaney might be at home by now—but I don't know where he lives, so that's no help. I could try the Grand Hotel, but I'd never get past the door, and they might call the police. The town hall? I can't see the Mayor risking that. He owns plenty of buildings, though, and his closest friends own plenty more. Too many. I couldn't check them all, even if I had an address list. Even if I wasn't...

...it hasn't quite sunk in yet, it still feels unbelievable...

A wanted man. A man who held a gun to a cop's head. A fugitive from the law.

Oh, man, what's Dad gonna say when he finds out?

Back at the theatre. Back where this all started, a lifetime ago it now seems.

The back door is still unlocked, its former guards nowhere to be seen. Even Microtron's remains have been spirited away. The normality of the scene sends icy fingers crawling up my spine. It's as if nothing happened here at all, like the four murdered soldiers never even existed. Until their bodies are recovered, I think numbly, no doubt alongside an alien weapon that Delaney and Ordaal have already contrived to link with me.

I creep along the darkened corridor toward the dressing rooms, in which electric light still burns. I've lost my translator, but I'm hoping I can make the circus performers understand me, anyway. I'm banking on them having some way to contact Ordaal, to let him know that I never welched on our deal. And I'm praying to God that it's not too late already.

I step through the first dressing room door—and my eyes widen at the sight of Ordaal's armor, standing in front of me.

It whirls to face me. It—*he*—brings up his blaster arm.

I throw up my hands. "Ordaal..." I begin.

And the mantis creatures come at me from the side.

They scratch and jab at me, trying to skewer me again. My ears are filled with their chittering cries. I'm trying to protect my face with my arms, and I'm yelling desperately, "Get off me...you don't understand...we made an arrangement...Ordaal, *tell them!*"

Ordaal just stands and watches. And suddenly, a triangular head darts at my neck. I can't avoid it. I feel a sharp prick as mandibles penetrate my skin and my muscle...

...and a dizzy feeling sweeps over me. The mantis creatures, Ordaal, the tabletop circus—everything blurs and shrinks as if I'm hurtling backwards down a long tunnel away from it all. I fight to say something, but my tongue lolls helplessly in my mouth. I can't raise my arms, and I can't feel my legs anymore, and the floor is rushing toward me, and...

The longest night of my life comes to a mercifully abrupt end.

Chapter

Eight

Scenes from another lifetime:

I'm afraid of Baron Karza.

He exudes such power. It blazes behind the red lenses of his horned black helmet, rumbles beneath his deep, dark voice. It's reflected in his confident stance, his regal bearing. And I can feel it in the heavy, gloved hand that weighs upon my shoulder.

I'm afraid of him. But he's treating me like a protégé. My place, he says, is by his side. He intends to guide me. His body language is paternal, and I don't want to think about that now, not so soon after... It's too freaky.

Karza's giving me this big speech about how weakness must be eliminated, how the strong must survive, and one question burns in my mind until at last I spit it out. "Why me?"

And all that power, all the dangerous energy that has built up inside this black-clad madman, this sole Emperor of an entire galaxy, explodes.

A stand-off. Acroyear has Karza's daughter, the only person he's ever cared about. But his Harrowers outnumber us badly. His Harrowers, and their airborne counterparts: the Harriers, commanded by one General Azura Nova.

Acroyear is prepared to die for his cause—and die victorious, knowing that he cut out the Baron's metaphorical heart with his sword. I'm not. But then, the explosives we placed in the Bio-Vaults detonate, and everything goes to hell.

The dream splinters into a series of confused snapshot images. Watching as our transport is destroyed. The scent of death in my nostrils and the dreadful fear that I'll never see home again, never bury my father. Thinking that maybe I should have stayed in my cell, shouldn't have got involved in this hopeless rebellion. Cradling an ally in my arms as the light goes out of her eyes. Then, a desperate flight to another launching pad, led by a turncoat foe.

I extend my left hand in front of me, fist turned downward. But the metal tube along my lower arm feels like a dead weight. I try to make the exact wrist movement that Acroyear showed me, screwing up my face in concentration, but nothing happens. I adjust my stance, steady my breathing and try again.

The blast comes when I least expect it. My arm snaps up and I fall onto my back foot. The topmost branches of a tree combust, and fire eats through the dry leaves.

I was supposed to hit a small bush, some six feet to the tree's left.

"Try again!" barks Acroyear in his gravelly, impatient voice.

"Give me a break, can't you?" I protest. "We've been at this all day."

"We are in the middle of a war, Archer—and you cannot even use a simple laser pistol!"

"Yeah, well I never volunteered to fight. I just want to go home."

"An attack could come at any moment. If you are not prepared, you will die."

Tiredness makes me irritable. "Are you listening to what I'm saying?" I snap.

"None of us chose this life," growls Acroyear. "It was chosen for us. You, most of all."

He keeps saying things like that. He's not the only one. I'm sick of people looking at me as if I'm special, expecting something from me. It gives me the creeps. It's like my entire life has been mapped out already, and nothing I can do will change it. Like twenty-year-old Ryan Archer, who has never had to be responsible for much of anything, suddenly has the destiny of a universe upon his shoulders. But then, Baron Karza has a life mapped out for me too—and his future scares me even more.

"Do it, Archer!"

I'm angry. At Acroyear for pushing me; at Karza for persecuting me; at the cruel fate that brought me here without giving me a say in the matter. And there's only one target I can take it out on. I whirl around, bring up the pistol again and will it to fire.

I didn't even stop to take aim. But the small bush explodes into flame.

"Pull up!"

"We're venting fuel."

"Pull up, you imbecile! You've got to pull up!"

Ah. The sweet voice and sunny disposition of Karza's adoptive daughter, the Princess

Persephone. Acroyear brought her along on this mission as insurance. He thought that, with her on board our ship, Karza's troops might hold back. He was wrong.

We fled from Nova's Harrier squadron into an asteroid field. Into an ambush. Her flagship was waiting for us, cloaking itself in the debris at the field's edge, confounding our sensors. The General herself was on board; she appeared on our view-screen to gloat, until Acroyear cut her off in a fit of pique. We took some hits. Some bad ones.

Microtron was torn from his position at the helm. He rolled backwards across the deck, and something inside him popped. I'm trying to get him upright again, but the floor keeps bucking beneath me and an instrument panel explodes in my face. Acroyear is at the controls, but we're limping and we can't outrun our pursuers.

"Our shields won't hold!" cries Knave. As if we didn't know that. And, once the shields are down, I'm told it will take just one good shot to blast us into atoms.

"We've hit the atmosphere," Persephone reports through clenched teeth, her tone accusatory even in restrained panic. "We're dropping like a stone!"

It was Biotron's idea to head for this dust-brown planet. With his habitual calmness, he suggested that we position it between us and the Harriers, masking us for precious moments as we used its gravity to gain speed and slingshot ourselves out of their detection range. Persephone insisted that we'd never make it, that we were committing suicide. She took my shoulders and shook me, yelling in my face: "Surrender, you fool! My father wants you alive. We hardly know these people—we don't have to die with them!" I said nothing. The proposal wasn't worthy of an answer. But her words still ring in my mind. What am I doing here?

All I can do for now—all I've been doing since I came through the Rift—is deal with the moment. I haul Microtron back to his position and hold him in place as he reconnects to the ship's systems. He reports that we've lost almost three-quarters of our power.

"The controls aren't responding." That's Acroyear. "I can't break free of the planet's grip." I'm trying not to look at the view-screen, at the wispy clouds breaking across our nose and the rolling scrub land beneath them, frighteningly close. But I can't ignore the rising heat. Fires are breaking out across the bridge, and Knave grabs something that looks like an extinguisher. Not for the first time, I admire his agility as he leaps from blaze to blaze, dousing the flames with well-aimed bursts of some compressed blue gas.

The whole ship is rattling now, tearing itself apart. And the heat is intense and oppressive, flaying my skin and making my chest ache. Acroyear and Persephone are exchanging jibes, and suddenly the deck drops out from beneath me and I think my stomach went with it. A second later, I hit the floor on my face, and something lands on top of me. Microtron. I'm gasping for breath, feeling smothered. I don't know how I find the strength to stand, but I have to grab on to a console to keep myself upright because we're pitching at a forty-degree angle and the flat brown land is screaming towards us.

Acroyear is still fighting with the joystick. Biotron is bracing himself for the inevitable impact: He doesn't move, but his narrow eyes glow with a deep red light. Knave and Persephone are down; Knave looks like he's unconscious, the extinguisher lying beside him. I struggle to reach him, but more flames flare up in my path. They're worse now, spreading to engulf the entire ship. I'm choking on thick smoke.

An alarm siren is sounding, as if we need its dire warning. Nor is there any point to what I'm about to say, but the words tumble out of me like a confession that I'm helpless, that I can't do anything more than state the obvious and pray that somebody else can rescue me.

"We're burning up!"

Somebody calls my name. I feel a toe between my ribs, and a groan escapes my throat. I know I'm dreaming, but I can't open my eyes. I'm trapped in here, torn between two worlds. And I think this might be it, I might see the end this time. I might relive my death in that other timeline. I might feel the smoke

entering my lungs, stealing my life.

It's my fear of that prospect that gives me strength to fight. Waking up is like battling my way out of a tar pit—and when I realize how much my head hurts, I almost give up, almost let the Time Traveler pull me back down.

“Ryan! Ryan, can you hear me? Ryan!”

At last, I surface. I'm on my back, looking at a dirty white ceiling, my arms twisted beneath me. I can smell hay, disinfectant and the faint remains of something more unpleasant. My first instinct is to put my hands to my aching head, but my shoulders protest as I try to move my arms, and I hear the clank of a chain. My hands are caught in something heavy.

The toe jabs into my side again. “Ryan? Are you awake?”

“I am now,” I groan. I recognize the voice: it belongs to Klingon Bill. So, Delaney broke his promise to release him after all. I shouldn't complain, though: we're both still alive.

I lift myself up on my elbows, and squirm into a sitting position. Pins and needles shoot through my arms, and I flinch as daylight hits me between the eyes. I rattle my chain: it's composed of some kind of solid energy, which glows a faint yellow. It connects my shackles to a small sphere of that same energy, which is bound by a metal ring screwed into the wall at one end of a rectangular room. Two sets of bars, with inset gates (locked, of course) divide the room into three, forming two square cages with an area in between. The room's only door is in this central area, but it's closed. Opposite the door is a window: I'm at the wrong angle to see out of it, but light streams through its net curtains. As my eyes adjust, I realize that the light is neither as bright nor as natural as it first seemed.

The other cage is unoccupied, piled full of hay. Bill is slumped in this one, beside me, bound to his own energy ring. He's wearing pink-striped flannel pajamas, and his feet are bare. “Oh, thank God,” he moans. “You're alive, man! You were spark out. I couldn't tell if you were breathing—and I couldn't check your pulse.” He rattles his chain ruefully.

“I'm O.K.,” I croak. “Just feel like I've been hit by a truck.”

“It'll wear off,” he promises.

“What time is it?”

Bill shrugs. “Can't see my watch.” He smiles wanly and indicates the chain again.

“I'm sorry, Bill,” I sigh.

He frowns. “What for?”

“For getting you into this mess. If I hadn't gone back to the theatre...”

“You did what?”

“They didn't tell you? That's why they snatched you: to get at me, because I overheard...”

I trail off, realizing that Bill is shaking his head. “No, no, no. If that's what Delaney told you, man, he was lying. They came after me because I saw their pet monsters.”

“What?”

“Like giant insects, they were.” He looks haunted by the memory. “They must live in Ordaal's suite at the Grand. The eggs, remember? I saw two of them—the insect creatures—attacking this guy.” Flushing with pride, he adds: “I saved him.”

I remember what Delaney told Ordaal at the theatre, and something clicks in my brain like a jigsaw piece falling into place. “That was you? How did...? What happened?”

“I...” Bill hesitates, looking abashed. “Well, I went back to the hotel, didn't I? I just thought, if Ordaal snuck out of his window again, I could follow him. So, I went into that alleyway—you know, the one round the back—and I just...I waited.”

“And?”

“It must have been about ten o' clock. I heard someone coming. I hid behind the bins, but it was just some guy. I think he'd come out of that bar around the corner, because he wasn't quite walking straight. He'd come into the alleyway to... you know, relieve himself.”

“Not over the bins, I hope.”

“He was just leaving when... when they came at him. Two of them, like I said. I don't know how to

describe them. They...”

“I know what they look like,” I say quietly.

Bill’s eyebrows leap up his forehead as he realizes what I mean. But I want to hear the end of his story before I start mine, so I prompt him: “What happened then? What did you do?”

“Well, I thought they were gonna kill him,” he recounts breathlessly, his round white eyes shining. “I mean, I could *see* they were gonna kill him, they were tearing at him and biting and... and...” His cheeks redden, and he lowers his gaze. “Well, I *wanted* to do something, I honestly did, but I couldn’t make my legs move, and then... and then this guy, he tried to get away, right? And the aliens, they kind of... they *threw* him, and he came flying into the bins in front of me and knocked them aside and *they saw me!*”

“Ouch,” I say sympathetically. Embarrassed as Bill seems to be at his own lack of courage, I certainly don’t blame him for it.

“I just ran. I didn’t look back. I thought they were going to... they had wings, man! They were coming after me, and I don’t know how I made it back to the street, I really don’t, but there were people there. A big group of people, coming past the hotel. And the aliens, they... I think they must have seen them and hidden, because they weren’t behind me any more.”

I nod. That sounds familiar. Almost too familiar. It brings back memories of my own gut-wrenching terror as I fled from those same creatures.

“I yelled to these guys, I said ‘You’ve got to come quick, there’s a guy being attacked by giant praying mantises back here,’ and a few of them—the men, mostly—they came into the alleyway with me.”

“I’m surprised they believed you.”

Bill’s face creases in thought. “I’m not sure I actually mentioned the giant praying mantises,” he admits.

“They’d gone, anyway. By the time we got there, I mean. And this guy, the guy they’d attacked, he was lying there, bleeding. It was horrible! The police came, and I gave them a statement—and I knew they didn’t want to believe me, but the victim, he backed me up, and they had to take me seriously, because it’s not as if they don’t *know* there are aliens in town, is it?—and I tried to call you, man, but you’d turned off your phone. Where were you?”

“Ah. I’ll tell you about that later.”

“Well, I went back to my lodgings,” says Bill, “and I went to bed, but I couldn’t sleep properly. I kept having these weird nightmares.”

“Yeah, I know how that feels.”

“And I woke up, right, but I thought I was still dreaming because there was this *shadow* at the window, and I got up and I pulled back the curtains, just to convince myself that I was imagining things, and they were... they... the window sill...” Bill’s face has turned white.

“The creatures again?” I ask. He nods dumbly, and says no more for a couple of minutes. I guess it’s too painful for him to think about it, so I don’t press him. It doesn’t take a genius to work out what happened next, anyway.

“My phone was ringing,” he mumbles eventually, in a faraway voice. “Next to my bed. And there was glass on the floor, I could feel it under my feet, and Miss Jones, my landlady, was banging on the door and shouting, but one of the creatures had rammed a chair under the handle so she couldn’t get in, and the other... the other one... I was just trying to get to the phone, I thought if I could let someone know what was happening, they could... I don’t know... but it was ringing, ringing out...” He buries his head in his knees.

“Where did they take you?” I ask gently.

“I... I don’t know. I just woke up in... I don’t know where it was. Some warehouse.”

“Near the library?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, when they talked about it, Ordaal and Delaney, when they made me call you, it was like it was... like they weren’t *near* the library, but they could...”

“They could see it? On a monitor?”

Bill shakes his head. “I don’t think so. But Ordaal did say something about... He was using some kind of communicator to talk to a woman called... Nova? I think she was... she could see you. I think she might have patched in to the security cameras around town.”

“From Ordaal’s ship,” I guess.

“That’s how they knew you were in the cyber-café.”

I let out a startled cry. “They knew?”

“Well... yeah. I mean, I thought you knew that. I guessed that was why you didn’t turn up at the library—the second time, I mean. I thought you’d realized it was a trap.”

“A trap?” I mouth the words numbly. My mind is racing frantically, trying to find some shred of hope, some reason to believe that what I’m thinking isn’t true.

“At last, your dull human brain begins to understand.”

I didn’t hear the door opening—but there’s no ignoring the armored form of Ordaal as he stomps up to the bars of our cage, making the floor shake. “I thought you would like to know that my colleague has intercepted and deleted your touching message to your father.”

“And who says I only sent one?” I respond defiantly, but he ignores my bluff.

“You should be grateful that Doctor Archer is so careless with his primitive computer. Had Nova been unable to get to *it*, she would have been forced to delete him instead.”

I make a lunge at him, despite the bars between us. My chain lets me get halfway to my feet before it yanks me back. “So, you *did* tell those cops where I was,” I mumble sullenly.

“Not at all,” says Ordaal. “You had already been persuaded to deliver yourself to me. It would have been much simpler if those police officers had not happened upon you. Still, the incident—and your escape from custody in particular—has worked in my favor.”

“I suppose you’re here to kill us, then.”

“Not yet.” A thin, slimy-looking pseudopodium extrudes from Ordaal’s armor, just above the wrist, and morphs into the shape of a small key. Seemingly without effort on his part, it unlocks the gate and pulls it open for him before retracting itself. I’m amazed; I’ve never seen his battle suit do that before! Come to think of it, it does look different, I think, although I’m not sure how. I can’t quite put my finger on it. Ordaal leans over us and checks that our bonds are secure, more silver tendrils creeping behind our backs to test the chains. I shiver as they brush against me.

“You are an especially interesting specimen,” the alien rumbles, looming over me. “I would like to see what price you can fetch alive.”

“And I guess it keeps Delaney sweet too,” I venture. “He might not want us telling what we know, but he doesn’t want us dead either, does he?”

“Delaney’s wishes are of little concern to me.”

I ignore the interruption. “I guess he can’t be too happy about the four soldiers you killed last night either.” Klinton Bill’s eyes widen, but he doesn’t say anything.

“I am in control of our partnership!” snaps Ordaal.

“Yeah? So, why do you put up with him? It can’t be for the intellectual stimulation. Delaney’s useful to you, isn’t he? He keeps the government off your back. He covers up for you. That’s why you lie to him, why you tell him what he wants to hear. He thinks you’re leaving Earth soon. He thinks there’ll be no more deaths. But you’ve no intention of going, have you? Not until you have to. Not as long as there’s still profit to be made.”

Ordaal turns his bulky form away from me, and strides back out of the cage. Pausing in the gateway, he hisses: “An astute observation. But after last night, I may be forced to return to my own galaxy—the realm you call Innerspace—earlier than I had planned. You are responsible for that. Your actions have brought a great deal of unwanted attention upon me.”

I grin. “Getting a bit hot for you out there, is it? Nice to know I wasn’t wasting my time.”

Ordaal slams the gate shut and locks it. “I trust your humor will be as good when I deliver you to the Medtechs. I will personally request that you are kept awake for your dissection.”

“I don’t think Karza’s gonna let me die, somehow.”

I expected a reaction to that, but there’s nothing. Ordaal makes to leave the room, and I call after him:

“That is who you’re working for, isn’t it? My old friend, Baron Karza?”

He turns back. “What are you prattling about?”

“Oh come on, Ordaal. You must have heard of Karza—he only rules your galaxy!”

Ordaal draws closer, until he's at the bars again. "I believe I... may have heard the name," he concedes. "But I can assure you, this Karza is not my ruler."

I can't tell if he's lying or not; that bubble helmet makes it impossible to read him. "You produced an action figure of him," I persist. "You called it 'The Evil Emperor!'"

Ordaal laughs scornfully. "The last Emperor was toppled decades ago. The only order now is chaos. A hundred different factions vie for power. A thousand alliances have been made and broken. Even the Galactic Defenders cannot broker a lasting peace."

"You mean your galaxy's at war?" breathes Klingon Bill.

"And which side are you on?" I ask.

"My own side," sneers Ordaal. "They say there can be no winners in a conflict such as this—but that is only true of those who wear their political allegiances upon their sleeves. The true winners will be those who can seize the opportunities that war offers."

"Mercenaries, you mean. People like you."

"Indeed. And now, if you will excuse me—" He's heading for the door again. —"I have important business to attend to."

"Hey," Bill calls out, "how about getting some food in here?"

"And water," I add. My throat is as dry as sand. "If you want to keep us alive..."

"The Kronos creatures will attend to your needs. I have left them here to watch over you."

"And where's 'here', exactly?"

Ordaal doesn't answer my question. The door closes, and a heavy silence falls in his wake as Bill and I each contemplate our predicament.

"I don't suppose *you* know where we are?" I ask eventually.

Bill shakes his head. "They knocked me out again before they brought me here." I expected as much, but I'm still disappointed to hear it.

A few seconds later, my cellmate asks tentatively: "These 'Kronos creatures'... do you think... did he mean the... the giant praying mantises?"

I nod glumly. "Yes. I think he did."

Time passes.

Nobody disturbs us. Occasionally, I hear distant voices, but I can't make out what they're saying. My headache has cleared up, but I'm starting to feel dizzy with dehydration.

Out of sheer impatience, I tried to break my chain, but to no avail. Maybe if my arms weren't tied behind me, if I could turn around and gain some leverage, I might stand a chance—a small chance—of pulling the ring out of the wall. That would still leave the bars, of course, but they look as if they were made for larger animals than me. They wouldn't have to bend far for me to be able to slip through them. Not that it makes a difference right now. My shoulders and wrists ache, and there's no sensation in my hands.

Bill wanted to know what happened to me last night, of course. He listened intently as I told him, interrupting only once. I'd been describing how I felt when I believed the whole town was against me, that nobody would listen to the truth, and he said quietly: "I've felt like that my whole life." He's been mulling over my story for a few minutes now: he keeps taking deep breaths and blowing his cheeks out, and shaking his head in a mixture of wonderment and fear. And every so often, a question occurs to him.

"Who's Baron Karza?" he asks.

"I don't know," I answer reflectively. "I thought I did, but now..."

"You saw him in your dreams," he guesses with a sage nod.

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. He was..."

Flashback:

"Do you take me for a fool?" The voice is an ominous growl, and instinctively, I shrink away from the speaker. He hasn't moved, but I can feel his anger welling up behind that black chest plate and I want to explain, to reassure him that I meant no offence and that I genuinely don't know what I'm doing here. I'll say anything to stop that pent-up energy from brimming over, from

exploding. But it's too late.

It streams from Karza's eyes and coalesces around his powerful fists. He's a shadow in the heart of the red flames, and I think he's going to strike me or choke me or simply channel that destructive force into burning out my insides. He holds my life in his hands.

He chooses to show me mercy. If you can call it that. "Remove him," he snaps. "Perhaps a stay in the pens will jog his memory of what he is."

I still don't know what he meant by that.

"I... I thought Ordaal and Nova might have been working for him," I say. "I thought there might have been more to their scheme than we knew. I thought, if I mentioned his name to Ordaal, I might rattle him. Looks like I was wrong."

"He could have been lying," offers Bill.

I shake my head. "I think he was genuinely confused. He doesn't know who Karza is."

"And you think he should?"

"Trust me," I say ruefully, "he's kind of hard to forget."

"So, what does that mean?"

I think about the question. All this time, whenever I've pictured Innerspace, it's been the realm of my fevered dreams. I've imagined Karza ruling with an iron fist, Acroyear leading the resistance against him. But that was in the old timeline, and sure, some things are the same in this one—Ordaal is still a mercenary, Nova still commands a squadron of Harriers and body parts are still big business—but other things have clearly changed.

"We know that something has altered history," I say with sudden clarity of thought. "Whatever it was, I think it must have happened in the Micronauts' galaxy. That's why Earth wasn't affected until recently. Events here didn't diverge from the old timeline until the Rift opened. No... until the Rift *should* have opened, a few months ago, out in the Nevada Desert. Karza should have sent his Harrowers through then, he should have kidnapped me, but he didn't, because whoever he is—if he even exists—in this timeline, he isn't the man I knew."

Bill stares at me, and I can almost see the cogs of his brain turning.

"I don't know where the Rift came from," I continue. "The original Rift, I mean. I don't know if Karza created it to get to me, or if it was some kind of cosmic accident. But let's say that, even if it *was* an accident, he had something to do with it. That would make sense—not much happened in his galaxy that he didn't have a hand in somehow. So, in this timeline, Karza didn't open a Rift to our world *then*. But the technology to do so was still developed, and eventually it was used. By Ordaal or Nova, perhaps. Or perhaps it was somebody else who tore a hole in space, and they just... well, as Ordaal said, they seized the opportunity."

I look at Bill, expecting a dozen more questions. "Well, obviously," he says with a shrug. "I mean, we knew all that already."

I blink. "Did we?"

"Why else would the Time Traveler need you to go into Innerspace? He wants you to fix the anomaly, man—and that's where it is."

"Oh," I say. "Right." I feel kind of stupid now. My cellmate reads and watches way too much science fiction.

"You should have asked Ordaal about this Acroyear guy," says Bill.

"I meant to. I was thrown when he didn't recognize Karza's name. But Acroyear... Ordaal knows him, all right. His name's right there on his action figure. Unless..." I frown as a thought occurs to me. "I never found out much about him. Acroyear wasn't his real name, it was a kind of a... a ceremonial title. What if there were other Acroyears once, like there were other Emperors?" I remember what I read on the toy packaging, about an army of Acroyears in the service of the evil Emperor. I dismissed it, then, as a fiction. Could I have been wrong?

"I still can't help feeling that Karza is the key to all this," I muse. "If we could find out where he is, what happened to change the course of his life..."

"You sound as if you've decided to do what the Time Traveler wants after all."

I do, don't I? And I don't know why, because I never made any such choice. I think, somewhere along the way, I've just come to accept that my life is no longer my own. There was a kind of awful inevitability about Ordaal's intention to take me through the Rift.

I'm still stubborn, though. Still determined to kick against my destiny. "Not if I can help it," I snarl. "Not if it means putting Baron Karza back on his throne."

That thought galvanizes me, and I strain at my bonds again. It's no good. I feel weak, drained. I stamp my foot in impotent frustration. "Where *are* they with that water?" I complain. My voice cracks in my parched throat.

"We could try to attract their attention," Bill suggests.

"I think I'm too hoarse to shout."

"I was thinking about trying to rock the trailer."

"The trailer?" I don't know what he means at first—but suddenly, it makes sense, and I feel stupid again for not having seen it before. The layout of this room, the unnatural light outside, the trembling of the suspension when Ordaal walked in...

...the fact that animals have obviously been kept in here...

A horrible suspicion dawns on me, and I don't want to acknowledge it, to admit that it could even be possible. But then, the trailer door opens to reveal one of the mantis creatures, and I know that it's true. I know exactly where I am.

The giant insect fills the doorway. Its thorax is as thick as my arm, its protruding eyes are like baseballs and I can see every seam of its overlapping plates of natural green armor. Klinton Bill takes a sharp intake of breath, and I don't blame him. He was terrified enough of the Kronos creatures when they came up to our knees. Now, this one is the same size as us.

Or rather, I'm now forced to accept, we're the same size as *it*...

Chapter

Nine

I was staring so hard at the Kronos creature that I didn't notice the figure behind it, framed in the light of the theatre dressing rooms. Ganam Jafain—Knave—shuffles into the trailer, holding two trays in his four hands. He's shorter than the mantis, but still over five feet tall. At least, that's what my instincts tell me; I have to remind myself that I'm judging things by a different scale now. Knave is the same size as he always was.

I remember Dad telling me how the Micronauts talked about building a miniaturization device. Looks like they already had one. Looks like they lied again.

The Kronos stalks up to our cage, its front legs crooked and held together. It motions to Knave, who comes forward and fumbles with a set of keys. He unlocks the gate and sets his trays down in front of Bill and me. Each tray contains a small jug of water, a bowl of something that looks like purple porridge and a spoon. Knave's stubby tail flicks nervously as he backs away from us, his black eyes lowered.

"Hey!" I protest. "How are we supposed to eat with our hands tied?"

He looks to his grotesque master for guidance. It thinks for a moment before it makes another... um, foot gesture. Knave comes back into the cage and crouches beside me. Just when I think he might unchain me, the Kronos barks an instruction, which Knave acknowledges in a subdued whimper (I'm looking at the creature in a new light now; I didn't realize it could speak). I have to settle for having only one hand released from what, I can now see, is a single helmet-shaped device molded from a heavy, plastic-like substance. I'm still chained to the wall by my right wrist, but at least I can reach my food now, and it's a relief to be able to move my arms.

"You're Ganam Jafain, aren't you?" I say conversationally as Knave unlocks Bill. He throws a glance back at me, but doesn't respond. "We've met before," I say, "although I guess you don't remember. Ryan Archer."

"Musoz!" the Kronos snaps.

“We used to call you Knave. Do they still call you that?”

“*Musoz!*”

Knave is studiously ignoring me. “You’re a Vaerian, aren’t you? One of the last of your kind. You joined the circus to get away from your lawless home world, but—”

I don’t get any further. The mantis creature strides into the cage and towers over me, its front legs poised to strike. “Fo muson, zatyzy, il ei cus zin oyn en es!” I might not understand the language, but I know when I’ve been told to shut up.

I give in and start to eat. The purple oats don’t taste of anything much, but they’re hot and edible, and cold water has never felt so good in my throat. Fighting my instincts, I take my time; the longer my arms are free, the more I like it. All too soon, though, my bowl and jug are empty and Knave is pushing my left hand back into the restraining device.

“What was all that about?” asks Bill, when our two visitors have left.

“Just trying to make a friend,” I say. “Unless things are seriously screwy in this timeline, Knave’s one of the good guys.”

“He wasn’t here by choice,” Bill agrees.

“I think I made an impression. Did you see how he looked at me when I called him a Vaerian? He must be wondering how I could know that.”

“You think he’ll come back to find out?”

“I hope he’ll try.”

“Are you sure he understood you? I don’t know what language that... that creature was speaking, but it was nothing I recognized.”

“In the Micronaut galaxy, people have translators implanted at birth.”

“In the timeline you remember.”

“Knave understood me,” I say confidently. “I could see it in his eyes. The problem is, without translators of our own, we can’t understand him.”

“That’s gonna make it difficult to strike up a conversation,” says Bill.

“But not impossible.”

Time wears on.

Bill and I have long since run out of things to say to each other. We’ve made all the plans we can, and they haven’t amounted to much. We can’t reassure ourselves any more that everything will be O.K., that we’ll find a way out of this. All we can do is wait and pray.

I think these hours have been the worst of my life. Even when I was attacked on Gabriel’s Hill, and when Ordaal murdered those soldiers, I didn’t feel this badly. I guess I just didn’t have time to think, then.

Now, I can do nothing else. I don’t know what’s going to happen to me, but my mind plays out a hundred scenarios, all of them bad. There’s a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Nevertheless, I doze for a few minutes at a time, always feeling a pang of disappointment when I wake up to remember where I am. I don’t see the Time Traveler in my dreams. Perhaps he’s given up on me. Perhaps he’s seen my future and he knows I can’t do anything for him now. Perhaps this is exactly what he was trying to prevent.

For a while, there was music. I could barely hear it, but I could feel the drumbeat shaking the floor of the trailer. There must have been a show in progress, out on the stage. But that was some time ago.

When Knave reappears with two more trays, I welcome him with desperate hope. He’s alone this time, although I spot one of the Kronos creatures at the trailer door before it closes. Knave unshackles our left wrists again, before withdrawing to the gate. He plays with his four hands, and the gills on each side of his face—just below where his ears should be—twitch anxiously. “What have they done to you?” I sigh, shaking my head. “The Knave I knew was strong and confident—and, even after everything he’d been through in his life, he was an optimist. He was always joking, always cheering us up.” He’s trying to avoid looking at me, but I think I caught a quick glance. “You were fun to be with!” I maintain.

I scoop a spoonful of porridge out of my bowl, and continue: “I guess you’re all pretty scared of Ordaal,

huh? I can't say I blame you. That battle suit of his scares me too." Suddenly, I remember crouching under a table as Ordaal was lifted into his human-sized armor. I remember wishing I could see him, see what he looked like out of the suit—and now, I have my answer. The thought of that big silver shell opening to reveal a smaller (and more sophisticated?) version of itself, like a Russian doll, almost makes me smile. But then, I think about the fact that I'm now sitting on top of that same table, and I feel all weird again.

"I know you wouldn't help him by choice," I say. "He must have some kind of hold over you. He needs a distraction, something to bring the tourists here and keep them occupied while he goes about his real business, so he finds himself a circus. And, hey, he's not asking for much, right? He just wants you to do what you do best: entertain."

Still no response, but Knave looks uncomfortable. Bill keeps looking from one of us to the other, staring intently, but he leaves the talking to me.

I take a mouthful of water and press on. "So, what has he told you? That he'll set you all free if you do as he wants? That he'll sell you to the Bio-Vaults if you don't? Or was it Nova who made the threats? She enjoys hurting people, doesn't she?"

"Nolom zinuz co gyz hi," says Knave suddenly, his tone apologetic. "Noe sloy ruso ni iv am." He spreads his four arms wide in a helpless gesture.

"They're killing people, you know," I say quietly. "Ordaal and Nova and those things they call the Kronos creatures. They're preying on our kind!"

Knave looks away again—and, before I can say more, the trailer door is thrown open and its insect sentry jabbars an impatient order. Knave jerks into action, whisking our bowls away before I've finished eating. Then, under the watchful gaze of the Kronos, he secures our bonds again and locks the cage gate before scurrying away.

I rest my head against the wall, and sigh despondently. "I think this could take a while."

Bill lies awkwardly on his side, snoring heavily.

Every muscle in my body aches. I long to be able to take a stroll, or even to stand up fully. I heard music again, not long after Knave left, and I guessed that the evening performance was in full swing. So, now it must be Saturday night, or Sunday morning. I know that several hours have passed, but I've no way of counting them. I've fallen asleep four times, for I don't know how long, always waking to the electric daylight from the trailer window. It's as if time means nothing any more, like it doesn't exist here.

My stomach growls at me. It feels like forever since my last meal was interrupted. At the same time, though, I don't think I could eat; at least, nothing substantial.

Knave should be back soon. If we're to be fed three times a day, that is—and always assuming that another slave doesn't take over his duties. He's *got* to come back!

I've been thinking about what to say to him, running a dozen speeches through my head. I can't get the words right. But this is too important to screw up. Knave is my only hope. I've got to persuade him to help us, even though I don't know how he can.

Even though I might just end up getting him killed too.

During breakfast, I tell Knave how I came to be here. I don't mention the Time Traveler or my dreams of another reality; I just stick to the stuff he'll believe. He winces visibly when I tell him about the soldiers at the theatre doors, and he nods solemnly and says something to himself. "You knew about that?" I ask, frowning.

I've always been good with languages. It's part of this intuition I have, my way of being able to figure things out. And I think I'm getting used to Knave's language, because I swear it's beginning to make sense to me. Of course, the extravagant four-armed gestures help. He outlines the shapes of several men towering over the circus trailers, and I deduce that the army have been around asking questions. I shouldn't be surprised. Four of their people went missing outside this building, so I doubt they'd have let

Delaney keep them away from its alien occupants. I'm sure Ordaal would have sat in on the meeting, though.

I get another weird feeling when I think about what must be happening outside, just a few yards away from here. If only one of those army guys had stooped and put his eye to the window of this trailer this morning, he would have seen Bill and me out cold inside.

I wonder if anyone is looking for me. They probably are, I think, if only because I'm a suspect in a multiple murder case. But why would they look here? Those few yards might as well be a hundred miles, and they certainly feel like it.

"How much longer are you going to let this go on?" I ask, frustrated.

I didn't mean to be so blunt. This time, Knave makes a hurried exit without having to be prompted.

I apologize to him at lunchtime, having had an eternity to regret my outburst. "I know you're in an impossible situation," I say, "but you're the only one who can help us."

He doesn't answer. I could be reading his body language wrong—he's an alien, after all—but I think he feels guilty. Maybe that's good.

"We could get out of here together," I suggest. "Bill and I could help you. We know what's outside this building. We know where to find help. People will have to believe us now; I mean, look at the size of us! And once our government knows what's going on, they'll do something. They'll deal with Ordaal and Nova, they'll stop the killings, and they'll probably... they'll offer you asylum, you and the other performers."

Knave is sitting slumped against the bars, embracing himself. He doesn't look at me, but he's heard what I said. I leave him to mull it over until I've finished eating. Then, I say quietly: "Just think about it, would you? All you have to do is unchain us, and we could end this. We could all be free."

Knave picks himself up and turns to stare at the trailer door, no doubt seeing the insect guard behind it. There's an expression of longing on his face, and excitement surges through me. I think I've done it. I think I sounded convincing. If this Knave is anything like the one I knew, then I'm sure he won't be able to resist my appeal. And, yeah, it'll mean him taking a risk, but that was what Knave *did*. He took risks. With a smile on his face.

The Vaerian crosses the cage and crouches beside Klingon Bill.

He pulls his arms behind his back and locks up his free hand again.

My stomach goes into free fall, and I actually feel the prickling of tears in my eyes.

As Knave turns toward me, I try to convince myself that I can still hope. He needs more time to think, that's all. By the time he returns with dinner, he'll have decided to help us. I just have to wait a few more hours. But, as he takes hold of my left arm, a defiant voice yells inside me that I *can't* wait, I just can't. I can't bear this any longer.

So, I shrug off Knave's grip, and I punch him. I connect with his jaw, with unexpected strength, and stagger him. I seize his wrist and try to pry the keys from his fingers. But Knave twists and turns in my grasp (I forgot how agile he is) and suddenly he's free and backing away from me. I leap after him, but my chain brings me up short, yanking at my right shoulder. I feel like howling in frustration. Instead, I fall to my knees, defeated, spent and trembling, and the first tear brims over onto my cheek.

I stare up into Knave's startled and accusing eyes, and I implore him: "Please don't go. Don't leave us here to die. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... please..."

During the brief skirmish, I must have kicked my tray toward the gate. Knave snatches at it, his eyes never leaving me. Then he picks up Bill's tray too, and leaves as fast as he can.

I try to bury my head in my chest as he slams the door behind him. I thought I felt bad before, but it was nothing compared to this. At least I had hope then. At least I had plans. Now, all I have is despair, and it closes around me like a shadowy fist.

"Um... Ryan?"

The worst thing is, it's my own fault. I was getting somewhere. I was so close. All I had to do was be patient, not give in to my impulsive nature.

“Ryan!”

I have to force myself to look up. I don't want to. I want to wallow in misery; I want to build an imaginary shell around myself and hide from the world. I don't want to think about the fact that I was given one shot to do something important, something meaningful, with my life, and I ran away from it. I don't want to think about how, the last time I saw my father, we had a blazing row. But Bill's voice is insistent, and it reminds me that I'm not alone, much as I'd like to be. So, I respond to his call, feeling ashamed at having lost it in front of him. I half expect him to lay into me for blowing our chance, but he's looking past me with his white eyes bulging, and I follow his gaze.

At first, I don't know what he's looking at. But then, I notice that the gate in the bars is still open, just a crack. And I remember that Knave didn't stop to lock it.

I'm still chained to the wall, of course, but only by one wrist. When Knave left, I expected him to report my attempted escape to the Kronos. I expected the insect creature to stride in here and secure me again. But time has passed in silence, and I'm beginning to realize that I can still hope after all.

“Do you think he did it on purpose?” asks Bill. “Did he decide to help us?”

I don't know. Perhaps Knave was just too afraid to face the creature's wrath. “I'd like to think so,” I say. “But we're not free yet.”

I sit facing the trailer wall, plant both feet against it, gather my chain in my hands and pull. I still feel weak, but I have weight and leverage on my side now.

It isn't enough. I'm aware of Bill's face falling as I wipe sweat from my forehead and try to get my breath back.

I'm not giving up yet, though. I inspect the metal ring that appears to be generating my energy chain. I'm wondering if, with the right tools, I could short it out. Something tells me I'd be in for a nasty shock if I tried. But the ring is attached to the wall by four giant screws. Excitedly, I report this fact to Bill. “I expected bolts or... or welding. But I guess they didn't... this cage was built for animals, not for people who know how to use a screwdriver.”

“But we don't *have* a screwdriver,” Bill points out. He's still wearing his pajamas, of course—and the police emptied my pockets at the station.

I begin to pace fretfully. I know I should be conserving what strength I have left, but right now I'm too keyed up to sit still. I wonder if I could take off my jeans and jam one of the metal buttons into the screw heads. But, just as I'm considering that possibility, my foot hits something that makes a clinking sound.

“A spoon!” cries Bill. “He left your spoon behind!”

It must have fallen off my tray when I kicked it. I fall upon the gleaming object and press it giddily to my lips. “Ganam Jafain, I love you!”

Of course, it isn't exactly perfect. I can only force one corner of the spoon's handle into the screw heads, but it's something—and, after grazing my knuckles a bunch of times, I manage to loosen two screws.

Eventually, I can turn them with my fingers until they emerge from the wall. The remaining two screws are unmovable, but I can make the ring wobble now. I pull at the chain again—and, with a terrifying crack, I tear a third screw free. Afraid that I might have been heard, I spin around and press my back to the wall, concealing the damage. To my relief, however, nobody comes to investigate.

The fourth and final screw is loose now, and it's the work of a couple of minutes to tease it all the way out. I'm free. I can hardly believe it, but I'm free. The realization hits me like a cold wave breaking on my face. The heady sensation makes me feel faint. My body wants to give up, its work over, but I force it to hold on. I'm still stuck in this trailer, this circus, this miniature world. There's still so much to do. But I swear to myself that things will be different from now on. This is where I take control. I won't be helpless again.

I squirm around awkwardly in the window frame, until I can lower myself out of the trailer feet first. The open window presses down on my back, the frame cuts up into my stomach, and as careful as I try to be, my shoes create a dull, hollow thud as they connect with the wooden tabletop. Instinctively, I drop into a crouch, but all I can hear is the distant drumbeat of the circus's afternoon show and my own

shallow breathing.

I couldn't free Bill. I tried, but the best I could manage was to remove one screw from his chain generator. We were both uncomfortably aware that time was passing, that the trailer door could open at any moment. And, when the music started up again, we realized that this was the time to make our move, while most of the performers were onstage.

"All I need," I said, examining his shackles, "is a pin; something small enough to fit into this lock. I could spring it in a minute." I'm becoming quite the locksmith. I could free my own right wrist too, instead of having to carry my chain and generator around with me.

It was Bill, in the end, who told me to go. I hesitated, but he insisted. I could find a lock pick, he said, and come back for him. If I'm able. I don't think he really expects me to return, but I will. I made him a promise. And I'm taking control, right?

I put my head to the ground and look under the trailer. I see no insect feet on the far side. So, the Kronos creature isn't guarding the door. Which is good news, I hope.

Unless it's using its wings to hover. Or standing on the step. Or it's simply obscured by the trailer's six wheels. Jeez, Ryan; being careful is one thing, but this is paranoid!

I'm standing in a narrow passageway, formed by the circus trailer in which I was imprisoned on one side and the back of another, identical, trailer on the other. I still can't get over their size. Intellectually, of course, I knew I'd been shrunk to their scale—but whenever I pictured the vehicles, it was as I first saw them in the dressing rooms, laid out on tables in front of me. Even close up, I thought they'd look like giant toys, fashioned from plastic with no fine detail. Instead, they look... *real*. The 'ground', too, is much coarser, more uneven, than I'd anticipated, the grain of the wood forming a crazy striped pattern. I tiptoe around the trailer behind me, wincing at my every resounding footfall until I'm breathing through clenched teeth. I think about taking off my shoes, but I might need to run.

The trailer is locked, so I try the next one. As I approach its door, however, it flies open. I leap for cover, sure that I won't make it in time—but, fortunately, it's a few seconds before anybody appears in the doorway. Two performers emerge, walking backwards and yanking on ropes. As I watch in horror, they pull the orange lobster creature—Lobros—down two steps onto the table. Its tamer follows in its wake. I recognize her from the show; I remember thinking that she looked pretty normal human—a short, heavyset woman with long, black hair—until I spotted her hooves. She also holds one of the ropes that bind the beast, and she's talking to it in calming gibberish.

I'll tell you this much: I could have done without seeing this particular monstrosity at full size. It shuffles along on two stumpy, segmented legs, its back bent and its thorny, oval head swaying in front of it as its huge mouth snaps open and shut like a clamshell. Were it not for the restraining rope around its neck, I'm sure it would gladly take a few chunks out of its keepers. More ropes secure the giant, deadly-looking pincers on the ends of its front legs, which twitch angrily but can't break their bonds.

My stomach tightens further as a Kronos flies out of the trailer. Its role appears to be supervisory: it hovers behind the entourage and gives out orders as the performers drag their unwilling charge in what I assume is the direction of the stage.

Lobros doesn't seem to have eyes. I wonder how it 'sees': by radar? Scent? Vibrations? And, even as the thought crosses my mind, I realize that the great orange beast is straining in my direction. *It knows I'm here!*

The tamer is only a second behind me. She points vaguely toward my hiding place, saying something to the Kronos in a baffled tone, but I'm already running. I just pray that the lobster is making enough noise to cover the sound of my retreat. I sprint around three more trailers, try one door and then another, which opens. I hurl myself through it, close it behind me and throw myself to the floor.

This trailer must belong to a group of performers. It's decorated with gaudy, star-patterned wallpaper and furnished with four foldaway beds, a few chairs and a dining table. At one end, there's a small kitchenette; at the other, a large square mirror sits above a shelf overflowing with cosmetics, brushes and—aha!—a few scattered hairpins.

The floor is littered with circus props and junk, and I find myself a juggling pin. It isn't very heavy, but I

feel safer with it in my hand. There are windows on each side of the trailer, and I raise my head above the sill of the one nearest the door. I catch my breath and duck down again as the Kronos creature flies past slowly, its triangular head jerking from side to side and even turning a full one hundred and eighty degrees to look behind itself.

I tighten my grip on the juggling pin, ready to swing it if the door opens. I even wrap my chain around it to lend it more weight.

After ten minutes, though, I'm satisfied that the search has been called off. With any luck, Lobros's behavior will have been put down to nerves or grumpiness, and nobody will have thought to check the trailer where Bill is still chained up. I tend to think that, if they had, I'd have heard about it by now, there'd have been some kind of commotion. But I can't be sure.

"You should have got out of here while you had the chance," says Bill as I poke at his restraining device with a hairpin—but the gratitude in his voice tells a different story.

"I said I'd come back if it was safe," I remind him, "and it was. The place is empty."

"What happened to..." Bill's eyes flick nervously toward the door through which I've just entered the trailer. "...you know, the guard?"

"Off-duty," I reply. "I guess it has more important things to do than stand around out there all day. Its mate too, probably." I tell Bill what I saw out on the tabletop.

"They're watching the circus guys," he concludes.

"Makes sense," I agree. "It'd be easy for them to make a break for it during the show."

"So, both those things are still in the building somewhere," says Bill with a shudder. "We'll have to get past them to get outside."

"I hope not. They'll be in the wings of the stage, I reckon. If we can time this right, we can run for the back door without them seeing us."

"I like that idea." Bill's hands are suddenly released, and he moans with pleasure as he flexes his fingers and rubs the circulation back into his arms.

I drop the hairpin and creep up to the door, checking through the keyhole that the coast is still clear. "I'm more worried about Ordaal," I confide to my former cellmate.

"Ordaal?" he repeats, white-faced.

"If he's around too, and in his full-sized armor..."

"He'll be seven or eight times our size," breathes Bill.

"Exactly. We won't be able to outrun him. If he sees us, that's it. Escape over."

Bill thinks about that, his lower lip protruding. Wordlessly, I hand him a spare juggling pin, and I give him a quizzical look as I rest my hand on the door handle. He nods bravely.

I push the door open.

We hurry across the tables, staying behind the trailers where possible and keeping low in case somebody looks out of a window as we pass it. Although we haven't discussed it, we seem to have agreed that speed is more important than silence. I've lost all track of time, and we don't know how long we have before the afternoon show ends. Nor do I have any sense of direction: I hope we're heading toward the dressing room doors, but the tall trailers block our view of the room around us. I feel as if the circus is my world, like there's nothing beyond it. This must be how laboratory rats feel as they scamper around their mazes.

I follow the direction in which Lobros was taken, until I lead Bill to the edge of the table. I can see a wall now, but it looks unreachable. For the first time, I feel small. I'm standing on a wooden cliff edge and staring into a magnolia sky. And all I can think about is a metal gauntlet reaching down from that sky, like the hand of God, and wrapping itself around me.

I look at Klingon Bill, and I see that he's reeling too. But we don't have time to deal with culture shock. There's a big black hole in the magnolia, and I've just realized what it is. The end dressing room door is

standing open. I swallow and focus on my friend's face, tuning out everything else. "Come on," I say in what I hope is an encouraging tone, "we're almost there. We just have to get down to the floor. Can you jump?"

Bill looks dubiously down at his bare feet.

"It's only a table. It's about two, two and a half feet tall."

"That's about three times our current height," he points out. "It's the equivalent of, like, an eighteen foot drop."

"We can make that!"

Bill shakes his head firmly. "If one of us sprains an ankle, we're sunk."

I can feel frustration building inside me again. Bill's right, I know he is—but I can't bear having come this far only to have to deal with another obstacle between me and freedom.

"There must be a better way down," he says reasonably. "A ladder or something, for the circus performers to use." Now, why didn't I think of that?

We move along the table edge toward the open door, and we find it in about a minute: a rope ladder is stretched across our path, its top end tied to a trailer axle. Bill mounts it first, holding my hands in a petrified grip as his feet scabble for a rung beneath him. I watch him as he climbs gingerly away from me, until the sheer distance to the scuffed maroon floor starts to make me feel dizzy and I'm forced to look away. When next I risk a glance downward, Bill is just stepping off the bottom rung. He grins up at me, forming his thumb and forefinger into a circle. Then, he sets off toward the door. I want to shout after him, tell him to wait, but that would be even more reckless. So, I tuck my juggling pin under one arm, swing myself out onto the rope ladder and propel myself down it as quickly as I can.

I haven't even reached the halfway point when I hear Bill's terrified voice beneath me. "It's coming!" he hisses. "Out in the corridor... a Kronos..."

I curse under my breath. I don't have time to go back. Alarm makes me go rigid and I'm hanging here, a sitting target. "Ryan..." Bill whines urgently.

I let go of the ladder. I smack into the floor with both feet, the bone-jarring impact driving my knees into my chest. I don't have time to get my breath back. Bill's already running, and I do the same. We dive beneath the tables and I take cover behind a wooden leg. I flatten my back against it, keeping my feet together, my arms pressed to my sides.

I hear footsteps behind me, and I realize that Bill understated our peril. At least four people have just shuffled into the room.

And a familiar snapping sound turns my blood cold.

I peer around the table leg, and confirm my suspicion. I can see a Kronos all right, but it's part of a larger group, which is returning Lobros to its trailer. The hoofed tamer is there again, and two different performers are wrestling with the orange monster's ropes and keeping out of range of its hinged mouth. I guess the Kronos takes whoever can be spared from the stage for a while. This time, that means a guy whose complexion is almost as orange as the beast's (in fact, his head looks like an orange, bald and pockmarked)—and Knave.

I know what's going to happen next—and the scene plays itself out with an almost cinematic inevitability. Lobros strains at its bonds as it senses the presence of two alien life forms—and, after a hurried consultation with the tamer, the Kronos turns its head in the direction of the table and barks: "Co zic ei lo nolo. Mic eilmosbo en izgo." I've no doubt at all that I've just been ordered to show myself.

There's sweat on my forehead, and ice water dribbling down my spine. I close my eyes and pray. For long, unbearable seconds, nothing happens. I don't know where Bill's hiding, but he's as quiet as I am. Then, in a lower voice, the Kronos says: "Azsoym no foym!" And I hate to say it, but I think I know what that means too.

I have to see what's happening. I risk another glance, in time to see Knave pulling the creature's last rope loose and skipping away from it nimbly. Lobros flexes its pincers and rolls its oval head. Then, its tamer shouts something and cracks her whip behind its back.

And the creature shuffles forward. It's coming right at me.

Chapter

Ten

I can't move my legs. I can't turn my head, can't even look at the approaching monster. I can hear the eager clacking of its mouth and its pincers—it sounds as if a Spanish dancer is edging toward my hiding place—and I'm praying for a miracle because I know that, if I show myself, I'm dead. And then, Lobros heaves into view around the table leg, right next to me, and it makes a grab for my throat.

I react, using instincts I didn't know I possessed. I swing the juggling pin like a bat, and knock the grasping limb aside. Lobros flinches, stung, and I'm looking for an opening, looking, looking...

I find it, and I swoop in to deliver another blow to the creature's oval head, which it throws back, jerking its mouth open to emit an unearthly squeal. I'm backing away, keeping it between me and the other aliens, wondering how far I can get before the Kronos intercedes, wondering if I could be lucky enough to find another door open.

Lobros thrusts and I parry, again and again, as if guided by some sixth sense. But I was concentrating on its pincers, not paying enough attention to its head, which swoops at me unexpectedly. I throw myself backwards, lose my footing and fall, and that great snapping mouth hurtles toward me. I can see right down Lobros's orange throat. Desperately, I try to push the creature away, and suddenly it rears up with a pained roar, and I see that somehow I've managed to wedge the juggling pin vertically between its jaws.

Lobros is thrashing about, confused, as if it can't work out what's happened to it. I've earned myself a moment's respite, but lost my weapon. I pick myself up and look for somewhere to run, but now the Kronos has taken to the air, and it's bearing down on me.

Klingon Bill appears from behind another table leg. He lets out a primal scream as he runs at the mutant insect, swinging his pin above his head. I think he actually has his eyes closed. But it doesn't matter: he jumps, cannons into the creature's side and knocks it to the floor. Its head jerks about in surprise: it's on its back, and Bill is hammering away at its carapace, producing a satisfying rhythm of loud cracks. Half of me is cheering him on; the other half is wishing he'd stayed hidden, because at least then he'd have had a chance of making it out of here. We've been lucky to survive this long. And now, the Kronos fights back, stabbing out with its sharp-tipped front legs and forcing Bill into retreat. And Lobros has just snapped my juggling pin and is spitting out the pieces.

I race past the lobster creature while it's disoriented. The Kronos is righting itself, and I jump and bounce off its stomach. It doubles up, almost catching my foot in its mandibles. But I've reached Bill now, and the giant, dark shape of the doorway looms ahead of us. Only Knave and the other two circus people stand in our way, watching the skirmish with wide eyes, and I don't think they're going to stop us. "Run!" I yell.

And, for a heady moment, I think we're actually going to make it.

Then the Kronos hits me square between the shoulder blades, and I skid across the linoleum face first. I try to get out from beneath it, but all I succeed in doing is shrugging my own jacket half off; the Kronos keeps me pinned with its six legs, and I'm waiting for that stab to the back of my neck, the bite that will rob me of consciousness.

Then, the squirming weight of the insect is lifted, and I don't know why—until I roll onto my back, shielding my eyes from the glare of electric lights, and I see that Knave has attacked it. The purple-skinned acrobat is wrestling with the green-armored monster, and I can barely keep track of their twelve flailing limbs. The Kronos fights with vicious stabs, any one of which could draw blood, but Knave's fluid motions keep him a step ahead, and somehow he also keeps his opponent's wings pinned, denying it the advantage of height.

Klingon Bill is at the base of the door, and he motions to me to join him, his white eyes round with urgency. Lobros is lumbering toward me again, and I *want* to run, because if I don't then Knave's sacrifice will mean nothing. But how can I leave him?

I shout across to Bill: “Go! Find help!” I don’t wait to see if he’s obeyed me. I throw myself back into the fray, and get a headlock on the Kronos. I’m cutting off its oxygen, and it devotes its two front legs to fighting me off, which gives Knave the chance to shower it with punches. Its rear legs buckle, but suddenly I’m aware that Lobros is right behind me. I spin the mantis creature around and hurl it into the jaws of the lobster. It clamps its mouth shut around its master’s midriff and tosses its head back exultantly.

Knave is standing stunned, as if he can’t believe what he’s done. Likewise, Lobros’s tamer and the other performer are still frozen.

I extend a hand to Knave—and he stares, terrified, for a moment before taking it. I drag him toward the door, but our movement draws Lobros’s attention. It drops the Kronos—which lies unmoving, a trickle of green blood forming a pool at its head—and it charges after us. I reach the backstage corridor, but a pincer swipes across the backs of my legs, scoring my flesh and throwing me off-balance. I let go of Knave, pitch forward and collide with the wall. I spin around in time to avoid another lunge from Lobros’s hinged mouth, but there’s a pincer to each side of me, and I’m hemmed in.

“Hicz, fie!” I cry. The words just popped into my mind. I heard them at the circus; Lobros’s tamer used them in her act. I had no idea that I’d memorized them. For all I know, I got them wrong anyway: they certainly haven’t had much effect on Lobros. But this is my only shot. So, I draw myself up to my full height (such as it is now) and, affecting as much confidence as I can, I snap: “Hicz, fie! Hicz! Mun!” And, remembering the tamer’s body language, I raise an arm as if to strike the beast.

To my amazement, it backs off. It cocks its head and regards me—with whatever senses it has—in confusion. It doesn’t know whether to obey me or kill me. I start running again, before it can make up its mind.

I’m following Knave, because he beckoned me to do so. It takes me a second to realize that we’re going in the wrong direction. I wanted to head for the theatre’s back door, but in the heat of the moment—and thrown by the sheer vastness of a corridor that I remember as being narrow and claustrophobic—I lost my bearings. It’s too late to turn back now, though. A glance over my shoulder tells me that the tamer has come out of the dressing rooms and is bringing Lobros back under control—she’s just slipped a lasso over one of its pincers—but still, I don’t like my chances if I were to get within reach of that monster again. I just have to let Knave lead me to the stage, and hope he’s got a plan.

Four wooden steps lead up to the backstage area, but each one is as high as my shoulders. Knave places two hands on the bottom step, springs onto it, and hauls me up after him. He repeats the process three times, with similar ease, and now we’re in semi-darkness behind the black scenery flat, and the music from the stage is vibrating the soles of my feet. Knave pushes me down behind a brightly-painted barrel. As I peer cautiously around its curved edge, three performers appear from the stage, run around the flat and wait at the far side. A moment later, their cue comes and they rejoin the show with enthusiastic somersaults.

Knave has disappeared into the wings, behind the red curtain. But suddenly, he returns—and my stomach sinks at the sight of the second Kronos creature at his shoulder. It must have been watching the circus slaves, as I theorized. I can’t help but notice the laser pistol mounted along one of its front legs. Knave is talking animatedly, and I pick up enough to know that he’s reporting the incident in the dressing rooms. He leaves out a few details, of course, but the thrust of his appeal is that the creature should attend to its stricken mate at once.

It gets as far as the steps, an arm’s reach from my hiding place. I hold my breath. But then, the Kronos hesitates, its head jerking around suspiciously. It looks back at the stage, evidently unwilling to leave the performers unsupervised. Knave does his best—he only just stops short of dragging it down the steps himself—but the creature’s tone of voice becomes more adamant. It’s made up its mind.

It issues a series of instructions, most of which I don’t understand. And I realize that, in a moment, it will return to its sentry post and I’ll get no further without being seen. Right now, however, the Kronos has its back to me.

I pull myself across the floor on my hands and knees. I’m out in the open, but the nearest curtain is just ahead of me. I only need a few seconds.

But I don't have them. The Kronos sees me.

I scramble to my feet. Knave stumbles into the creature's path as if by accident, but it brushes him aside, snaps up its pistol and fires. A beam of concentrated energy slices into the floor behind me, and I leap higher than I've ever leapt before.

I burst onto the stage, the bright lights dazzling me, music thudding in my ears, and I'm surrounded by hectic activity. I duck instinctively as the gangly chimp swings over my head on a trapeze. I stumble backwards and collide with an acrobat in mid-somersault, knocking him into a juggler who loses control of his flaming torches. One of them flies over my shoulder, lands at the foot of the velvet curtain and sets it alight. The green-blue elephant rears up in alarm, and a unicyclist pedals into its back. My unexpected arrival sends ripples across the stage as, one by one, each performer finds his or her (or its) carefully choreographed routine disrupted. A collective gasp rises from the audience, reminding me that there are people out there somewhere in the darkness.

The smoldering curtain twitches. I see a hint of green carapace and the flash of light on a pistol muzzle, and I concentrate on running. Somebody spills a dozen rubber balls in front of me, and I skid on them like a cartoon character and wind up on my butt. The fall saves my life, as another laser beam cuts through the air above my head.

I pull myself up and stagger to the front of the stage. I still can't see much beyond it, but I can hear that the audience is getting worried. I can picture the first few rows of people struggling out of their seats, trying to retreat from the haze of smoke drifting toward them. I wonder if they're aware of me, aware that there's a human being up here, or if I'm just another part of the chaos, another bewildered Micronaut, to them.

"Help! Help me! I'm a prisoner!"

My shouts go unheeded, and I'm not surprised: I can hardly hear myself up here. At least the Kronos has stopped shooting for now, presumably because it can't get a bead on me with everybody else panicking. It can't last. I need to get off the stage, but the drop to the floor must be twice as far as that from the dressing room tables, and all I can see when I look down is a black void.

I cast around for something I can use, some rope or something, and I'm startled to find a giant figure towering over me. It's humanoid—and, I realize, human. I remember the four soldiers whose job it is to keep the crowds back from the stage: one of them has climbed up here with a fire extinguisher. It hisses like a snake as he applies it to the curtain, and freezing white carbon-dioxide vapor billows toward me. I spot the Kronos at the soldier's knee, and it sees me, but then the cloud closes around us both.

I stare out into the auditorium. My eyes are beginning to adjust, and I can make out some shadowy shapes. The rest of the soldiers are helping the audience to evacuate in an orderly fashion. But, jutting up over the edge of the stage, just a little way along, I see a giant peaked cap and a giant head beneath it.

"Hey!" I yell. "Hey, Private!"

The soldier doesn't hear me, but I can get his attention. I take a running jump, my heart flying into my mouth as the ground drops away beneath me. I'm sailing toward a pair of broad shoulders, using the soldier's left epaulette as my target landing zone, and he doesn't look real: my mind turns him into an enormous statue, because it can't quite accept the reality, that he's a normal-sized flesh and blood being just like I... used to be.

He senses my approach, and turns as if in slow motion, an expression of alarm crossing his giant, chiseled face. He flinches, but the tiny movement is like a glacial shift to me.

And there's nothing beneath me again. I'm falling.

Cold air rushes up into my face. I spread my arms and legs in the futile hope of catching more of the updraft, of being slowed enough to survive. I can see the fake wood effect of the floor tiles now—and now, they fill my field of vision as if there's nothing else in the world.

And now, something scrapes against each of my shoulder blades and my direction is reversed, so abruptly that I think I left my stomach behind. The wood effect plunges away into darkness again, and I'm carried back into the light. Confused, dizzy and disoriented, for a second I entertain the notion that this is what it's like to be dead, and I feel relieved because it didn't hurt like I expected. But then, the Kronos creature that snatched me out of midair applies its sharp mandibles to the back of my neck, and I

feel its poison coursing through my system again, paralyzing me, draining my will to resist. . .

A metal fist cracks into my cheekbone. My head snaps back, my neck sore with the whiplash. I see my own face, distorted by a curved, golden mirror, my brown hair disheveled, a purple bruise beginning to show on my fair skin. My hands are bound again, in front of me this time, and I don't want to wake up to this reality. I dive deeper into the darkness, crying out to the Time Traveler. I beg him to take me away from this, to his world, to safety. I see him, an insubstantial figure drifting ahead of me, but I can't reach him.

Something cold hits me, and it shocks me back to the real world, the world of pain, the world I wanted to escape. I gasp and splutter as the water streams down my face. My eyes open involuntarily, and I see Ordaal standing over me, his features hidden beneath his reflective helmet, but my eyelids are still heavy. The mercenary catches my chin in a gauntlet before it hits my chest again. "Where is your companion?" he snaps. "Where is. . .?"

"*Time Traveler!*" I scream, and I'm swimming through the void towards him, and he's getting closer, almost close enough to touch, but he can't help me. He just shakes his head and fades away, and I'm left alone and afraid in the dark.

Ordaal's iron-plated knuckles graze my temple, and my muzzy brain begins to realize that his reality is the only reality. I can no longer hide from it. The veil of sleep lifts, and I'm back in the circus trailer, feeling as if I never left it, like my dash to near-freedom was just a cruel dream. It's over. I'm shivering and flinching from the harsh, cold light, my spirit broken. I can only wait to see what they do to me next—and, whatever it is, I know I won't be afraid. I'll just accept it, because what else can I do? Ordaal lays his heavy hands on my shoulders, and shakes me. I don't resist. I feel like a rag doll in his grip. "I know you escaped together," he bellows. "You must have arranged to meet him somewhere. Where is he? Where is Bill Dempster?"

I stare up at my own uncomprehending face, into its dull eyes. And, as a buried memory resurfaces, and a dead hope is rekindled, I see the lips of that face twisting into a smile.

And I convulse with laughter. I don't know where it comes from, but it's high-pitched and hysterical and, once I've unleashed it, I can't return it to the bottle. My stomach aches with it, I can't see through my tears, and I think Ordaal might kill me but even that threat isn't enough to sober me. I've lost control of myself.

Then, finally, the laughter bubbles down into my throat, and it stays there until the darkness reclaims me. This time, the real world leaves me alone. For a short time, at least.

When next I'm brought around, it's more easily. A gentle hand taps my face, and a pungent odor fills my nostrils. I fight the reflex to gag. I try to put a hand to my mouth, but I'm still wearing the helmet-shaped restraints. At least there's no chain attached this time.

I must have been out for hours. I can't help wondering what I've missed. Was I dreaming about fireworks? I can hear a voice, familiar and yet strange to me. It's Ordaal—that electronic modulation is a giveaway—but he's talking in the Micronauts' language. My face is warm, almost uncomfortably so. And those fireworks were real: every few seconds, Ordaal's words are punctuated by a tiny explosion from somewhere not too far away.

I try to sit up; I'm too weak, but the chimpanzee-faced circus guy puts aside his smelling salts and gives me a hairy helping hand. I'm outside. No, scratch that. . . I'm outside the circus trailers, but still on the tabletop. I'm surrounded by Micronauts: looks like the entire troupe has turned out. I'm on the edge of a large area, which can only be the open circle at the tables' center. In the middle of this area, a campfire burns, hot enough to scorch my cheek; I stare at it dumbly for a few seconds before I realize that the flames are fake, an illusion created by a pocket-sized box at their base. There's a tangible sensation of unease in the air.

Chimp-Face stoops over me with what looks like a tiny gun. I start to panic. What is this—a public

execution? Have I been brought round just so I can see my death coming? But then, I realize that the 'gun' has a nozzle rather than a barrel, and a purple liquid bubbles away in its chamber behind a clear panel. As Chimp-Face steadies my chin with one hand and inserts the implement carefully into my right ear, I remember where I've seen its like before.

I'd forgotten, however, how much it hurt. A piercing pain shoots through my head, from temple to temple, and I let out a hoarse yell. "Be careful where you point that thing, can't you?" I murmur weakly as colors flash before my eyes.

Almost as soon as the syringe is withdrawn, the pain of the injection subsides. But my newly fitted translator is working its way through my brain, reordering my neural pathways. My perception of the world shifts suddenly, and I want to barf.

Chimp-Face and the other circus guys have pulled away, leaving a space around me. Something has spooked them. I'm still asking myself what it could be when a pair of mantis legs wrap themselves around my shoulders from behind. The Kronos creature flaps its wings and propels me toward the fire, letting my trailing legs drag along the wooden ground. It dumps me at Ordaal's feet, and he leans menacingly over me.

Slowly, the translator kicks in, and the mercenary's incoherent babble turns into words. "...tell me which of these freaks helped you to escape!"

Blinking, I follow the sweep of his arm. I hadn't noticed them before, but a small group of Micronauts stands apart from the rest of the crowd, beside the fake fire. Four Harriers—I recognize at least one of them, maybe two, from Dad's lab—are holding their arm-mounted laser pistols on three performers: the Lobros tamer, the orange-headed guy, and Knave. The prisoners' hands are manacled like mine—which in Knave's case, requires two devices. He's lost his padded jacket, revealing the spines that run along his upper arms.

The Vaerian's dark eyes meet mine, wide with a mute appeal. I drop my gaze quickly; I don't want to give anything away. "Nobody helped me," I mumble.

Ordaal delivers a stinging, backhanded slap to my face. I put my hand to my cheek, and feel blood. "You have *got* to stop doing that!" I gasp.

"One of my people is dead," snarls Ordaal, "and somebody must pay!" The Kronos, hovering at my shoulder, becomes particularly agitated at that pronouncement. "Each of these wretches—" Ordaal indicates the prisoners again. "—denies involvement. If you do not tell me the truth about what happened beneath this table, I will have to presume them all guilty."

"And what makes you think I care?" I struggle to keep my voice even, to keep myself from looking at Knave again. "As far as I'm concerned, we're at war—my world against yours. If you want to turn the guns on your own side, I'm not about to stop you!"

A ghastly gargling sound emerges from Ordaal's speakers. I can't be sure, but I think he just attempted a chuckle. "A spirited bluff," he says, "but unconvincing." He continues to address me as he stomps over to the prisoners. "You lack the objectivity to be a true warrior. You have already demonstrated that you would sacrifice yourself for your friends. Now, which of these circus freaks, I wonder, would you count among their number?"

There's a lump in my throat, and I can't answer him.

"This woman, perhaps?" Ordaal seizes the tamer's throat, cradling her chin. She stares up at him, revulsion and fear fighting for supremacy in her eyes. "Her beast, she claims, killed in an uncontrollable frenzy—but perhaps it was she who ordered it to strike! And the Vaerian..." He turns to Knave. "Ah, the Vaerian... he had more opportunity than anybody to become attached to my unwilling guests. He was entrusted with their care."

I can't bear to watch this cruelty any longer. "Leave them be!" I shout. Ordaal whirls to face me—and, although his features are still hidden, I swear I can see satisfaction in his very bearing. It's only now that I become aware of the total silence around me. The other performers don't want to draw their slaver's attention, I guess; they won't even look at him, or me, or the prisoners. But the silence is broken by another explosion, and an answering burst of rifle fire. There are voices too, raised in an angry chorus. I swallow. "They've told you what happened," I say in a more subdued voice. "Bill and me, we broke

free of our chains and we were almost out of here, but... but that Lobros thing... it sensed us, and it went wild." I fill in some of the details of the fight, leaving out Knave's contribution just as the tamer and Orange-Head must have done when questioned. As I confess to my part in the Kronos's death, its mate hisses venomously at me.

Ordaal clasps his hands behind his back, lowers his head and paces ponderously, thinking about my statement. The world seems to hold its breath for a long time.

And then, the mercenary raises one hand, pointing without looking. "Kill him!"

The crowd raise a few horrified gasps, but they're quickly stifled. Reacting with the suddenness of striking snakes, all four Harriers turn their pistols upon the orange-headed guy and fire. Four crackling energy beams cut through the air; their target doesn't even have time to scream as they converge upon his head, and it just... he just...

I feel sick again. Tears are welling in my eyes, and I think I ought to have done something, but it all happened too fast and how could I have stopped it anyway?

"You... you *murderer!*"

Knave is shaking with an anger that surprises me. He broke out of the Harriers' circle while they were distracted, but Ordaal doesn't seem overly concerned. An instant later, I see why. He must have activated a control in his battle suit, because blue sparks flash around Knave's clamped wrists and shoot up his arms. He cries out in pain and falls to his knees, his shoulders sagging as the sparks subside. God, I didn't know the restraints could do *that*. The Harriers are covering him again now, from behind, but he yells at Ordaal: "He didn't do anything, you moron. It was me! Do you hear me? I let the humans out of the trailer. I attacked the Kronos, and I tried to lead the Archer boy away from here!"

So, he's standing up for himself at last. Knave is becoming the man I once knew, and I'm impressed. He even stirred a defiant hope in my heart, but it didn't last long. I guess he only spoke up at all because he knows he faces death anyway. Now, he can do nothing but await his judgement—and with each second that passes, he looks ever smaller, more alone.

"The juggler," growls Ordaal—and I guess he means Orange-Head, "stood by as you committed your betrayal. Furthermore, he lied to protect you. He deserved his fate." He turns to the tamer. "You, woman, would share that fate, were it not for the fact that I need you to control Lobros during the evacuation. We will discuss your punishment upon our return home. Until then, you will be kept under close watch. Fail in your duties again, and you will not be given another chance. As for you, Vaerian..."

Ordaal pauses for effect, and my stomach does a cartwheel. "You have compromised this project. You have placed my life, and the lives of all your comrades, in jeopardy, and you have cost me a great deal of money. You will, of course, die. The only reason I do not have you shot down now is that live specimens of your kind are rare indeed. You obviously feel a kinship with the human, so you will be imprisoned alongside him—until such a time as I receive an acceptable bid for your bodies, dead or alive."

He makes a sharp hand gesture, and one of the Harriers takes Knave's arm. Another unlocks the tamer's restraints, while a third comes for me. I struggle to stand, determined to walk to my latest prison cell. But my legs can't hold my weight, and I collapse into my guard's arms. She presses her gun into my temple, and bundles me away. Ordaal's voice follows me: "The rest of you will make preparations to leave—and I trust you have learned from this example. You work for me, and disobedience will not be tolerated."

I'm back in my cage in the animal trailer. I can tell it's the same one because of the jagged hole where my chain used to connect to the wall. This time, though, I'm free to pace anxiously. It's good to feel the blood pumping through my legs. But my hands are still shackled in front of me, and the cage gate is locked. The Harriers who brought Knave and me here stand on the other side of the bars, their expressions barely flickering as they watch us. They look like statues.

Knave sits slumped in a corner of the cage, his knees drawn up to his chin. We haven't spoken yet—but when I hear movement outside, and the whole trailer lurches as if the axle has just snapped, I blurt out: "What the hell's going on now?"

Knave doesn't look up. "They're attaching antigravity plates to the trailer," he explains in a voice that is dead, drained of emotion.

"For the evacuation, right?"

He nods. I glance at the Harriers, expecting them to silence us, but they don't twitch. I sit down beside my fellow captive. "So, what's up? Why is Ordaal moving out now?"

"Don't talk to me," Knave grumbles into his chest.

"Why not? What's wrong?"

He glares at me, his eyes flashing. "I've already caused one death because I tried to help you—and now, the rest of us will be lucky to get out of this building alive!"

"What are you talking about? What's going on, Knave?"

"And don't call me that!" he snaps. "My name is Ganam Jafain."

"OK, whatever," I say, backing off, startled by the outburst.

He turns away, and remains silent for almost a minute. Then, he lets out a heavy sigh, and says quietly, more calmly: "Your friend made it out of the theatre."

"So, he got to the army after all." I smile at this small triumph. "Way to go, Bill!"

Knave shakes his head. "He didn't go to your army. He went to your media."

"Oh."

"He spoke to your newspapers, put out messages across your computer systems and appeared on your... what do you call it?... your device for receiving broadcast images?"

"Television."

"He told your people what Ordaal was doing."

"Oh my God..." I shake my head in disbelief. I know what must have happened next. Two days ago, nobody would have listened to Klingon Bill's talk of alien threats and conspiracies—but that was before Ordaal miniaturized him. Now, he's become living, breathing, ten-inch-high proof of everything he's always believed in. As he stood in front of the TV cameras, he must have felt like his entire existence had been validated. I should be happy, I guess, that he got our story out at last. But I wish he'd trusted the authorities, and let them handle the situation discreetly. Instead, he's put a naked flame to the tensions that have been building up in Angel's Gift, and across the world, ever since the Micronauts' arrival.

"According to Ordaal," says Knave, "there has been rioting in the human town all evening. Nova sent some Harriers to escort us back to the Rift, but only four of them made it. Delaney has disappeared: we think he has been arrested, or gone into hiding."

"That's what I keep hearing," I realize. "There must be a mob out there."

"The theatre is surrounded," Knave confirms. "Your security forces are holding them back."

"Which is probably why they haven't stormed the building yet," I mutter. "That, and the fact that they don't know what weapons you have. It's only a matter of time, though."

"Ordaal knows that. We've waited until nightfall, in the hope that the fighting would have died down—but now, he says we have to move."

"He's going to make a break for it?" It's a rhetorical question, unfortunately.

The trailer rocks again, and my stomach tells me that it's rising, floating into the air.

Knave nods grimly. "Or die trying," he says.

Chapter

Eleven

We're moving.

I can feel the trailer gliding forward. I lean in to the tight bend that takes us out of the dressing rooms, and feel the sharp turn into the corridor beyond. I imagine a convoy of tiny vehicles floating out of the theatre's back door, or smashing through a window to the surprise of the besieged soldiers outside. I wonder where Ordaal is: at the rear of the convoy or at its head? Hiding in one of the trailers or marching proud in his battle suit? Wherever he is, I'm sure he won't explain to anyone that the circus folk mean no

harm. They're his living shields, the cannon fodder that will keep his enemies busy while he gets away. He'll take Knave and me with him, of course, if he can. We're valuable to him. We're headed for the Rift. I hadn't thought about that before, not properly. It makes me tingle all over, but I'm not sure if it's with excitement or fear.

Our two guards turn in unison, and march to the door. They open it, and step out into the dark sky, their blue wings flaring out of their backpacks to carry them away. As the door closes behind them, I hear the first shots from up ahead.

I jump up, race to the locked gate and hammer at it with my trapped hands. "We're sitting ducks in here—we've got to get out!"

"I won't argue with that," says Knave dryly, "but I don't think I can help this time."

The sound of gunfire—both rifle bullets and energy discharges—grows louder, and now orange light streams through the window, telling me that we've made it outside, adding to the urgency of our plight. And the shouting. . . It's like a constant, many-voiced stream of pure anger, like the planet itself is venting its fury.

A memory bursts into my mind, and I drop to my haunches in sudden hope. Knave frowns at me as I sprawl across the floor. At last, I find what I'm looking for: the hairpin I used to free Klingon Bill. I don't know what possessed me to drop it when I was done, unless it was some weird premonition that I'd end up back here and in need of a lock pick again.

I try to pick it up with my tongue, but the trailer bucks and twists and I fall onto my side. Knave obliges, wrapping his dexterous toes around the pin and lifting it to my mouth. I clamp my teeth around it, and lower the sharp end into the lock of my restraining device.

Something slams into the trailer from the side, rocking it again. It lurches, hangs suspended for a single second of grace, and then pitches nose down. I almost swallow the hairpin as I fall backwards into Knave, and we roll until the bars of our cage bring us up short. I try to shout something, but my breath is snatched away. The pin springs out of my mouth, and flies through the bars, landing out of reach. I stare at it in numb horror.

Then, with an abruptness that drives my stomach into my shoes and flattens me against the floor, the trailer pulls up, and the hairpin slides back toward me.

"Who's driving this thing?" I groan as we level off.

"The antigravity plates are remotely controlled," says Knave.

"From another trailer?"

"I expect so."

"And what happens to us if that trailer goes down?"

"Just what you'd imagine."

"Great!" We're reasonably steady now, so I get the pin back between my teeth and set about my restraints again. My forehead is slick with sweat, and my neck aches. Knave braces me against the cage bars, which helps to counter the occasional bouts of turbulence, but my task would be almost impossible even on solid ground. Whenever I think I'm starting to get somewhere, the trailer veers sharply—defensive maneuvers, I assume—and I have to start all over again. I'm trying to ignore the shouting outside, but my concentration is well and truly broken as a brick smashes through the window. Relative to me, it's the size of a television set, and the thought that I could have been in its path makes my throat dry. An acrid smell of burning follows in the missile's wake.

"Keep trying," urges Knave, focussing my thoughts.

Easy for him to say. I feel like I've been doing this forever. But then, suddenly, I have a revelation. Just like when I picked that first lock back at the Grand Hotel. I *know* when the hairpin is in the right position, and I know just how to twist it. . .

Once again, my instincts are rewarded. The restraining device pops open, freeing my hands.

All it takes, after that, to release Knave and open our cage is time. Or rather, time and near-infinite patience. We burst through the gate at last, two masses of pent-up frustration, and I approach the window cautiously, afraid that another brick might hurtle through it. Such thoughts are pushed to the back of my mind, though, as I stare down at a scene of pure chaos.

I no longer recognize Angel's Gift. I can't see a familiar landmark, so packed is the street below us with giant beings, so thick is the air with smoke. We're floating above the mob, too high to jump, too low to be safe; this must be as high as the antigravity plates can take us. Here and there, I see clusters of uniforms: police and soldiers in riot gear. I guess they were trying to maintain a defensive line, but when the Micronauts appeared, they found themselves fighting on two fronts and ultimately swept up by the tide.

The air is filled with missiles: bottles, dustbin lids, bricks, whatever the protestors can lay their hands on. The circus trailers wheel through the air, but they handle clumsily and take numerous hits. As I watch in horror, one trailer drops low enough for hands to grasp at it and pull it to the ground. It disappears into the throng, and I shudder to imagine what will happen to its occupants down there.

The aliens are fighting back, though. Two Harriers ride a trailer roof, taking potshots at the crowd. The beams of energy from their laser pistols seem small and thin, but wherever they hit, people fall. Likewise, many of the humans have brought out guns. I duck as a bullet whistles over my head to embed itself in the ceiling behind me. It looks like a bazooka shell; it's a good thing I'm a small target.

I've never seen or felt such overwhelming hatred. I guess the idea of being kidnapped and dissected by alien beings—especially those who masqueraded as friends—plays to some of our greatest post-millennial fears. Many people will have fled town, their panic rising as they sat, helpless, in traffic snarl-ups. But some have dealt with their fear by getting angry, and their emotions have fed into each other and created an endless spiral, until those people are no longer individuals, just parts of a hysterical group mind, a mass of wounded rage.

A bottle smashes against our axle, and the ensuing *whumpf* of erupting flames tells me that it was filled with gasoline. "Still want to get out of here?" asks Knave wryly.

I shake my head, pale-faced. "Not even if I knew how. You think we'll make it to the Rift?"

"Do you think we'll die less painfully if we do?"

I pout. "I don't suppose there's a way we can steer this truck?"

A barrage of gunfire pings off the trailer, and it drops about a foot.

"Sure," says Knave. "We dig through the floor and wire a local control unit into the antigravity plates."

"That simple, huh?"

Knave is about to answer when we both become aware of a high-pitched whining sound, emanating from beneath the floor. "I take it back," he mutters—and my fear is reflected in the Vaerian's eyes. I don't need him to tell me that the antigravity plates—the only things keeping us up here—have been damaged. As if in confirmation, the trailer takes another sudden, short drop. Its front end rears up as whoever's controlling it tries to regain the lost height: that should keep us out of the mob's reach, at least, but I can't help thinking that, the next time we fall, the straining alien systems may not be able to catch us.

"Over here!" says Knave abruptly, tugging at my arm. The gate to the other cage is unlocked, and he pulls it open. I don't see what he's planning at first, until he dives into the stacks of hay that fill this end of the trailer. "We swept all this into here when we moved the Equestrons out," he explains. "It's not much, but it'll soften our landing a little if the plates do fail. Bury yourself deep, and keep your muscles relaxed." That's going to be a tall order, I think—but Knave is right. I follow his lead.

The next few minutes pass slowly, made unbearable—like my time in chains—by my inability to do anything, even to see what's happening. Hay tickles my nose and gets into my shirt, making my skin itch. I'm still shaken by each missile strike against the trailer, of course, and tossed by its increasingly desperate and futile attempts to escape the line of fire. I count three more drops, longer each time. And suddenly, a new sound emerges from the general clamor: an uneven percussion of wood against metal. We must be down among the rioters, and they're hammering at us with sticks and baseball bats. The racket is deafening, and dents are appearing in the walls.

And then, we take another plunge. Our final one, as it turns out. Fortunately, there wasn't far left to fall, and we hit the ground before I knew what was happening, before I had time to tense up. That, and the hay, probably saved me from serious injury, although I still feel as if I've been thrown into a brick wall. The impact jarred every bone in my body. I hear screams outside: I guess we took a few people by surprise, maybe landed on a few toes.

It isn't long, though, before the onslaught resumes, concentrated upon the roof now. I don't mind admitting it, I'm terrified. I'm just praying that our tin can will hold out for longer than the attention spans of our attackers. Some hope.

And now, one side of the trailer is rising, slowly at first—I guess, even at this size, it takes a few hands to lift it—but gaining momentum. And now we're in free fall again, for just a second; the battered vehicle thuds heavily onto its side and I tumble, in a cascade of hay, into the wall, wrenching my shoulder. Knave calls down to me, asking if I'm OK: he was quicker to react, saving himself by grabbing hold of the cage bars. He drops lightly to my side.

The door is in the ceiling now, and my heart sinks as it's wrenched open, as our shell is breached. A giant white hand reaches in, the wrist almost filling the aperture. Someone's feeling brave—or too high on adrenaline to realize that, if we were armed and hostile, he could lose a couple of fingers. Knave and I flatten ourselves against the wall as the hand searches for us. It comes close, but the bars bring it up short, and it withdraws.

A moment of unnatural stillness follows. I begin to hope that we might have been left alone—until my scalp tingles with a dreadful premonition.

"We've got to get out," I insist, "now!" I climb the horizontal bars like a ladder, and Knave gives me a puzzled look but follows me. The gate opens upward now, and I duck beneath it, squirming around until I'm outside the cage but still clinging to the bars.

I climb to the ceiling, but I can't reach the door: it's too far along. And, before I can work out what to do about that, a Molotov cocktail drops past me.

The only thing that saves our lives is that the bottle doesn't shatter when it lands. But gasoline is dribbling out around the dislodged cloth fuse: it catches light, and the flames spread quickly to the dry hay strewn across the trailer.

Knave tugs at my foot from below. He reaches up, and I take his hand. "Swing me over to the door," he urges. I don't want to do it. He might be a trained acrobat, but I'm not. What if I get this wrong? What if I can't hold his weight? But the fire is burning hotter and higher, smoke is already feeling its way into my nose and mouth, and anyway, Knave has launched himself from the bars and I grit my teeth as pain lances through my injured shoulder.

And, suddenly, I'm not holding him any more, and there's a moment of panic as he somersaults and spins in midair and reaches for the doorway's near edge.

He finds it. He's facing me now, hanging by two hands, and his free arms reach out to me. "Jump," he shouts. "I'll catch you!" And, again, there's no time to argue.

Knave sways as I plow into him headfirst, but he doesn't let me go. The smoke is making my eyes water, and I bury my face in my companion's purple chest, fighting a coughing fit. But, behind my eyelids, I can see a spaceship cockpit, and another version of Knave fighting another blaze, and I yank my eyes open because this is no time to let the Time Traveler's reality distract me from my dire peril in this one.

The fire is licking at my feet now. Knave pulls himself up over the lip of the doorway, carrying me until I can get a hold myself and follow him. We emerge gratefully onto the side of the trailer, and I fall to my knees, coughing and retching. Knave pulls me to my feet, wraps his left arms around me and lets me lean on him as he guides me across a metal surface pitted with craters. He springs off the edge of the trailer and turns back to pick me up. As he sets me down, I collapse against the vehicle's vertical roof, wheezing and spluttering.

It takes a few minutes to clear my lungs and steady my breathing, and then I can take in my surroundings. What looked like a wide road at first turns out to be a narrow alleyway when I adjust my perspective—and, to my amazement, I recognize it as the one that runs beside the theatre. I thought we'd traveled halfway across town, but we only managed a few hundred yards! Whoever was controlling our flight, they must have turned us back in an attempt to get our crippled trailer out of the danger zone.

We're at the alleyway's mouth, standing amid discarded crisp packets, Coke cans and bottles that come up to my knees. The riot has moved out onto Orchard Street—which, from my point of view, is a seething mass of stamping feet and fallen bodies. Some of the latter are thrashing about, trying to stand; I can't tell if the others are alive or dead.

Our attackers, whoever they were, have forgotten about us. If they hadn't, they'd have swatted us like rats by now. Perhaps they concluded that our vehicle was empty, or at least that nobody could be alive within; perhaps they were distracted by fresh victims or attacked themselves. Whatever the reason, nobody's looking in our direction, even though—despite the smoke billowing out of its door—the crumpled trailer gives us only partial concealment from beings so much taller than us. And we have a clear escape route.

I nod to Knave to indicate that I'm ready. We run.

And we keep running.

We're covering distance at a snail's pace. I'm horribly aware that anyone could catch us with a few quick human-length strides. I push myself as hard as I can, but I'm still suffering the effects of smoke inhalation, not helped by the constant burning stench in the air. My lungs ache, my heart strains, and after what seems like an age, we've only just reached the back of the building. Knave rounds the corner ahead of me, his eyes set upon something.

Another trailer has fallen. Like ours, it lies on its side, battered and scorched. In this case, however, someone has taken a tool of some kind to the roof, peeling it back like the lid of a sardine tin. Knave doubles his pace, pulling away from me, and slips nimbly beneath the jagged edge. As I come to a breathless halt beside the trailer, he reappears—and, from his expression of relief, I guess he's found no corpses inside.

He's been collecting supplies. A length of rope is wound around his shoulder, and his pockets bulge with juggling balls and pins. He's also carrying something. It's golden, made from a lightweight plastic-type material molded into a figure-eight shape, and I recognize it immediately. "A glider pack," explains Knave unnecessarily, pressing the device onto my back and guiding my arms through the shoulder straps. "This should keep you out of reach of the giants." Catching my eye, he corrects himself: "I mean, the other humans."

"Don't you have one too?" I ask. The sound of the riot is still deafening, and I have to raise my voice to be heard.

"I could only find one."

"But—"

Knave holds up two hands, forestalling my objection. "Nobody's going to lay a hand on me. You need the pack more than I do."

I can't argue with that—and it feels good, like I was born to wear it. I flex my arms to activate it, and I feel it opening out, snapping into a new configuration: a pair of golden wings. Not energy wings like the Harriers have, and perhaps not as efficient—but they'll do. I step off the ground, a little unsteady at first—but Acroyear's voice is in the back of my head, instructing me in the glider pack's use.

"All we need now is a couple of laser pistols," says Knave with a grim smile.

"So, what do we do next?"

"This is the theatre, right?" He indicates the towering edifice beside us. He can only have seen it once before, I realize, when Ordaal brought his troupe here.

"That's right."

"Then I suggest we find somewhere to hide inside."

"We can't do that! What about the others? Your friends?"

"There's nothing we can do for them."

"They'll be slaughtered out there!" I cry, pointing in the direction of Orchard Street.

"And so will we, if we get caught up in the fighting."

"Maybe we can... I don't know... calm things down." Even to myself, I sound doubtful. "Your people don't speak English, but I do. I can explain that they're innocent, as much Ordaal's victims as the rest of us were."

"And you think they'll stop to listen, with Nova's killers firing at them?"

I don't say anything. I hate the fact that Knave's right.

"All we can do," he says sadly, "is hope that most of them reach the Rift, and that the rest aren't... aren't too badly hurt."

“Great!” I say sullenly. “So, now we’re rooting for Ordaal to escape, after everything he’s done.” An alarming thought makes my heart flutter. “And what happens when he reaches the research facility? He’ll have half the US Armed Forces waiting for him by now. He’ll have to fight his way in there.” There’ll be more deaths on my conscience. I wonder if this is how Delaney felt. He must have wanted to believe Ordaal’s promises, must have prayed that the Micronauts would leave because the alternative was this: this bloodbath. But Ordaal wouldn’t have stopped; I have to believe that. He had to *be* stopped, whatever the cost. “And what about Nova? What will she be doing right now? She’s in that dome with... with my father...” I swallow. “I have to get up there. I don’t care how dangerous it is, I have to go!” Knave looks into my eyes for a long moment—and he must have seen the determination in them because, finally, he nods. “We avoid the protestors where we can, though,” he says.

“You bet! Look... Knave, I’m really grateful and all. You saved my life, you really did. But this is my fight now. I didn’t mean... that is, I wasn’t expecting you to come with me.”

Knave’s eyes widen. “Get down!” he cries.

He grabs the front of my T-shirt, and I yelp as he pulls me out of the air. Knave flattens himself against the side of the downed trailer, and I follow suit. But, when no threat makes itself immediately obvious, I get impatient and peer around the corner of the vehicle.

The back door of the theatre has been kicked or blasted off its hinges. I don’t know if it was like that before or if it just happened and I didn’t hear it over everything else. Black smoke pours out of the building, making me think it was never such a great idea to hide in there after all. And standing in the doorway is Ordaal, wearing his full-sized armor.

I thought he looked intimidating before. I didn’t know the half of it. At my present size, he could squash me like a bug.

“He must have been waiting in there till the coast was clear,” I whisper to Knave. “Only it looks as if the place was torched first.”

“Has he seen us? What’s he doing?”

“He’s... I think he’s... yes, he’s moving away.”

“Thank the stars for that.”

“We have to follow him!” I don’t know where the words came from, but I’m holding Knave’s shoulders hard enough to make him wince. I’m in the grip of something like excitement, and the only way I can explain it is that I’ve finally found a purpose, something I can do. Something positive. The first thing I’ve done in what seems like ages that’s about more than just preserving my own life. “He’ll be heading for the Rift, and he’ll kill anyone who gets in his way. Don’t you see? We can stop him!”

Knave spreads his four arms, and utters a helpless: “How?”

“I don’t know. We’ve got this far. We can think of something.”

“I admire your enthusiasm,” says Knave, chewing on his lip, “if not your sanity.”

I take to the air without stopping to check that he’s following me. Ordaal’s gait seems unhurried, but he’s already reached Bramwell Road, which runs along the far side of the theatre. He turns into it, moving away from the riot, and I dive forward, letting a cushion of antigravity catch me and lift me. I soar after Ordaal, covering ground far faster than I could have done on foot. I watch the flagstones flash by beneath me, and I feel exhilarated. And then I look up again, and there are giants in front of me, brandishing their makeshift weapons.

I pull up short, hitting the ground so heavily that I stumble six paces forward. The rioters, I suppose, didn’t spot me when they passed this alleyway on their way down Bramwell Road. They must have seen Ordaal, the most recognizable of the Micronauts, from Orchard Street, and come after him. Even as I hesitate, another two young men race across my field of vision, shouting obscenities. Knave appears at my side—he was right behind me, of course—and we exchange uncertain looks.

I’m not ready for a fight. Not yet. I think about the last time I went toe to toe with Ordaal, not ten yards from here: I was six feet tall, then, and still hopelessly outgunned. But I saw what that armored monster did to those soldiers, and I can’t stand by as it happens again.

I fly out onto the street. Ordaal is already a block away: he’s making faster progress than I would have expected. He’s under attack from about eight people—they fling themselves at him, hammering at his

silver shell—but he keeps his head down and repeatedly bats them aside. He’s hardly broken his stride. One woman has a gun—I don’t know where she got it from; she looks like she’s only in her teens—but she can’t get a clear shot. Even if she could, it would do her no good. I swoop over their heads, not knowing what I can do to help. Then, a middle-aged man brings a crowbar down across Ordaal’s back, squealing in pain as it vibrates out of his hands. And I dive into the melee, and retrieve the dropped weapon.

I need both hands to lift it. It weighs me down as I try to get clear of the rioters again. Somebody just yelled “Another one!”—and they’re aiming their fists and sticks at me now. The teenager lets off two hurried shots, but her aim is lousy.

I touch down on Ordaal’s shoulder, and set about prying the thin end of my steel bar into the seam beneath his golden bubble. If I can lever him out of this battle suit, we might stand a chance. He sees what I’m doing and tries to shrug me off, but my glider keeps me steady. When Ordaal makes a grab for me with his hand, though, I’m forced to take flight.

Fortunately, my unknowing allies are piling on top of him again, distracting him. “Aim for the helmet!” I cry out. I draw some strange, distrusting looks, but a few people actually take my advice. They can’t slow the alien’s relentless advance—but as he fends off this fresh flurry of blows, I see a clear path back to his shoulder, and I take it. To my delight, I’m able to wedge the crowbar beneath Ordaal’s bubble top, and I press down on it with all my might. I think something is beginning to give.

That’s when Ordaal stops walking, and starts to fight back. His blaster glove opens, and two people are engulfed in flame. That gives some of the others pause for thought—but one woman is already struggling to hold back Ordaal’s arm, to keep him from firing again. “Keep at him!” she yells with a hint of high-pitched desperation. “We can’t let up for a second or he’ll slaughter us!” The crowbar springs out of my grasp, and I have to fly after it, catching it in midair. As I pull up again, I see that more people are joining the battle, streaming toward us from Orchard Street as they see what’s happening down here. Then, something hits me. Something hard and wooden. I think it was a baseball bat. I spin out of control, smarting all over. I don’t know which way is up, until I realize that I’m about to smash into the road. I put the brakes on just in time, grazing my left arm and leg as I skid to a halt along the asphalt surface. The crowbar barely misses my head, bouncing next to me with a series of resounding clangs. I curse myself for my carelessness. I was concentrating so hard on Ordaal, I forgot that not everybody has worked out which side I’m on yet.

For a few seconds, I can’t see past my pain. A hand lands on my shoulder, and I lash out before I realize that it was too small to belong to a human being. Knave, of course, dodges my swing with ease, and returns to the business of helping me to my feet. I flash him a grateful, if embarrassed, smile. He shrugs the coil of rope from his shoulder and hands one end to me. I glance up at Ordaal, and nod to show that I understand the plan.

Suddenly, there’s an explosion of light, a fierce crackle and a smell of burnt ozone. Somebody is thrown past me, landing with a wet thump. He’s unconscious—but not, I don’t think, dead. A space has cleared around Ordaal, and there’s a lull in the fighting as people nurse burns or stand dazed, staring at those who have fallen. Ordaal, I’m guessing, just ran an electric current through his armor. He succeeded in repelling his attackers—but he isn’t pressing his advantage. He stands still, as if stunned himself.

“The suit needs time to recharge,” cries Knave. “This is our chance!”

We start forward as one, the rope unraveling between us. I fly to Ordaal’s right, Knave runs to his left. The crowd aren’t too far behind us. As battle is rejoined, I swoop between Ordaal’s legs, then up and around him again, wrapping the rope around his knees as, beneath me, Knave ties his ankles. Besieged from all directions, the alien raises a sluggish arm in defense, and tries to plow on. The rope pulls at his legs, and he loses his balance. He topples like a felled tree, people scrambling to get out of his way. Knave springs out of the monster’s approaching shadow, and the great, heavy battle suit crashes face first into the ground.

A second later, it disappears under a mass of heaving bodies. Somebody has picked up my crowbar and, following my example, he’s trying to pry off the bubble-shaped helmet. I gain some height, to get a better perspective, and another weighty piece of wood whistles past my ear. Somebody screams, and

huge hands try to swat me away. I'd been aware of the deafening noise of the riot growing around me, but I hadn't quite appreciated how quickly Bramwell Road was filling up. I thought I'd avoided getting caught up in the worst of this—but, thanks to Ordaal, the riot has come to me. Everywhere I turn, there are hate-filled faces.

I drop to knee height: too low for people to get a good swing at me, too high to be stamped on. I spot Ordaal—normal, Micronaut-sized Ordaal, ripped from his outer armor—being held aloft exultantly by five pairs of hands. He's struggling, but he still seems groggy from his fall. His smaller battle suit extrudes a wicked-looking blaster from the substance of its left arm, but its first shot flares up into the sky. And then, he's lost to me, dragged down into the mob—and, despite all the alien has done, I feel sick as I think about him being torn apart.

I remind myself that I could suffer the same fate yet. I keep on the move, threading my way through a forest of tree trunk legs, causing chaos wherever I fly. I can't see Knave.

Slowly, it occurs to me that the gaps between those legs are widening. The crowd's continual roar is stuttering, interspersed by shocked and indignant shrieks. And then something slams into me, like a battering ram applied to my ribs. It drives me into the man beside me, who screams and flaps his hands, accidentally catching my leg. I spin around, and the battering ram hits me again, in the stomach this time—it's cold, and it takes my breath away; what the hell is it?—and I tumble end over end. I fight to control my flight, and dive to the ground, where I'll be a more difficult target, I hope.

I'm shivering. My shirt is soaked, clinging to my skin. But I'm not hurt. Droplets of water rain on my head. I look up to see a jet of clear liquid arcing over me, and I realize what must have happened. The authorities are trying to disperse the protestors with a water cannon.

I head toward the source of the jet, because I reckon I'll be safest there. This takes me against the flow of the panicked crowd, and it's all I can do to avoid being trampled. Then, suddenly, there's an empty stretch of road ahead of me and, at its far side, a row of riot shields and a black, armored crowd control vehicle.

Seeing an end to my ordeal at last, I fly up and toward the reformed police line.

And, suddenly, I'm deafened by an explosion, and another—and now, a whole volley of them. Gunfire. The sky is filled with oversized bullets, and I realize too late that the police are just as scared of the Micronauts as everybody else is.

I feel a heavy thump in my back, and I think I've been shot—but the glider pack took the bullet for me. Unfortunately, it's now spitting and crackling at me. And now, I'm plummeting, trailing white smoke, into a sea of blue uniforms.

I keep trying to reactive my stricken wings: I'm rewarded with a few halting spurts of antigravity, which slow my fall. I bounce off a shoulder, then a knee, and land feet first like a parachutist, letting my legs buckle and rolling onto my side.

I hurt all over, and my much-abused body has decided that enough is enough. It won't respond to my commands. I can't even lift my head. My eyes are staring upward, but I can't make out much: just shifting shapes against a black sky. And there are voices, but I can't hear them over my own panting. All things considered, this could have been much worse.

Then, something is lowered toward me. A huge, metal tube. And I'm staring down its open end, to where the tube is blocked by something squat and sharp-pointed.

A bullet. Waiting at the back end of a gun barrel.

And, as fear takes my breath, I focus past the weapon to the enormous, scowling face beyond it. A familiar face.

“Archer!” hisses Brannigan. And his black moustache bristles as his lips curl into a satisfied sneer.

Chapter

Twelve

I'm standing on the passenger seat of a cop car.

Yep, that's right, standing. It's the only way I can see over the dashboard, and even then I have to crane my neck. Brannigan looped the safety belt over me, but it hangs loose around my hips and I don't think it'd do me a whole lot of good if he slammed on the brakes.

Not that he's picked up much speed. The fighting has died down—at least in this part of town—but we're still feeling our way through sullen crowds. There's another car in front of us, and one behind. The lead driver sounds his siren in one-second bursts to scatter the most stubborn obstructions. Even so, some people get close enough to see me in the car, and to express their anger at me by beating on its roof.

A man comes at the windshield with a wrench, and I fix him with a stony glare, which makes him back away. He says something to a woman beside him, and points at me. She furrows her brow, nods and pulls at the sleeve of the person next to her. I think people are beginning to realize who I am, or at least that I'm one of them, a human being. They know that Klingon Bill was shrunk to this size, after all, and maybe he even mentioned me in his broadcast. That would explain how Brannigan seemed to know the whole story, even why I ran from him at the police station. That's why he waved aside my tongue-tied attempts at an explanation as he half-guided, half-carried me to his car.

"I just wish you'd told me all this before," he said sourly as he threw me a towel. I bit my tongue, remembering how he refused to listen to me.

He spoke to his superior officers, just out of my earshot, then got behind the wheel and buckled me in. I protested as we pulled away; I was worried about Knave—still am—but Brannigan assured me that the cops were doing all they could. "We've picked up a lot of the circus guys already," he said. "A few bruises, but most of them will be just fine."

"I hope so," I said. "They're not our enemies, you know."

"We did manage to work that out for ourselves," he said tartly.

"The ones you have to worry about are Ordaal and the four women with wings."

"The ones who are shooting at us. Yeah, thanks."

"And... um, there's this giant praying mantis..."

"Look," said Brannigan, "I'm sure your friend will be OK. Right now, my orders are to get you to the dome. A lot of people have been looking for you."

"Really? Good thing your pals didn't put a bullet through me then," I say pointedly, "especially since you're so certain of who your enemies are."

He's said nothing since then. His radio, however, flares to life every few seconds with the reports of nearby police and army units. Ordaal, I learn, is in custody, unconscious but alive. His battle suit has been peeled from him—although, to my disappointment, the reporting officer doesn't elaborate on what was found beneath it. I'm also privy to the final moments of a shootout between a unit of soldiers and a lone Harrier, who has taken a young family hostage in their own home. The siege culminates in the alien's death.

Wearied by our crawling progress, I sit down, my outstretched legs barely reaching the edge of the car seat. The busted glider pack digs into my back. I couldn't bring myself to discard it, so I retracted the wings and hoped that it could—I don't know—self-repair, maybe.

According to the radio, six trailers made it out of town. They fell together at the foot of Gabriel's Hill; I guess their remote guidance system finally failed. Hundreds of protestors had gathered outside the research facility, but troops were able to contain them and prevent violence from breaking out. Many of the protestors fled as a crashed trailer set light to the hillside around it. The stranded Micronauts surrendered to the army, and a path is being cleared to take them to the relative safety of the dome.

Soon, it's my turn to be guided up that same path. Brannigan bundles me out of the cop car like I'm four years old, throwing the damp towel over my head. I cast it aside. I'm not a criminal being jeered and photographed as he's led into a courthouse; it's safer if people *can* see me, see that I'm as human as they are.

Nobody can get near me, anyhow. Two lines of soldiers stretch all the way to the halogen-lit compound

of the dome, and three more plus Brannigan provide a close escort, surrounding me. They walk slowly, but I still find it difficult to keep up with them. My feet sink into the grass up to my ankles, and at one point I almost cry out when a colossal insect flits past the corner of my eye. It's a harmless grasshopper, I realize, but looking as big to me now as the Kronos creatures did when they ambushed me here two nights ago.

Only two nights ago? It seems longer. Even the ugly white dome, when it comes into view, inspires a rush of sentiment in me. Inevitably, my thoughts turn to the Time Traveler figure in the bottom of my wardrobe; I feel as if it's welcoming me home.

There are more soldiers inside the facility, lining the corridors. Reinforcements must have been pouring in all day. I'm almost getting used to being stared at from a great height.

The main administration office has been turned into an operations room. People in suits and uniforms bustle back and forth. Tables are strewn with papers and photographs, schematics of the dome are pinned to one wall, and seemingly random words have been scribbled on flipcharts: at the top of one pad, written in red capitals and circled, is the name 'AZURA NOVA'. Telephones chirp in an almost constant melody behind the urgent buzz of debate. There's so much happening, and most of it so far above my head, that I can't take it all in. It occurs to me to look for my dad, but I don't see him.

We stop in front of a desk, but to my frustration, I can't see over it. I'm left staring at the polished wood, unable to hear the conversation above me, until Brannigan stoops, lifts me unceremoniously by the shoulders and deposits me on the tabletop. I feel humiliated.

"Ryan Archer, sir," says the cop.

Seated before me is a steel-haired army general, middle-aged and heavysset. I guess he's dealt with a few Micronauts already, because he takes my size in his stride, acknowledging my arrival on his desk with an abrupt nod. "Archer," he grunts.

"You're in charge here, I take it?"

"That's right, son. You gave us quite a scare, disappearing like you did."

I'm not really listening. I've just spotted somebody over the General's shoulder. Roger Delaney is talking to himself. No, I realize, there's a telephone on a bank of desks in front of him. It's attached to a tape recorder, around which four men huddle, two of them wearing headphones. "Please... please, Ms. Nova," pleads the Mayor (ex-Mayor?). Even from here, I can see the sweat on his brow. "You have to be reasonable. Ordaal, as I've already told you, is receiving treatment. He can't be moved in his condition. He... No, no, I can't do that."

I can hear Nova's clipped tones over a tinny speaker, but I can't make out her words.

The General is saying something to me about a debriefing.

"He's out of my jurisdiction now," insists Delaney. "Just... just please listen to me, Ms. Nova. Hurting the hostages won't help you."

"As soon as Corporal Jennings is free," says the General, "he'll take you to the —"

"Hostages?" I interrupt, feeling the beginnings of a new dread.

The General's lips tighten. "Ah."

"You see? I told you she wouldn't listen." Delaney's shrill cry distracts me again. He's turned to face the guys beside him, gesticulating wildly.

"I think it would be best if Jennings explained," mutters the General. He looks away as one of the men from Delaney's table hurries over to him. "Well?" he raps.

The man shakes his head. "The suspect won't compromise, sir."

The General leaves his seat, throwing a vague "Excuse me" in my direction.

"They never listened to me. They lied to me, they used me!" Delaney looks close to tears.

I turn to Brannigan, still looming behind me. The top of my head doesn't even reach the badge on his chest. "What hostages?" I yell up at him. "What's going on here, Brannigan?"

He leans over me, his voice lowered as if afraid to attract attention. "Ordaal's accomplice, this Nova woman, and her technicians have occupied some laboratory."

"Some laboratory?"

"Where they were analyzing the Rift. They've got hostages."

“My father?” It can’t be. It *has* to be.

“I don’t know. I only –”

“Mr. Archer?” A watery-eyed youth with a ginger moustache and a corporal’s stripes approaches the desk. “My name’s Jennings. I need to ask you a few –”

I round on him furiously. “*Is my father in there?*”

“I... I...” he stammers, taken aback. “Yes, Doctor Archer is... I’m afraid he’s...”

I’ve heard enough. I race across the desk, activating my glider as I leap off the edge. If my sputtering wings don’t hold me now, this is going to hurt.

I’m lucky. A single gasp of antigravity takes me to my destination, although my landing is less graceful than I’d hoped. The General is leaning over the speaker phone, trying to reason with the maniac on the other end of the line. He recoils in surprise, snatching his hands away as I smack into the table in front of him.

“General?” crackles the voice of Azura Nova.

I crouch beside the phone and shout into it, needing to make my small voice heard. “Dad! Dad, can you hear me? It’s Ryan. I’m OK, Dad. I’m here. I’m in the –”

A callused hand slams down, cutting the connection. I jump back in alarm and fall right on my butt, so I’m staring up at the General’s livid face as it zooms toward me. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Even normal human speech sounds loud to me now, so his bellowed words threaten to blow out my eardrums.

“She’s got my father in there,” I remind him sharply.

“And now she knows that you’re out here!”

“So?”

The General’s cheeks are red. “So, she wants you in exchange for the hostages! You and her partner, this Ordaal character. That’s the deal she’s been pushing for, and we’ve been stalling her. We’ve been telling her we don’t know where you are, but you’ve just blown it.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what to say. I find myself hoping that Dad didn’t hear me after all, that he doesn’t know how I acted impulsively and screwed up as usual. The piercing ring of the telephone only adds to my gloom: evidently, Nova is eager to find out more.

One of the General’s men—the guy who was negotiating before—takes the call, lifting the handset way out of my reach. “Edmonds here,” he says. Then: “Yes... yes... I apologize for that... yes, he *is* here, but... no, we only just found him. I assure you, Ms. Nova, we didn’t... no, we don’t know how he...” I can make this right.

“I’ll do it!” I say.

The General frowns at me. “I beg your pardon?”

“That’s what I was planning to tell Nova.” Well, sort of: my plan was only just beginning to form as I acted. “I’ll hand myself over to her if she lets my dad go.”

“That isn’t an option, son. How old are you? Seventeen? Eighteen?”

“I’m twenty—old enough to make my own decisions!”

He shakes his head. “I’m not prepared to put your life at risk, and that’s an end to it.”

“Hey, don’t walk away from me!”

As the General disappears, Brannigan comes back into view. “Come on, Archer,” he says, “you’re in the way here. Let’s get you to this debriefing, then I can get out of here.”

He tries to pick me up again, but I push away his huge hands. “I can still walk, you know!”

“Yeah? So, how are you planning to get down from the table, wise guy?”

My wings are still extended, so I will them to lift me. Nothing. Obstinate, I look for something I can jump down to: a stool or something. I hate being this size.

“You know I can’t agree to that, Ms. Nova,” says Edmonds into the phone. “Yes, yes, I understand that, and I *will* talk to my superior officers, and... yes, you have my word.”

Brannigan is glaring down at me, his arms folded. “Look,” I say to him, “can’t you talk to these guys? They won’t take me seriously!”

He shrugs. “Nothing to do with me.”

“How many people is Nova holding?”

“I told you, I don’t know the details.”

“Listen to me, Brannigan—body parts are valuable in her galaxy. If she doesn’t get what she wants, she’ll cut her losses. She can take the *Sunrunner* through the Rift any time she likes. She’ll head back home with all the human corpses she can lay her hands on.”

“And you want to die in your father’s place. Very noble.”

“No, you don’t get it. There’s something about me... I don’t know what it is, but I’m worth more to them alive. Maybe enough to swap for *all* the hostages.”

As the cop considers that, I hear the General’s raised voice: “Delaney! Where’s Delaney? Did anyone see where he got to?”

At last, Brannigan nods. “I’ll see what I can do. But there’s one condition: you go with Corporal Jennings and you tell him everything you know, like the General asked.”

“OK. Fine.”

He reaches for me again—and, reluctantly, I let him pick me up. He hoists me on to his shoulders, making me feel like a kid again. On the plus side, my newfound height gives me a better perspective on my surroundings. The General has found Delaney, who is slumped in a chair, his head in his hands. “I don’t know,” he wails, “I don’t know. I don’t know anything about these people, why won’t you believe that?”

“You spent more time with Ordaal than anybody,” snaps the General. “Come on, Delaney, think! You’re already in this up to your neck, so just tell me: who was calling the shots? Was it Ordaal or Nova?”

“I don’t know!”

“What did she think of him? Did she listen to him?”

“Leave me alone!”

The General’s barked rejoinder fades into background noise as the room whips past me, a little too fast for comfort. I cling to Brannigan’s neck and close my eyes for a few seconds, to calm the rush of blood to my head. When I look again, the ginger-haired young corporal has fallen into step beside us and we’re out in the corridor.

“And you will talk to the General, right?” I say anxiously. The only response from my human mount is a long-suffering sigh. I take it as an affirmative. “Good—and you can tell him something else. Tell him that the Ordaal thing, it’s worth a shot.”

“What are you talking about now?” grunts Brannigan.

“They’re thinking about letting Ordaal talk to Nova—if they can bring him round, I suppose. I think it’s worth a shot.”

“You do, huh?”

“Well, let’s just say it can’t do any harm. I don’t think Ordaal is as ruthless as Nova.” Of course, I’m basing that on my experience with the erstwhile General Nova in another timeline; I remind myself that I’ve had very little contact with her in this one. “He’s a businessman—and he’ll want to save his own skin. Put a deal to him; I think he’ll listen.”

“But will Nova listen to him?” asks Corporal Jennings.

“I don’t know,” I confess. “Maybe not. But it should buy us some time, at least.”

By which I mean that it should buy *Dad* some time. Time for the people in charge here to see sense. Time for them to realize that there’s only one way to end this.

The debriefing took forever. It reminded me of the police station, the endless repetitive questions—except that, this time, the interrogator believed my answers. Plus, I was sitting cross-legged on his desk, resting my elbow on the lid of a computer printer.

When we were done, Jennings brought me here: to a large, rectangular room on the ground floor of the dome, populated by a couple of dozen Micronauts. When I complained about being sidelined, he promised to find out what was happening and come back for me soon. I accepted his word grudgingly. To be honest, it feels good to be among people of my own size again, no matter how alien they might be.

It's as if my mind, having had to process so many unusual perspectives, is glad of the chance to relax and see things on a more familiar scale. I can almost feel a knot unwinding itself in my brain.

It looks like the majority of the circus performers have been rescued. The sight of the blue-green elephant performing an impromptu belly-dancing routine for his colleagues brings a grin to my face. I'm glad the big guy's safe! The atmosphere is positive, although most of the people here must still have friends among the missing. I guess they're just happy to have been liberated. Many of them are nursing cuts and bruises, even broken limbs, but they're looking after each other. They've cut bandages and slings to their own specifications from the contents of a human-sized first aid kit. Cushions have been scattered across the room for their comfort, along with mattresses across which five or six of them can lie in a row.

"So, what kept you?"

I whirl around in delight at the familiar voice. I want to hug the speaker, but he has too many arms in my way. "Knave, you made it! I thought you'd... when I lost you in the riot... how did you get here?"

"Mostly," says the Vaerian, "by holding on to the underside of your car. Getting past the giants and into this building was a little more tricky."

"You mean you got into the dome without the army even seeing you?"

"Right into this room. I had to be sure it wasn't a trap." Knave smiles. "So far, though, we've been treated well. Some of the guys are even talking about claiming asylum here. It may take some time for the humans to accept us, though. I heard Ordaal has been captured?"

I nod, and fill Knave in on what I know. When I tell him about Nova and my father, he frowns and pulls at his lip in thought. "We might be able to do something about that," he considers. "First, though, I think there's someone you should talk to."

He leads me across the room to where Bill Dempster is sitting despondently against a wall, his head buried in his knees. He looks up when I call his name, and a relieved expression washes over him. He clambers to his feet and lunges at me, gripping me in an awkward bear hug that pins my arms. "You're OK, thank God, you're OK."

"Hey, hey," I cajole him, struggling to detach him from me. "What's up, Bill? You're surrounded by alien beings—I thought you'd be in hog heaven!"

"I'm sorry," he stammers. "It's just that... I saw some of the riot on TV, after they questioned me, before they brought me here, and it's awful, man. This is, like, First Contact, right? And look what's happening: they're fighting in the streets, humans versus Micronauts. All the people who've been hurt, and it's all our fault. All *my* fault."

"You did what you had to," I say automatically, ignoring my own doubts.

"I tried to explain," insists Bill. "I told them about Ordaal and Nova and those mantis creatures. I told everybody, so it couldn't be covered up. I thought they'd... I thought people would protest, make a fuss, force the government to do something. I didn't think they'd..." He flaps his hands, unable to find the words.

"They're scared," I say. "They were scared from the start."

"But I told them! I told them who the villains were. Not the circus folk. I even told them about Knave, how he helped us."

"And people believed what they wanted to believe. Like you always said."

"And what about us, Ryan? Are we gonna be stuck like this forever?"

I hadn't even thought about it. Bill slumps back down, shaking his head miserably. "It's all such a mess!"

"But it's coming to an end," says Knave quietly. "At last, it's coming to an end. We're free." He turns to me. "I've been trying to tell him that. I've been trying to tell him how grateful we are for everything you've both done—but he doesn't have a translator."

I nod understandingly, and pass the message on. Bill manages a half-smile in response.

"I've been thinking," says Knave. "We don't have to wait for your politicians to make up their minds. If we can get to this laboratory..."

"How? There'll be guards on the doors—both sides!"

"The same way I got in here. The obvious way." I look at him blankly, until he grins and says: "Don't you have any story books on your world? In the fiction of my galaxy, buildings like this always, *always* have

handy air-conditioning ducts!"

I follow his theatrical gesture, smiling as my eyes alight upon something in the wall above Klingon Bill's shoulder. It's one of the grilles that blows warm air—or cold, I suppose, when necessary—through the dome. I'd seen it before, but not really registered it. I'm still getting used to the fact that, where once I could barely have squeezed my head into the square pipe beyond it, now I could almost stand up inside it.

"This base was put up in a hurry," says Knave. "I can unfasten the screws on that grille with my claws." *Only from the outside*, I'm about to say. Unless... I stare at the grille's horizontal slats, and conclude that my Vaerian friend could probably fit an arm or a leg between them. I look at the short, thick nails of his bare toes, and imagine the contortions he'd have to go through to do as he describes. "We can go anywhere we like," he says.

But I've seen a flaw in his plan. "Anywhere except the main chamber," I say grimly. "The lab. It's designed to be isolated in the case of an emergency. Nova must know that: she'll have activated the failsafe systems, sealed herself in." The only thing keeping Dad alive, I realize, is an emergency air tank pumping oxygen into the airtight room, and I don't know how long it will last. One more reason not to waste time.

"What if we could get to a phone, at least? Could we contact Nova?"

"Maybe." That sounds promising.

"We could put your proposal directly to her."

"She could send the hostages out through the lab doors, and let me in through the grilles."

Knave frowns. "You're making a big sacrifice, Archer. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Positive! I'm not giving up, Knave. I might let Nova take me through the Rift, but that doesn't mean I'll stop fighting her; I just don't want anyone else to get hurt. This is about me and her now."

He takes a deep breath, and lets it go. "Then we'd best get moving."

He climbs onto my shoulders to reach the screws at the top of the grille, turning them with his fingers (he must have left them loose when he came in this way). As he tackles the lower screws alone, I turn to Bill: he's watching us curiously, having heard only my half of our conversation. "We're getting out of here," I recap for him, "going to see if we can do something about Nova. You coming?" He opens his mouth to reply, but no sound emerges.

Knave lays the grille aside, and hauls himself over the lip of the uncovered aperture. He reaches down to me, but I hesitate. "Bill? I asked if you wanted to come with us."

Klingon Bill stares up at me, then at Knave, then back at me. He shakes his head.

I should have recognized the fear in his eyes before now.

"I'm sorry," he spits out. "I... I can't..."

"Hey, it's OK," I rush to reassure him, feeling guilty for having asked at all. "You've been through a lot. Nobody expects you to risk your life again. You've done enough."

"I'd only screw up, I'd slow you down, I'd..."

"You don't have to explain, Bill, it's OK. Anyway, I should have thought—we need someone we can trust back here. Someone to keep an eye on things, to look after the circus guys and to cover for Knave and me if anyone comes looking. You can do that, right?"

Bill nods gratefully.

"He can start by putting the grille back on behind us," says Knave.

I translate the suggestion and make to leave, but Bill snatches my hand, pulling me back. "You will look me up when you get back, won't you?" he asks. "You will tell me what it was like... out there?"

It takes me a few seconds to answer. Part of me wants to refute the implication that a journey through the Rift is inevitable for me, although it's one I've made myself. Another part knows that, if I do make that trip, I'm unlikely to return. In the end, I just smile and nod. "Of course I will," I say, knowing that the promise means nothing.

And that's when I hear the door opening, and a voice booms: "Mr. Archer? Ryan Archer?"

Knave drops out of sight behind the hole in the wall. Bill scrambles to his feet and slams the grille into place over it, holding it with one hand and trying to look casual, like he's just leaning against the wall for

the fun of it. Fortunately, a well-positioned bed blocks him from the view of the newly arrived Corporal Jennings. I show myself hurriedly, before he can get any smart ideas about coming further into the room. “The General has considered your proposal,” he reports. “He wants to speak with you.”

The exchange takes place in the corridor outside the main lab.

Nova insisted that it was cleared before her so-called technicians emerged. Therefore, as I turn that final corner with six armed soldiers around me, the Harriers are already waiting for us. Three of them form a line outside the lab doors, pistols and blasters raised and ready. Two more hover behind them, watching for a sneak attack from the rear.

One of my escorts speaks into his radio: a brusque confirmation that everything is as expected. His movements are mirrored by a tall, thin Harrier. A long silence follows as, away from the firing line, our respective commanding officers say their final words to each other. I want to scream. I want to yell out: *For God’s sake, let’s get this over with!* It’s taken hours of drawn-out negotiations to reach this point. I don’t know what time it is, but it can’t be long before night gives way to morning.

I’ve never felt more nervous in my life.

I try to get a hold of myself. All I have to do is walk down this corridor. I’m in no danger: the General isn’t planning to doublecross Nova, and she wants me alive. I’m doing this for the right reasons. But my stomach is churning, and I wish I’d taken the well-meaning advice of all the people in the operations room who kept telling me to eat something.

At last—and yet somehow too soon—the hostages are herded out of the lab. Five of them altogether, in their blue environment suits. The soldiers step aside, and one of them pats me on the shoulder as the scientists start walking toward us. It’s time.

I don’t think I can make my legs move, but it happens anyway. I walk slowly, afraid of stumbling or making any other sudden movements, aware of the guns on each side of me. As long as I can fix my sights on the scientists, I can do this. But suddenly, they’ve moved past me, all expressions of helpless gratitude and pity, and all I can see now are the Harriers’ weapons, all trained on me. It isn’t only my reduced size that makes the distance I still have to cross seem vast.

At least I’ll be with Dad. Focus on that, Ryan.

Oh, yeah. Dad. Nova wouldn’t let him go. She agreed, in fact, to release all the hostages except him. I guess she plans to keep me in line by threatening him. I’m not happy about it, but I’m still saving five lives—so, it would have been selfish to refuse, wouldn’t it?

My long walk is over. I feel almost relieved as the Harriers land in a circle around me, and a blaster muzzle digs into my back. They march me into the laboratory, slamming the doors behind me. I cast a forlorn glance over my shoulder as a steel shutter descends over them, separating us from the outside world. My heart sinks with it.

The chamber, of course, looks even bigger than it did before, its furniture towering over me. I can’t even see the Rift at first, until I’m prodded around the corner of a workbench and its white light hits me in the face. Is it my imagination or is it brighter than ever? I blink stars out of my eyes and try not to look directly at the portal. For that reason, I don’t see the hovering figure in front of me until I almost bump into her.

“Ryan Archer!” hisses Azura Nova, rolling my name on her tongue. I squint sidelong at her, but the light behind her turns her into a fuzzy silhouette. “You have caused a great deal of inconvenience for me.”

What am I supposed to say to that? “I tried my best,” I reply with a shrug.

She punches me: an uppercut to the chin that comes out of nowhere and sends me sprawling. The Harriers catch me, and I look up into Nova’s face as she moves in, her energy wings flaring behind her. I haven’t seen her up close before, and I’m surprised at how young she looks. Young and beautiful. Her eyebrows arc gracefully beneath her sprouting purple hair, and her slender nose has an attractive curve—but her eyes are cold, and a cruel sneer twists her pursed lips. I wonder what could have happened in her life to make her so cold and ruthless, for surely she couldn’t have been born that way. But then, I think about another time, another place, a deadly ambush and a ship shot down in flames, and

I wonder if it was always Azura Nova's destiny to become a heartless monster.

"Enjoy your joke, Archer," she snarls. "You will pay for it soon."

"When you sell me to the Medtechs," I conclude, affecting boredom. "Heard it all before, lady, from your bubble-headed partner—and look where he ended up."

She narrows her eyes. "Your continued survival, against all odds, has made you cocky. I can have that beaten out of you." I don't doubt it. Perhaps the smart thing to do would be to play it cool for a while.

Nova clicks her fingers and gestures sharply to her women. I don't resist as they haul me closer to the Rift, particularly not when I see who's waiting on the floor beside the *Sunrunner's* landing platform.

My dad's on his knees, his hands tied behind him. Another Harrier stands guard over him with a blaster weapon, from a nearby bench. When he sees me, his face contorts with a mixture of conflicting emotions, settling on shock at my diminished stature. "Oh, Ryan..." he whispers, shaking his head as if this whole mess is somehow my fault.

"Kill him!" snaps Nova.

The order takes me by surprise. "What... what are you...?" I stammer. The Harrier on the bench rises a foot or so, cocks her blaster and levels it at Dad's head.

Dad cringes, screwing his eyes shut against his impending fate. "I'm sorry, Ryan," he calls to me through clenched teeth. My impulse is to leap forward, to put myself between the gun and the target, but there's no time.

"You can't kill him!" I cry hopelessly. "You need him!"

To my bewildered relief, the woman doesn't fire. Nova, I realize, has held up a restraining hand, a hint of amusement pulling at her lips. "You need him," I repeat, my voice sounding small. "He's your last hostage. If you want the army to hand over Ordaal..."

"Ordaal," says Nova, "is expendable. He was a useful contact—but my agreement with him does not extend to managing the consequences of his own carelessness."

"You're abandoning him?"

"I have a small but valuable collection of human organs, and I have you. This way, I do not have to share my bounty." Her smile broadens now, but it has no warmth. "You're beginning to understand, I think, my true reasons for keeping your father with me. I cannot risk damaging your body, but I promised you that you would pay for your interference nonetheless. Consider this your first installment."

She brings her hand down.

The Harrier fires her blaster.

Chapter

Thirteen

The shot goes wild. It hits a glass beaker, fusing it into a twisted, transparent sculpture.

The Harriers react with well-trained speed, flying to surround a two-drawer filing cabinet behind me and to the left. Nova rises on her energy wings, and sights along her laser pistol. "Whoever you are," she barks, "show yourself or die! There will be no second warning."

My brain is still processing the sequence of events I've just witnessed. It picks out the remembered image of a small, round object blurring through the air.

A juggling ball. It must have struck the blaster weapon of Dad's would-be killer as she squeezed the trigger, throwing off her aim. Nova and her people followed its trajectory back to the cabinet—but they weren't looking where I was looking at the instant that the kill order was given. They didn't see what I saw: a flash of purple skin over Nova's shoulder. They don't realize that the ball bounced on its way to its target.

And suddenly, there are eight, nine, ten more juggling balls in the air. They rain down upon the disarrayed Harriers, ricocheting from surfaces above, behind and around them, confusing them so much that two more shots are let off. One strikes a computer console, causing a series of fizzing, popping explosions. Equipment topples from shelves, filling the room with noise. And the Harriers are wheeling in all

directions as Nova shouts orders at them.

In the chaos, nobody is watching Dad. I race over to him, and set about untying his wrists. “Friends of yours?” he asks, craning over his shoulder to look down at me.

“Just one friend, I think—but a good one.” I’d hardly dared hope that Knave would have found his way to the laboratory without me. He must have slipped in through the vents when Nova brought up the shutters to let me in and the other hostages out. “I’ve counted six Harriers. Any more lurking about?” Six would be about right, I think. That would be about half of Nova’s force, the other half having been sent to Ordaal’s aid.

“Not that I’ve seen,” said Dad, “but six plus Nova is too many to take on, Ryan.”

“He’s only one man,” screams the mercenary leader, as if on cue. Her voice sounds comfortingly distant. “Find him!”

“I know,” I grunt, straining at a tough knot. “But if I can get you free, you can unseal the lab and we can run for it. There are hundreds of soldiers outside, Dad. Once we’re out of the firing line, these guys are toast!”

“No! No, Ryan, we can’t leave Nova here with the Rift. We have to—”

“*Down!*”

I try to push Dad aside, try to throw myself on top of him, but he’s too big and I’m not strong enough. He sees the danger for himself—sees the Harrier taking aim—and moves, an instant too late. A stream of sizzling energy clips his shoulder, melting the fabric of his environment suit. He cries out, his hands coming free from the loose ropes as his body spins and crumples. He’s on the floor, writhing in pain, but when I look back at the Harrier, she just returns my gaze with a smile—she *smiles*—before leveling her weapon at Dad’s head.

I’m running at her before I know what I’m thinking. My rashness surprises her, but even so, I’ve no chance of reaching her before she shoots me. She’s bringing her arm around now, but there’s no fear in me, only a heady, thoughtless rush of desperation. Momentum overrides my reason until I think that, even if she *does* kill me, I’ll be on her before I have time to drop.

And then, I see the change in the Harrier’s expression, her sudden uncertainty. She lowers her pistol and takes to the air, but she’s too late. A flying leap brings me close enough to seize her ankles, dragging her down. I pin her against a strut of the *Sunrunner*’s landing platform with my elbow, and I punch her, once, twice, three times, only just realizing giddily that she couldn’t shoot me because Nova wants me alive. *She wants me alive!*

Something slams into the back of my head, puncturing my newfound optimism. The pain is sharp but focussed at first, and I can cope with it. But then, it explodes to engulf my senses, becoming my whole world. The battle to stay on my feet is lost before it’s begun; as the room darkens, I put everything I have into the struggle to remain conscious. I almost succumb, but sheer willpower allows me to see again. I almost wish I couldn’t. I’m staring up at two Harriers, one wiping blood from her split lip, eyes blazing with hatred, the other raising a blaster weapon to drive its blunt end into my skull again.

A jet of water hits her, knocking her into her cohort and sending both women sprawling. Dad’s face comes into view above me: I can see from his clenched jaw and dilated pupils that he’s in pain, but he’s clutching a fire extinguisher, and its pressurized contents batter the Micronauts with the same force as the police’s water cannon did the protestors outside.

I should help him, but I can’t get up. I turn onto my front and push with my hands, but my arms are like sponges and the effort makes me dizzy. Nova’s screaming for someone to “deal with the giant”, and I can hear running, booted footsteps. Damn it, Dad was right, we can’t fight all of them—why couldn’t he have got out like I told him, when he had the chance?

And now, a new sound permeates the room—a deep, throbbing hum—and I gasp as something drives me down into the floor. I think a Harrier must have placed a foot on my back, and I fall flat, my arms splaying in front of me. But there’s nobody there, I’m sure of it. And suddenly, the pressure lets up, and I can move again.

The first thing I see when I lift my unwilling head is the expression on the face of the nearest Harrier. Her jaw is slack, her eyes wide as she stares at something above her. A blaster hangs from her hand as if

forgotten. And then, the ceiling lights are eclipsed by a great angular shape, a huge mass of dull metal, and I realize what Knave has done.

He's used the confusion to reach Ordaal's ship. The pressure I felt was some kind of antigravity backwash as he launched it from its platform above me.

I'm speechless, awestruck. When I first saw the *Sunrunner*, I thought it looked cool in a model kit kind of a way. I didn't think about what it was, what it represented, what it could do. When I saw it again, at a fraction of my normal size, I didn't really look at all: there was so much else to think about, to take in. Now, it's hovering above me, dwarfing me, and the immensity of it hits me. It's a spaceship. A great big spaceship. It's real. It can fly. And it's the most amazing thing I've seen in my... in *this* life.

And now, that miracle of engineering, that spaceship, turns and dives, and the Harriers run for cover. I follow their lead, dragging myself beneath the landing platform. The ship describes an impressively tight arc, and swoops low over the laboratory benches, its downdraft scattering their contents. With its wings outstretched, it looks like some great mythical dragon—and it belches fire, gobbets of burning plasma sputtering from gun ports to each side of its golden egg-shaped cockpit.

They hit like meteorites, shaking the dome to its flimsy foundations. I cover my face as a stool in front of me is blasted to splinters. The air fills with dust and smoke, and my ears are assailed by the percussion sounds of secondary explosions and answering fire from the Harriers, which glances harmlessly off the *Sunrunner*'s shielding. The ship pulls up and circles again: maneuverable it may be, but the confines of the lab are a little too close, and it scrapes a wall with its wing. That doesn't seem to faze the pilot: a moment later, he drops into another strafing run.

I lie flat, hands over my head. A strut gives way, and the platform crashes toward me—but it's caught by a spider-web latticework of partially collapsed scaffolding. On balance, I reckon I'm safer under here than I would be out in the open. I just hope Dad's found shelter too. At least I can be sure that Knave won't target him—at least, not on purpose.

The dust is all around me now. I'm choking on a thick cloud, and my eyes sting. I'm robbed of all senses except my hearing—but the roaring onslaught of noise is such that I can't isolate any individual sound, can't guess what's happening even a foot from me. All I know is that I've never heard such a cacophony before, not even in the midst of the riot. It builds to a screeching, rending crescendo, and I think it will never stop. But then, all of a sudden, it does, leaving my ears deadened so that the ensuing silence seems to ring.

It's a moment before I can tune in to the quieter sounds that remain: the crackling of small fires, the settling of timbers—and, somewhere, the insistent bleat of a telephone, so prosaic as to sound out of place. I'm amazed that it still works. No doubt the General wants to speak with Nova, wants to know what's going on in here. I wonder how long it'll be before his troops blast their way through the reinforced walls. He's probably given the order already.

I can't hear the *Sunrunner* any more. This, I think, is what gives me strength to drag myself out of hiding and to my feet. I clamber over the shifting wreckage, brushing dust from my clothes. I have to know what's happened to Knave. And to Dad. But the laboratory is unrecognizable now, a devastated landscape of uneven shapes, where strange shadows shift behind every mountain of debris. The lights are out, and a thin haze hangs in the air, restricting my vision, hampering my search further.

The Rift, on the other hand, shines as strongly as ever, drawing me into its warmth. The containment grid, incredibly, seems undamaged: Knave must have taken pains to avoid it. I find myself staring into the white light, my heart pulled toward it as if by magnetism. I could almost dive into that brilliant pool, leaving the worries of my life on Earth behind me. But the time isn't right. I still have things to do here.

The telephone is silenced in mid-ring. Perhaps the General gave up. But it sounded to me like somebody yanked the wire out of its socket. I'm not alone.

I can see a body—at least, the top half of one, protruding from beneath a scorched and overturned lab bench. Too small to be Dad, too few arms to be Knave. A Harrier. I kneel by her side and check for a pulse in her neck. She's dead. I feel a mixture of relief and sadness. I lift her cold hand—I can't afford to be squeamish—and unhook her laser pistol from her arm. I don't do it myself, and heft it experimentally. It feels like an old friend.

Soon after that, I spot two more Harriers, lying side by side. They must have been caught in one of the *Sunrunner*'s blasts. There isn't much left of them, apart from scraps of armor. I turn away from them quickly, fighting the urge to retch. My stomach reminds me that it's empty. I have to keep telling myself that the two women were cold-hearted mercenaries, that they would have dispensed the same fate to my father without compunction. Kill or be killed. It wasn't me who set the rules.

The sound of gunfire leads me to the *Sunrunner*. It's down, as I expected; not as bashed up as I feared but resting at an uncomfortable angle against the broken remains of a table. As I watch, Knave's head pops out of the main hatchway. He's wearing two laser pistols—found them in the ship's armory, I guess—and he fires them in opposite directions before bobbing back down out of sight. Both shots are returned almost instantaneously, and I realize that my friend is pinned down by two Harriers.

I can work out where one of them must be. I circle around her, moving as stealthily as I can, going as wide as I dare. Sure enough, she's hovering in front of me. A fireproof cabinet, its top half a cooling mass of slag, gives her cover from Knave, but she's exposed to me. I balk at what I have to do, my left arm shaking so much that I can't fix the mercenary in my sights. But I know what will happen if she turns now, if she sees me.

Kill or be killed. The laser pistols have no stun setting. Don't think about it, just do it.

"Do it, Archer!"

A perfect shot. It strikes her in the back, and she squeals and falls. I don't remember firing, but I saw the flash and prepared myself for the recoil, standing firm as it snapped through me. A wisp of smoke rises from my muzzle, and if I'm feeling anything at all, it's a cold, calm acceptance. I did what I had to. Just like Acroyear taught me.

And then, the moment ends, and before my victim hits the floor, I'm running. A rational action, perhaps, for somebody who's just signaled his position to airborne foes—but my real aim, I fear, is to put some distance between me and the woman I killed.

Caution slows me, my instinct for self-preservation forcing me to deal with the situation. There'll be time for introspection later. I hope. I start to make my way back toward the grounded *Sunrunner*—but, somewhere ahead of me, something shifts and scrapes.

I freeze, trying to pierce the smoke-filled gloom. I know there's somebody there, in a winding passageway between the junk heaps, but maybe she hasn't heard me yet. Maybe I can sneak up on her too. I hold my breath and strain my ears, but I can hear no more. No clues. She's standing still, she has to be: if she was using her wings, I'd be able to see their light. She's set an ambush, waiting for me to get overconfident and come looking for her. Perhaps the best thing I can do is back up from this.

Slowly, I put one foot behind the other and withdraw carefully.

A hiss of air between teeth. I whirl around, dropping to one knee, bringing up my pistol.

It's Knave. He slides down the slope of a tabletop and springs over a mound of papers at its foot, to land at my side. I must look like I'm about to make a startled exclamation, because he puts a warning finger to his lips. "I heard someone down there," I whisper, nodding to indicate the direction. Frowning, I add: "Or was that you?"

He confirms, with a nod, that it was. One day, I'll have to ask him how he can move so quickly and quietly. "There are Harriers around, though," he adds. "I exchanged laser beams with two of them, a few minutes ago. I think one of them was Nova."

"I... dealt with the other," I tell him.

"So, that's why they broke off the attack."

"I don't understand. How did they bring you down in the first place?"

"Ah. That was Nova too. She landed on the hull. She was using her laser to cut through the main hatch. I did a few barrel rolls, tried to shake her off, but..."

"You crashed it? Is that what you're telling me? You crashed the ship?"

"Hey, I brought her down in one piece. I think that was pretty good going under the circumstances. I didn't train as a pilot, you know."

"Did you see my father?"

"The bearded giant? I saw him from the *Sunrunner*. He ducked under a console, near the Rift. Not too

far from where you were, actually.”

“He should be safe, then?” It was meant as a statement, but it sounds like a plea.

“I tried to keep the cannons away from that area.” But so much stuff was burning and falling, and there were Harriers everywhere—and, compared to me, Dad was such a big, inviting target... No. Keep positive. He has to be OK, he just has to be.

“We have to find him,” I say, “before Nova does.” Knave nods, and lopes away confidently. I follow him, happy to trust his sense of direction over mine.

And then, I feel a prickling sensation on the back of my neck: the kind of premonition that I’ve learned to trust. I spin around, simultaneously leaping aside as laser energy tears up the ground beside me. I can’t see my attacker, but I let off a quick shot in her direction, hoping to gain time as I look for cover. I think I’ve found it, behind a table leg, but the next blast comes from above, slicing so close to my ear that I can feel its heat. There’s a glimmer of blue in the haze up there, and I take aim, but it’s already gone.

Knave is running, and I’m at his heels again, but we’re exposed, and death punches down around us in searing bolts. I try to vary my course, veering without warning, to make myself an impossible target, but I’m running a deadly obstacle course, leaping over flames as they break out at my feet. Knave’s motions are more self-assured, more fluid than mine, and he finds time to loose off a few shots of his own. But as he stares over his shoulder, trying to get a fix on our airborne pursuer, he fails to see the figure that springs out of shadow in front of him. I shout a warning, too late. The Harrier bears him to the ground, punching him. Knave squirms beneath her, pushing her away with his six limbs. By the time I reach them, she’s struggling to keep her balance on top of him. And then, another laser beam strikes between me and Knave, barely missing us both; barely missing the Harrier too. Whoever’s up there, she doesn’t care about her own allies, so long as she gets us. Nova!

We leap in opposite directions, Knave using the distraction to scramble to his feet. And now, he’s wrestling with the Harrier: they’re holding each other’s arms, each trying to keep the other’s pistols away from them. Knave’s extra limbs should give him the advantage, but the Harrier is combat trained. She matches him move for move, and tries to throw him using her superior weight. He’s practically dancing in his efforts to resist her, hopping and jumping as she snakes her feet between his legs and tries to trip him. And yet, I realize with admiration, he’s keeping his head down, letting her lean over him, using her as a shield from our flying foe.

I can’t get a bead on the Harrier: I’m not confident enough in my aim, and I won’t risk hurting Knave. I throw myself onto her back instead, gripping her sides with my knees, looping my arm around her throat, yanking her head back. She reacts with frightening speed, reaching behind her, seizing my arms and breaking my hold. But I’ve given Knave the opening he needs. He lands a solid blow to the Harrier’s chin, and follows up with a kick to her stomach. Her armored suit protects her, but she’s knocked off-balance, and he springs after her in a flurry of fists.

I fall clumsily. I’m on the ground, rolling, as the fight moves away from me. I’m on my back, and when I open my eyes, they’re met by the cold gaze of Azura Nova.

She’s hovering about a foot above me, her laser pistols aimed downward, squarely at me. I think my heart just stopped. I throw up my arms to protect myself, knowing it to be a futile gesture. And she fires. Both barrels.

The twin beams converge on my own arm-mounted pistol, their combined force burning through its upper surface to destroy its circuitry. As Nova swoops down and takes the front of my shirt in a black-gloved hand, I realize that she hit exactly what she was aiming for. I’m helpless as she lifts me into the air, thrashing about in the desperate hope that I can make her drop me before we climb too high. My shirt tears, and I’m momentarily in free fall, but she catches me, an arm around my throat just as I was holding the Harrier a moment ago, a pistol pressed to my head.

“I’m trying to decide which would be more satisfying,” she hisses in my ear. “To kill you close up, or to let you see your death racing towards you.”

“You can’t...” I splutter.

“You think yourself untouchable, don’t you? Another mistake on Ordaal’s part. You have tried my patience to its limit. Your body is still worth a great deal to me dead.”

“More... alive...” It’s difficult to speak. Her arm is crushing my windpipe, and every ragged breath I take is filled with stinging smoke.

“The satisfaction I take from killing you will be compensation enough.”

We’re almost touching the ceiling, at the apex of the dome. The smoke has closed in around us like a dense fog, and I can’t see the ground any more. “I’ll let gravity do its worst, I think,” considers Nova. “A good Medtech can work with damaged organs—but I may have difficulty selling you if your brains have been blown out. Goodbye, Archer.”

She lets go of me, but panic hones my reflexes. Flailing about, I find armor plating and wrap myself around it. As Nova soars away, she takes me with her. My arms are fastened around her legs, my cheek against cold metal. Disgusted, she tries to dislodge me with a barrel roll. I keep a dogged grip on her, but my legs trail helplessly. I feel queasy, and I’m thinking, why couldn’t I have been more careful with the glider pack, because I really need it now. I tried to fix it, of course, tried to get my instinctive know-how to do its business, but it needed replacement parts that I don’t have.

“Listen to me, Nova,” I yell over the wind in my ears. “Is this the life you dreamed for yourself? Leading a bunch of undisciplined thugs, hiring yourself out to greedy idiots like Ordaal to make a crust?” Oh God, just listen to yourself. Is this all you’ve got left: cod psychology? “You should command an army. People should respect you, fear you. And I bet you know that, don’t you? You’ve always known it deep down. I bet you’ve always wondered where your life went wrong. Well, I can tell you, Nova. I can tell you because I’ve seen it. Do you hear me? I’ve seen it!”

She reaches down and takes my arms again, trying to break my grip on her. I resist at first, but she’s stronger than me, her fingers digging into my muscles. Fortunately, she doesn’t drop me this time; she hauls me up until we’re face to face. “What are you jabbering about, little man?” she snaps. I’m struck by her lack of emotion, like all this is just business to her, something that has to be done. Still, I wouldn’t be alive if I hadn’t engaged her interest.

Trouble is, I don’t know what to say next. So, for want of a plausible story, I blurt out the truth. “I’ve been contacted by a being who calls himself the Time Traveler. According to him, something’s gone wrong with time, altered our very history.”

“Time Traveler?” A hint of a frown creases Nova’s smooth brow.

“You’ve heard of him?” No, Ryan, don’t show surprise; that gives her an advantage. “Of course you’ve heard of him! And you know about me; you know what Ordaal found when he examined me. I’m connected... I don’t know how, don’t ask me to explain it, but somehow... I’m connected to your galaxy. I’m connected to the Time Traveler, and he tells me that this, this timeline, isn’t how things were meant to be. He wants me to put it right.”

Her eyes bore into my skull, and I wish she’d react. I wish she’d say something. Just a flicker of an expression would do, something to guide me.

“Think about it. The return of the Emperor, your galaxy united under one fist again. And standing at his right hand, his most trusted General. You’d control the skies.”

“Nice story,” says Nova. “Goodbye.”

Knave hits her from behind, wearing a stolen glider pack. She drops me, of course, but I’ve already grabbed her arm. She tries to shake me off, whipping my helpless body through the air, but Knave is all over her. He has a laser pistol at her temple. “Because I’m a gentleman,” he tells her, “I’m giving you one chance to surrender.”

She throws herself backwards into a headfirst dive. Pulled after her, I overshoot and tumble end over end. Knave’s shot goes wild, glancing off the reinforced ceiling. He sees my plight, and abandons Nova to come after me. He plucks me out of midair, but his selfless act leaves him exposed. Our foe comes up behind us, pistols blazing. We dive and twist and roll through gray clouds until I don’t know which way is up any more and my stomach, I’m sure, is three turns behind me. I’ve lost track of Nova, until she appears, for a heart-stopping moment, in Knave’s sights. But she’s almost as fast as he is, and more practiced in aerial combat. He fires—but, with a streak of gold, she’s gone.

A second later, she’s back, coming up beneath us on a collision course. She rams us, loosening Knave’s grip on me. I’m dangling from one hand, swinging wildly, kicking out at Nova as she claws at me, trying

to tear me from him. Somehow, Knave gets an arm between us, fires a laser pistol, and she peels off and vanishes again.

Knave drags me through a whole new series of aerobatics, until I want to scream at him to put me down, and I'm thankful that I didn't eat after all. I realize that I've closed my eyes, and I open them again as we level out. Not that there's much to see. But the haze around us is beginning to subside. Dust is settling, and the small fires on the ground are petering out.

I catch sight of Nova.

She hasn't seen us yet. She's flying straight and level, scouring the sky below her. Knave is trying to get a bead on her, but she's an insubstantial silhouette, shifting in and out of the deceiving fog. And suddenly, I know what I have to do.

I squirm out of my friend's grasp, to his alarm, and I'm falling again.

Until my target reappears beneath me, just where I knew she'd be.

I land on Nova's back, her blue wings sputtering as my solid arms pass through them. She tries to throw me, but I've got a tight hold on her, and I'm prying the glider pack from its slot in her armor. It's not coming free, and she's got my arms again... but Knave has dropped down in front of her and he's coming at her head-on. She pulls up, firing at him, but without my weight to drag him down, he evades her shots with agile ease.

And suddenly, I'm got the pack, but I can't control it. It yanks me upward sharply, away from its erstwhile owner, and she makes a grab for my feet but I kick her away.

Azura Nova plummets to the very fate that she had planned for me, greeting her onrushing death with a stoical silence.

A moment later, her glider pack pulls free from my grasp, and I follow her down.

Knave is there to catch me, as always.

We find her just where we expected, facedown on the lab floor. My spine tingles at the thought of getting closer to her, but we must. I have to know that it's all over.

The corpse is relatively intact—thanks to the armor, I guess—but its neck is broken. Nova's head lies at a severe angle. Her face is pale, her eyes staring, her expression as emotionless as it always was. A line of blood seeps from her mouth to congeal beneath her chin.

I did this.

I don't want to look at her. But I can't take my eyes off her.

Something moves up behind me. Something—some *one*—big. But I don't turn. So what if this is some new foe, if I'm leaving myself a sitting duck? I don't care. I've had enough. Anyway, there's nothing to fear; I'm sure of that—the lack of a reaction from Knave confirms what I've already sensed—even before the new arrival crouches beside me and I recognize him.

"Dad..." His padded suit is torn and filthy, his face red, bruised and scored with shallow cuts, but he's OK. I manage a brief smile.

He looks at Nova, and shakes his head sadly. His hand hovers over my shoulder, but he hesitates and withdraws it. Perhaps it's only our newfound difference of scale that made him think again. "It wasn't your fault," he assures me. "You did what you had to do."

"I know."

I don't think that was the answer he expected. I look up into his face, but it's rigid, his thoughts unreadable. He probably doesn't know what he's feeling himself. And, after a long moment, he does what he always does. He stands and walks away from me.

I won't let him do it this time. "Hey," I cry, hopping after him, "where are you going?"

"I've work to do, Ryan." The old excuse. He's starting to pull away.

"And it can't wait? Look around you, Dad. Look at what we've been through!"

"And you think it's over? It's not over, Ryan. Not as long as the Rift is still open."

"So, you're gonna seal it? Can you even do that?"

He halts at an instrument console. It's surrounded by debris, soot-blackened, but relatively intact. I guess

this is where he sheltered during the *Sunrunner*'s assault. He operates the controls, his brow lined in concentration. "Emergency systems have kept the grid up and running, but it won't last much longer," he reports distractedly. "Circuits are shorting out across the board."

"Shouldn't you... I don't know, wait for the army guys or something?"

"There's no time, Ryan. Don't you understand? Nova sent for reinforcements. Even if they don't arrive, there are any number of potential hazards on the far side of that hole. It's like I told you: we weren't ready for this, and recent events only prove that. If I wait for the army to get their orders signed in triplicate, the containment grid might collapse, and it would take us weeks to get it up again. We can't wait that long. It's best for everybody if I end this threat now, once and for all."

He drops to his haunches, pulls open a panel in the console's base and pokes around inside it. My gaze is drawn to his injured shoulder, its skin a livid red. It must hurt like hell.

At least his ears are a little closer to me now. Perhaps he'll start listening.

"Dad..." I venture. "Dad, if you're gonna do this..."

"It's lucky you got that message to me," he mutters, half to himself. "It gave me time to prepare. I've been running a mild current through the Rift for almost forty hours, weakening its molecular cohesion. I wish I could have done more, but with the dissipated energy being converted into visible light, I couldn't take the chance that Nova would see what was happening. Still, it shouldn't take more than about thirty more minutes to disperse the Rift altogether. That is..." He grunts as he reaches into the console's innards and pulls at something. "...if I can make these blasted controls respond!"

I'm struggling to keep up. "You got my message? I thought Nova erased it."

"She did—but, even if she had been the scientist she claimed to be, she didn't know much about Earth technology. It was simple enough to reconstruct your e-mail from my hard disk, once I knew where to look for it."

"And how did you...?"

"Your voicemail, of course." Dad looks at me with a familiar disappointment in his eyes: the look that says I'm wasting his time with dumb questions when I could use my brain for once and work out the answers myself. But the look passes quickly, this time, as he appends a rare compliment. "That was good thinking, son."

This isn't getting me any closer to saying what I have to say.

"Dad, if you're gonna... if you're shutting down the Rift, you have to let me..."

Just spit it out. Get it out there.

"I'm sorry, Dad, it's just that... I don't know how to explain it... it's like, I've been doing a lot of thinking lately, you know, and I realize now that my destiny isn't..."

He freezes, still half-turned away so that I can't see his expression.

I plow on, resisting the urge to stare at the floor. "I can't keep hiding from it, Dad. I can't deny it any longer. This isn't my life; it doesn't *feel* like my life. I told you about the Time Traveler, in my message. Well, I think... I *know*... that I've got to listen to him. I've got to find out what he wants me to do. You understand that, don't you?"

He emerges from beneath the console, and sits back on the floor. His lips are set into a straight line, more unreadable thoughts playing behind his eyes. "What are you trying to tell me, Ryan?" He must already know the answer, but he wants to hear it from my lips.

"I've made up my mind," I say firmly. "I'm going through the Rift."

Chapter

Fourteen

I expected a row.

I could already hear Dad lambasting me for another dumb spur-of-the-moment decision. I mean, getting into a spaceship and flying to a different galaxy, a whole other dimension, for the sake of a stupid dream? And what am I going to do when I get there? Play the hero? Save the universe? Who do I think I

am—Captain Kirk, or John Crichton? I've spent these past five days blundering through one situation after another. I'm lucky I didn't get my fool head blown off—and I can't kid myself that that was down to anything other than blind stubbornness and a whole heap of luck. It hardly qualifies me to face the unknown, and probably far greater, perils beyond the Rift.

I steel myself for a verbal onslaught. But Dad just looks at me sadly, and says: "You do realize I'll have to close the Rift behind you?"

I nod, dumbstruck by the realization that my doubts were entirely my own.

He frowns. "Is that not what you wanted to hear?"

"I... yes," I splutter. "I just... I... why aren't you trying to talk me out of this?"

"You said you'd made up your mind."

"I have... I think. It's just..."

"And you've obviously thought about it a great deal."

"I suppose so." More than I've ever had to think about anything before.

"Then I think you should go."

"You do? I mean, really? That's what you want?"

His face clouds over. "It's not what I want, Ryan. I don't want to think about you facing God-knows-what out there. I don't want to think that I might never see you again. But you seem quite certain that this Time Traveler fellow is real..."

"I am." I told him everything in my e-mail, of course. Why did I still imagine that he wouldn't understand?

"Everything that's happened... all the evidence..."

"Well, then. I think you should go." He stands abruptly, and turns away. He doesn't want to face me.

Nothing new about that. But this time, it feels different. This time, I know it's because he wants to hide his emotions, doesn't want to let them hold me back. And suddenly, uncomfortably, I wonder if that has always been our problem.

"Dad..." I call up to him, because I can't leave things like this. "Dad, you do realize that, if I'm right about the Time Traveler, what he wants me to do..."

He leans wearily against the console. It takes him an age to turn back to me. "You might change history. If you do that, then none of this will have happened. In a real sense, I might cease to exist. Certainly, I won't know anything about it. No one will remember this timeline. Our lives will be different; they'll always have been different."

"Not always," I correct him. "Just recently. Just since the Micronauts. There'll still be... you know, everything before that. You and me."

He tries to smile. "It might be for the best. A lot of people have died here. Ordaal and Nova have caused a great deal of misery. You might be able to undo all that."

"I don't know," I mumble. *A shadow in the heart of the red flames... I think he's going to strike me or choke me... channel that destructive force into burning out my insides... my life in his hands.* "I don't know if the Time Traveler's reality is better or worse. I just know that it ... it's where I belong, and I'm not sure if that's enough."

Dad crouches beside me again, regarding me with sympathetic eyes. Then he places his hand on my shoulder, his hand almost engulfing my arm. "You'll do the right thing, Ryan. I know you will. I'm proud of you."

Now it's my turn to be tongue-tied—and, to my shame, I change the subject, mumbling something like:

"Well... um, I guess we'd better get started, then." Dad doesn't seem to mind, though. In fact, I think he's relieved. Like father, like son.

"The first thing we need to do," he says brusquely, straightening up and turning to include the silent Knave in the conversation, "is to get the army off our backs for a few more minutes. I can handle that. Then, we have to get the *Sunrunner* on its feet again. I assume that is how you're planning to make this trip?"

"I guess so," I say. I hadn't really thought about it. "Will it fly again?" I ask Knave.

"With a little work, maybe."

"We don't have much time," cautions Dad, busy at the console again.

Knave nods, and hurries off in the direction of the crashed ship. I'm left with nothing to do. I'd only get in

Dad's way, I suppose; I should follow the Vaerian, see if he needs any help. But I hesitate, looking up at Dad's back, feeling like there's one more thing I should say. Something he should know.

When I composed my message to him, when I told my story, I left out one crucial detail. I didn't know how to break it to him; I still don't. And maybe he doesn't want to know. I told him about Karza's Harriers, how they came through the Rift in a laboratory like this one, and took me to their galaxy. He knows that he was present at the time—and yet he hasn't asked me the obvious question. He hasn't tried to find out what happened to him.

I long to tell him. I don't want to say goodbye with secrets between us. But what good would it do? I'd be making myself feel better at the expense of his unnecessary grief. And, if I do change history, if the Time Traveler can show me a way to restore his (*my*) timeline, and I decide to take it... well, like Dad said, he won't know anything about it.

But *I'll* know.

Everything came together with surprising speed.

Dad reconnected the phone and spoke to the General. He assured him that we were OK, that there was no need to take drastic measures, then hung up. There'll be hell to pay when the government find out what he didn't tell them, what he's really up to. But he doesn't care; in fact, he seems quite cheerful about the prospect of a trial. He intends to tell the world what happened here, why he concluded that the Rift had to be destroyed. It's the only way, he says, that we can be sure not to repeat our mistakes. And, like he told me, his actions will make him a hero to a lot of people. I never knew he had it in him.

We managed to right the *Sunrunner* between us. Actually, its antigravity generators did most of the work by rendering it temporarily weightless. Knave is sure—well, “fairly confident” is how he put it—that he can take off from the lab floor. I grinned and made some reference to his earlier insistence that he wasn't a pilot. “I'm no engineer either,” he said seriously. “I've lashed this thing together and made sure it's space-tight, but it's only good for one more launch, if that.”

“One launch is all I'm asking for,” I said.

I never asked him to come with me. I didn't dare broach the subject, because I know it would be safer for Knave to stay here with his troupe and I don't know what I would do without him. Fortunately, he talks as if his decision was made long ago. He intends to see my story through to its end, and I'm grateful for that.

The bridge of the *Sunrunner*, after its external splendor, is something of a letdown. Its golden shielding, opaque from the outside, is transparent from within. The light of the Rift shines down upon a simple semicircle of worn instrument banks. Sitting in front of them, Knave pulls back three levers simultaneously. I notice that the fingers of his spare hand are crossed, and I wish I hadn't. The ship rises six feet, causing me no more discomfort than the average elevator ride. The light is shining right at me now, brighter than ever.

Our farewells were hurried and awkward, but heartfelt. Dad can't see me now—but I can see him, pretending to work at his console. He looks alone, haunted by the past and the future, and I want to go to him, but I can't. Thanks to him, the energies that are burning a hole into reality are breaking down. He started the process without telling me, as if to ensure that we couldn't prolong our parting—and it's irreversible. There'll be nothing left soon.

I'll never see him again.

The deck throbs beneath my feet. I'm sitting in what I guess is the copilot's chair, but the dials and lights before me mean nothing, and all I can do is grip the console and hope for the best. Knave eases us forward, and the white light welcomes us.

“The wings!” I cry in sudden realization. “Did you retract the wings?”

Knave's eyes widen. He flings himself across his console, stabbing at the controls. The light engulfs us, and a sharp jolt vibrates through the ship's hull, from right to left. We lurch, first one way and then the other. Panels light up red in front of me, and something deep within the *Sunrunner's* systems explodes. My knuckles turn white. A squealing, scraping sound fills my skull, like a million fingernails on a thousand

blackboards, and I'm praying: Please, God, don't let us bring the containment grid down on top of us! And then, the sound cuts off, and the light goes out.

We're inside the Rift—and I remember what *that* feels like about a microsecond before the pain hits me. I feel as if I'm being taken apart, sliced up layer by layer. Bile rises in my throat, and I can't feel the console any more. I'm floundering, reaching for something to hold on to as some unseen hand rearranges my internal organs, and I'm thinking that, even if I'd ended up dissected on a Medtech's table, it couldn't have hurt much more than this.

And then, at last, it's over. We've come through, and I'm panting with relief because—perverse as it may seem—this journey was easier on me than the last one. Perhaps my body was better prepared for the stress placed upon it (but I haven't *done* this before, despite my memories of it). Perhaps the ship protected me, or at least conveyed me more quickly through the nightmare darkness. Or perhaps my size helped: when I entered the Rift in the original timeline, I was six feet tall; not so when I emerged. I don't know why the Rift shrunk me, while the Harrowers—my captors—remained unaffected. I guess the very molecules of my body were too large to pass through it. Not this time, though. At least, I hope not.

What if I have been shrunk again? I could be the size of a mouse.

I open my eyes. I've left a pool of vomit around my shoes. We're drifting through a deep black void, but I can see pinpricks of starlight. I half expect to find Knave towering over me, but nothing has changed. He's still in his seat, I'm still in mine, everything to the same scale. "We've stabilized for now," he says, his face a paler shade than normal.

"The Rift," I stammer, gripped by an inexplicable compulsion. "Is there a rear view-screen or something? Can we see the Rift?"

Knave frowns at his console. "According to these readings..." He turns to me, his black eyes glistening sympathetically. "It's no longer there. It's gone."

"Already?" I feel cold. I knew this was going to happen, but still... my only connection to my home, to everything I know... I'm alone...

And at that moment, rising like the sun over the horizon, a ship pulls into view ahead of us. It's big. It's green. It's oblong, with an almost spherical front section. It gives me the impression of an angry insect buzzing in front of us, staring at us with the single black eye of its forward portal. "It's a troop carrier!" breathes Knave.

"Can we take it?" I ask, not holding out much hope.

"Under normal circumstances, maybe. With the *Sunrunner* in the state it is..."

A static wheeze bursts from a scratchy speaker, somewhere behind me. A female voice says: "Sunrunner, *this is Harrier Four, awaiting recognition codes. Do you receive?*"

"Don't answer her," I whisper. Knave gives me a withering look. He's altered our course: not so much as to be obvious, but the oncoming ship is drifting slowly to our left.

"Sunrunner, *this is Harrier Four. We require recognition codes. Failure to comply will lead to an assumption of hostile intent. There will be no further warnings.*"

"Tell me we can outrun them."

"Again," says Knave, "under normal circumstances..."

"But we're gonna try, right?"

He nods. "I'll push the engines as hard as I can. Just pray that they abandon pursuit before we shake ourselves into tiny little pieces."

I nod, and brace myself for sudden acceleration. The funny thing is, I don't even feel worried. Perhaps I've reached a point where I'm inured to danger. It's more than that, though. It's like my every instinct is telling me that I haven't come this far for nothing, that the Time Traveler won't let me die in flames now. *It can't happen again.*

Knave throws us into a steep banking climb, and we soar past the troop carrier, our underside almost scraping its hull. Freedom is in our sights. Then, *Harrier Four* fires at us, hidden turrets along its broad side flashing fiercely. The first shot hits us. So does the second. And the third, and the fourth. Our shields dampen the blasts, but the *Sunrunner* rocks in violent protest. It's all I can do to stay in my seat as shifting gravitic forces try to fling me at the walls. The pilot's console explodes, creating a chain reaction

that blows out systems across the bridge. We're past the other ship now, screaming through space, and the high-pitched whine of the engines has reached a painful intensity. More charges smack into us from behind: a dial blows out in front of my face, and I jerk back instinctively, only to be punched forward again and almost hit my head. But the blows are coming less frequently now, and I think we're starting to pull away.

I look at Knave for confirmation of my hope, but all his concentration is reserved for his spitting, smoking controls. His four hands are a blur of frantic motion.

And then, a laser beam shrieks past him, and stabs into the console.

He leaps aside, spins round and fires back. The shape of a Harrier ducks behind the doorframe. She must have sneaked aboard in the lab. Damn me for assuming that Nova's final crony was lying dead somewhere! The turbulence must have thrown off her aim, else Knave would surely have suffered that very fate.

The Vaerian wrenches his chair from the floor—it was bolted down, but various trials have loosened it—and hurls it at the Harrier. Fooled by the distraction, she wastes two shots on the flying furniture and is unprepared for the flying acrobat behind it. He knocks her down. I'm halfway to them when the *Sunrunner* goes into a spin, pulling my feet from beneath me. An alarm klaxon sounds, taking me back to another ship, another time. *Fires are breaking out across the bridge... the heat... flaying my skin and making my chest ache.* I fight my way to my feet, *but I have to grab on to a console to keep myself upright because we're pitching at a forty-five degree angle* and I'm hitting the dead controls, not knowing what I'm doing, just hoping to get a response from something, *and the deck drops out from beneath me* and I'm down again, *gasping for breath, feeling smothered... I'm choking on thick smoke.*

Did I mention, by the way, that I am quite worried now?

We're running, kicking up dust clouds. My legs weigh me down, the soft, dry ground pulling at my feet. My lungs are like sandpaper and my eyes are streaming, but Acroyear has my arm and he's dragging me along after him. When the explosion comes, I'm completely unprepared. It throws me forward, burying me in the fine brown grains that blanket this planet. An intense heat washes over my back, and shards of metal rain upon me.

When, finally, it's over, Acroyear hauls me to my feet. I'm gasping for breath, and I can't support myself, can't let go of him, but I'm alive. Alive! That thought fills my head.

"Well, I can only thank you again." Persephone's voice, caustic with sarcasm. "You certainly know how to pick the best tourist destinations."

"Apologies, Princess," snarls Acroyear, "if the accommodations are not everything you are accustomed to."

"Looks like the perfect vacation spot to me," says Knave, shielding his eyes from the glare of two blazing suns. "Sun, sand... more sun, more sand..."

"You call this sand?" retorts Persephone in disgust, shaking dust from her boots but only beating up another cloud of the stuff to get into my nose and mouth.

»The surface layer of this planet is composed of 48% silicon, 23%...«

"Thank you, Microtron." Something roars above my head, and I look up to see the glow of a low-flying vessel streaking across the yellow sky. Acroyear eases himself away from me, forcing me to stand unaided. "We must get moving," he says.

"Are you insane?" erupts Persephone. "We don't have any supplies. We have no shelter. How long do you think we can last on this ball of dirt?"

"Significantly longer," he snaps, "if Nova does not find us!"

"This is a dead planet," shrieks the Princess. "It can't sustain us. Your only hope of survival is to surrender now and beg for my father's mercy."

"Your father has no mercy," rumbles Acroyear, "and I will not go back to his pens."

"I don't wish to alarm anybody," says Knave, "but I think those ships are getting closer."

“They’ve triangulated our approach vector. They will be carrying out sensor sweeps of the surface. We have to get away from the wreckage.”

There’s precious little of our ship left, after the explosion. Even as it skipped, belly-down, across the dirt, it was barely holding itself together. Now, it’s a burnt-out skeleton. It’s a miracle that nobody was killed.

I guess we have Biotron to thank for that. It was he who brought us down, using his interface with the ship’s systems to coax a final, faltering gasp from its engines. It was his giant fists that smashed a way out of the burning wreck for us—and he who carried me to safety. It bothers me that I can’t feel grateful. I can’t forget that I once saw him eradicate a pen full of prisoners on Karza’s command. He claims to have overcome his programming, but he still gives me the creeps. I wish I knew exactly what he was beneath that robotic shell. I gaze up at him, but a sun behind his head casts his face into shadow. It takes me a moment to spot the glint of his eyes, to realize that he’s looking back down at me. I shiver.

“I will not go with you,” says Persephone.

Acroyear hefts his sword. “You have no say in the matter.”

“I will not throw away my life for you. You cannot bully me when I have nothing to lose.”

“You’d rather stay here?”

“Yes!”

“And if the Harriers strafe the area?”

“I am their Princess, the Emperor’s daughter. They will not risk my life.” She tosses her head back imperiously, her long blonde hair streaming behind her, her eyes an icy blue.

“If you believe that,” says Acroyear, “then you do not know Azura Nova as I do.”

“She didn’t seem too concerned about your welfare when she shot us down,” Knave points out.

“Been friends for a long time, have you?”

The Princess falls silent, scowling resentfully.

“If I may intercede at this point,” booms Biotron, “my long-range sensors indicate that this world may not be as barren as we assumed.”

“Somebody’s home?” asks Knave.

“I have detected no life signs as yet. However, there is a large, manmade structure some 17.6 kilometers from our present position.”

“Then that’s where we should go,” I pipe up. OK, so I just wanted to be involved, to make a contribution. “Like the Princess said, we need shelter—right?”

“Princess?” growls Acroyear.

Persephone looks up into the yellow sky, then lowers her head and nods, defeated.

That’s where the dream ends—and I’m back on the ship, back on the floor, surrounded by fire and smoke. Dying again. But it feels different this time.

For a time there, I convinced myself that this was it. Destiny’s cruel joke on me: for all the Time Traveler’s efforts, my life was fated to end in the same way in this reality as it did in the last one. Alternative history repeating itself. But that was when I thought I *did* die, in that crash landing in the other timeline.

I thought the Time Traveler was showing me how it ended. I was wrong. All this time, he’s been trying to show me how it began.

I didn’t die then. I won’t die now.

I force myself to my feet. We’re going so fast that the nearest stars are streaks of light around us. I’m amazed that we haven’t hit anything, but then I guess there’s a whole lot of nothing to hit out here. Knave and the Harrier are on the floor, wrestling. I can barely stand, barely breathe, barely keep my eyes open, but I cast around for a weapon and find one.

I snatch the blue extinguisher from its wall bracket, almost too weak to hold it. I remember how Knave operated it, in my vision, and I mimic his actions. I douse smoldering and burning systems, clearing a path

to my friend—and whenever the juddering ship throws me off-course and off-balance, I pick myself up and keep going.

The Harrier looks up as I reach her. I blast her full in the face with freezing blue steam. She reels, clawing at her eyes, and Knave shoots her in the chest.

Another death. This time, it hardly affects me.

Knave springs past me. The pilot's console is a blackened mess, but he gets to work at the bank beside it. "I'm redirecting command functions to the copilot's position," he explains over his shoulder. I wish I'd known how to do that.

He must have activated some kind of ventilation, because the air is clearing. We're slowing to a less breakneck pace, and the engines seem to give a sigh of relief. Able to keep my balance now, and to take great, wheezing gulps of clean air, I'm tempted to echo it.

"What's the damage?" I ask when I can speak, afraid of the answer.

"Extensive," says Knave. "They took a chunk out of us. Our shields are down, and we've lost hull integrity in the storage bay. If we go anywhere near a planetary atmosphere in this condition, we'll burst into flames and crumple like a sheet of paper."

"Tell me there's a plus side."

He turns to me with a sly grin. "The rest of the ship is intact. Well, more or less. The engines came close to overheating, but they're holding. We've shaken off the Harriers. So long as we don't get into another dogfight for a while, we'll be OK."

"In other words," I say, "we made it."

"By the skin of our teeth, yes."

I laugh. I can't help myself. I'm wondering exactly what Knave said, what alien turn of phrase it was that my translator relayed to me as that very human colloquialism. I'm leaning against the wall, trembling as the adrenaline that's kept me going all this time drains out of me, leaving me weak.

"So," says Knave, "where to now?"

Some time later.

Knave found a cabin, and went to take a nap. He offered to let me go first, but I feel like I've passed through tiredness and out the other side. I stayed here, on the bridge, on watch. Not that I can do much more than shout for him if anything goes wrong.

Thankfully, the past few hours have been peaceful. The *Sunrunner's* self-repair systems are ticking away, doing what they can. Knave will do more when he's rested. We're on an even keel, limping but out of immediate danger. I've had time to relax, to collect my thoughts. And I almost fell asleep after all, sitting in my padded seat, my feet on the copilot's console, lulled by the throbbing of the engines.

I *can't* sleep. It's like when I was a kid and we went on vacation, and no matter how long the flight was and how late we arrived, I'd be wide awake, unable to settle because I wanted to get out and explore this wondrous new place. I haven't felt like that in a long time—but hell, memories of another life aside, this is my first visit to another universe. It took me a while to get my head round that, to realize the magnitude of it. From here in my golden shell, I can see further than I've seen before: to distant stars, most of which are orbited by planets, many of which have spawned beings of all kinds. I feel excited, honored, anxious, frightened. I feel like I've come home.

I didn't know how to answer Knave's question at first. For days, I've felt as if my life was leading up to this: to the moment when I came through the Rift and arrived here. I never gave much thought to what might happen next, except that I imagined the Time Traveler would guide me. I haven't seen him yet. I've been thinking about the crash, trying to remember what we found on that alien world because I'm sure it's important somehow. I remember trekking across the dusty surface, sweltering beneath the suns. Me, Knave, Acroyear, Microtron, Biotron, Persephone. I remember it as clear as day. But after that, there's nothing, and I think it's best not to force it. My guide will show me what I need to know, when he's ready. Or when I am.

I told Knave about the Time Traveler. I hadn't mentioned him before, like he was my guilty secret. But I

remembered Nova's reaction to his name, which gave me hope that my Vaerian friend might have heard of him too. He had. "Everybody's heard of the Time Traveler," he said. "They call him the greatest unsolved mystery of our universe."

"And you know where to find him?" Somehow, the idea of him as a real person, somebody I could just stroll up to and meet, unsettles me. "Can you take us there?"

"If you're sure you want to go."

"Will it be safe?"

Knave looked at me. "Nowhere is safe."

He set a course for a place I've never heard of before. A city called Micropolis. We're taking the long route, avoiding the most likely trouble spots: systems that have been claimed by one or more of the factions that vie for control of this galaxy. We're also running on half power, in deference to the *Sunrunner's* fragile state. Suits me. I'm in no hurry.

Like Ordaal, Knave has never heard of Baron Karza. But he did recognize one more name from my dreams. By chance, Micropolis is where we'll find him too.

"I only know him by repute," said Knave, "but if half of what I've heard is true, if he's been through everything they say..."

"It doesn't matter what he's been through. He's a fighter!"

"He may not be the man you knew."

I shook my head stubbornly. "I don't care what they've done to him, how deeply they've buried him. They'll never beat him! He'll help us."

Knave was right, of course. I may have memories of the Micronauts' galaxy (can I still call them that?), but it wasn't *this* galaxy. I can't assume that anyone or anything will be the same. But I've already found one friend, and I can find another. I *have* to find him, because I can't imagine doing this without him. I need him.

My comrade-in-arms. My mentor. My guardian and my hero.

Acroyear.

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