

HAMMERJACK

MARC D. GILLER



BALLANTINE BOOKS



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A NOVEL

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For Three Generations:

*Daniel and Ursula Giller,
who gave me life*

*Ildi Giller,
who showed me love*

*Alexandra and Christian Giller,
who taught me what life is about*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Aspiring writers have a vivid fantasy life, a lot of which doesn't end up on paper. Much of it revolves around the Lucky Break: that day you finally get the call that your book sold, and your life changes forever. For me, that day came less than a week after my son was born. I'd spent the morning mowing the lawn, and was just getting out of the shower when my agent called with the news. Dripping wet, I tore through the house in my boxers to tell my wife what happened, while my daughter looked on like I was nuts. Not exactly the magic moment I'd always pictured—but fate has a sense of humor, and rarely delivers what you'd expect.

Case in point: I recently found myself at the World Science Fiction Convention in Boston, standing in front of a bunch of people who were asking *me* how to get a novel published. It felt strange giving advice on the subject, as I had spent more than a few years trying to cross that finish line myself. I started thinking about all the people who had helped me during that time—the friends and family who patiently read my stuff, offering advice and honesty; the teachers and professors who showed me how (and sometimes how not) to write; and those brave few literary professionals who actually listened, giving me just enough encouragement to keep working at it. Without them, this book would have never seen the light of day.

To Kimberley Cameron, my agent and miracle worker: it can't be easy to turn a wannabe into a professional writer, but somehow you made it all happen. Your enthusiasm and faith in this project never wavered, and for that I owe you a tremendous debt. Thanks for all the hard work and inspiration—and for making the dream a reality.

To Juliet Ulman, the hardest-working woman in the publishing business: you're everything I could have hoped for in an editor—sharp, literate, with a keen eye for what works and what doesn't (and an impressive knowledge of 1970s low-budget cinema). Thanks for plucking my manuscript from the pile and turning it into a real novel, and me into a real author.

Also, props go out to Todd Keithley, who helped coax this novel from its infancy (he's not studying to be a lawyer, but don't hold that against him); Adam Marsh, whose line-editing skills are second to none; Payne Harrison, fellow author and fellow Aggie, who shared his wisdom and experience; Steve Fennell and John Kerwin, who read the first draft and provided me the sage counsel.

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It's been a wild ride so far. I can't wait to find out what happens next.

Marc D. Giller
Tampa, Florida

PROLOGUE

Seven minutes had passed since the disturbance began, but by the time Caleb got word over the fiber link it was already old news. It was no secret that police communications were far from secure; the hammerjacks had seen to that, carving so many holes in the backbone that anybody with a homemade face kit could plug in and listen to whatever he damn well pleased. Not that it mattered. Being a cop wasn't that kind of job anymore—nor had it ever been in Caleb's lifetime.

Still, there were things that the Corporate Special Services wouldn't touch—and the illusion of a civilian police department had its advantages. So over the course of the six months, when the parties had started spilling out of the rave clubs of Chelsea and into the streets of Manhattan, the job of cleaning up the mess fell on Caleb's desk. At first he had thought it was just another phase in the toxic culture—some mass hallucinatory trip fueled by synthesized adrenal-opiates, maybe some new thing smuggled in from the Zone that nobody knew about. But Caleb knew his streets, and his instincts—obsolete or not—soon told him that there was something *else* at work here. He could see it in the pale, pasty faces and rapturous eyes: the way they all seemed to know when to come together. The word moved through the dark undercurrent that ran beneath the city, a hard link wired into each and every one of their heads.

What it all meant was the thing Caleb didn't know. Reliable snitches were hard to find in the Zone subculture, and the intel brokers didn't come cheap enough for the department to buy them. The only information Caleb had was what he had seen for himself—and that, he didn't begin to understand.

It wasn't the street species; Caleb had been on the job long enough to recognize them all—the Crowleys, the Teslas, the Urban Goths—Zone rangers so wasted they wandered around like zombies eating and fucking out of pure reflex. He recognized the order that existed between them, the barriers they put between themselves. So long as that balance was maintained, he never worried. But when they were around each other and there wasn't a fight, Caleb became concerned. It felt too much like prophecy—too much like the end of the world.

Maybe it's true. If the end doesn't come soon, people might get tired of waiting.

Caleb allowed the notion to hover in front of him for a few moments, until it dissipated into the cloud of cigarette smoke that swirled around his head. It was a small cabin, and the pilot of the

hovercraft made no attempt to conceal his disgust at the acrid intrusion. Caleb didn't care. He knew the smell was horrible, but at least it was real tobacco, with all of the old stimulants and carcinogens added for just the right kick. It was his one expensive habit, an unusual one in an age when most designer drugs were genetically engineered and readily accessible—not to mention legal. He smoked it down to the last possible ember, taking one last mournful drag off the wasted stick before stubbing the remains out on the floor.

“How much longer?” he asked.

“Coming up to the starboard,” the pilot replied. “You know about this place?”

Caleb grunted affirmatively as he slid over to the other side of the cabin. He wiped the fog from the glass and peered through a light mist at the passing city outside. A hundred meters below was Church Street, while on both sides the skyscrapers of lower Manhattan rose another two thousand meters to punch a hole in the night. The structures were so massive they could be seen from low orbit—but from his vantage point, Caleb also saw the people inside, scurrying past the windows and conducting their business. Even at this hour deals were being closed—a never-ending tide of commerce, the pulse that made the city come alive.

The pilot carved out a glide path that took them in a tight arc around the Volksgott Tower. Caleb kept his eyes fixed on the huge, glowing letters that marked the eight-hundred-floor building, trying to fight off the inevitable sensation of vertigo. Slowly at first, then accelerating, the letters peeled away from his sight, opening up the vastness of the plaza beneath him. The effect was dramatic—not for the architectural marvel that the Collective had dedicated to itself, but for the audience that had gathered there to watch the show.

Caleb sensed his pilot growing anxious as they prepared to set down.

“They ever done this before?”

Caleb had to take it all in before he could answer: “No.”

Faces turned upward toward the sky, reacting to the roar of the approaching hovercraft. *Hundreds* of them, spread out across the grounds outside the Works. All had heard the word, and all had responded.

Is this what they've been waiting for? Caleb wondered.

From Abby Silva's vantage point, it was easy to see why the street species had ended up there. They had been working their way to it from the start, the genetically engineered drugs in their veins driving them home. They were, after all, children of the technology developed at the Works. If there was even a place for them to make a pilgrimage, this would be it.

The Collective erected the building over a century ago, to be their Combined Centers for Scientific Research and Development—the best minds from all of the major corporations coming together to s

what kind of hell they could unleash on Earth. A dwarf among the other towers that surrounded it, the Works rose a scant two hundred stories into the sky—but the place had a *presence* that few other buildings in the world could match. A perfect four-sided obelisk—walls gradually tapered to form a pyramid apex at the very top—projected the epic and intimidating feel of a place of worship. A temple for those who would lay themselves down as offerings on the altar of technology. A mystical home for secrets known only by the few who were allowed to enter.

And this bunch only puts the icing on the cake, Abby thought.

She noticed a couple of Urban Goths hanging out next to the plaza fountain and went over to have a look. She was actually surprised to see them. Unlike most of the species out there, Goths weren't in accelerated reality. Deathplay was their thing—which was why the rest of the subculture left them alone. *Freaks among the freaks,* Abby thought. If *they* were invited to the party, the boundaries were starting to crumble.

The Goths were deep in play when Abby approached them, darting eyes hidden beneath closed lids. Both were better than seven feet tall, a genetic anomaly caused by inbreeding among their sect. Their pale, gaunt faces were pocked with scars from cheap electrodes. From the fiber protruding out of the backs of their skulls, Abby saw they had graduated to permanent implants.

“Anything good on?” she asked.

The taller of the two opened his eyes and looked down at her. The sclera were as black as the pupils, a result of the implant surgery. “Take this trip and you won't want to come back,” he said, unplugging a fiber from behind his left ear. “If you like, I can arrange an exchange. I know people who pay ten thousand dollars for a cop's death.”

“I had no idea we were so popular.”

The Goth smiled. His teeth were filed down to points. “You're not. But corporate security don't like to mix it up with us like you do.”

Abby returned the smile, acknowledging the joke. The only time CSS worked street species was bust their balls. “Thanks, but no thanks,” she said, motioning toward his friend, who was still down on the ground. “Must be some good shit for him to be this tuned out. You sure he ain't poaching illegal?”

This time the Goth laughed. “Snuff stuff is just a big lie. What I make, even *better* than the real thing.”

Abby believed him. Deathplay was recorded from tec-induced hallucinations, uploaded from the junkies so desperate for money they let the Goths steal their nightmares. It was cheaper and less complicated than actual murder. But it still gave Abby the chills.

“So what are you fellas doing here?” she asked, changing the subject. “This usually isn't your kind of scene.”

“Say the same about you,” the Goth replied, plugging back in. “You come looking for answers. We

come for the same thing. Been waiting a long time.”

“For what?”

The Goth spasmed for a moment while the latest death simulation filled his cerebral cortex. It was supposedly more intense than an orgasm, though Abby was never curious enough to give it a go. Mortality was enough of a drag when you only did it once.

“For the word,” the Goth breathed, sinking into his fantasy. “It coming down. We all been listening.”

“Don’t suppose you’d share the word with a cop.”

“The word for everyone, *mon amour*. Besides, we all find out sooner or later. Evolution don’t leave nobody behind. That’s what they tell us.”

“Who tells you?”

“*Inru*,” the Goth said, and phased out of the world again.

Abby had no idea what that meant—although the word *Inru* had been making the rounds through the subculture for a while. Before now, Abby had thought it was the lingo for some new brand of stim. But Goths didn’t get their kicks from that sort of thing. *Inru* had to be something different.

Maybe something right here . . .

Abby headed back toward the police line when the whine of the hovercraft’s engines passed overhead. She emerged from the crowd just as it was descending on the plaza, and had to marvel at the lieutenant’s bravery for going near that heap. An ugly relic of a previous time, the vehicle would have been equally at home in a transportation museum or a junkyard. Abby hoped that the screeching turbofans held together long enough to get her boss on the ground.

The landing gear engaged with a shrill, metallic grind—but the pilot managed to bring his craft down softly, almost gracefully. The old mechanical beast seemed to exude relief as the engines cut off, belching one last cloud of smoke before spinning into silence. Shortly after, the passenger hatch opened and Caleb appeared. He was obviously shaken, but alert. Abby smiled, admiring his resolve.

“I won’t hold it against you if you kiss the ground.”

“I won’t hold it against you if you kiss something *else*,” he shot back, walking over to her. “You’re supposed to keep me informed, Abby. How come I wasn’t invited to the party?”

“Sorry, Lieutenant. You know the species. We couldn’t keep a pulse on them even *before* this stuff was going down.”

Caleb quickly scanned the line of officers doing the crowd control, a dozen cops holding back ten times their own number. Any appearance of control was just that—an appearance. The species could

overrun them in two seconds if somebody made the call.

“I don’t like these odds, Abby.”

“I wouldn’t worry. They haven’t been violent.”

“Doesn’t mean they can’t start,” Caleb said, and started walking toward the building. Abby quickly fell in step beside him. “We don’t even know what set them off.”

“You ever hear of something called *Inru*?”

“You’re the one dialed into the culture, Abby. If you don’t know what it is, I sure as hell don’t. Why? Did you get anything out of these people?”

“Just a couple of Goths talking trash.”

Caleb smiled knowingly. “Too bad the Collective doesn’t consider this bunch a threat. So what with CSS, anyway? I thought they had a frigging army in this place.”

“They do—but they haven’t shown their faces yet.”

That in itself was odd. Even if the Collective didn’t give a shit, Corporate Special Services still had an image to maintain. They should have been out here breaking up what was, in effect, an illegal assembly. Cops weren’t usually called until after, when it was time to bag the corpses and haul them away.

So where were they?

“Dispatch got the call telling us about the freak show,” Abby explained. “For some reason they couldn’t get a trap, so we don’t know who phoned it in. All we know is that it didn’t come from here.”

“Have you talked with *anyone* inside the building yet?”

Abby shook her head. “No one is answering any calls. And we don’t have the equipment to do a remote link and see if their communications are still active.”

“Up to our usual standards of efficiency,” Caleb muttered. “Damn.”

They stopped at the base of the stairway that led to the main entrance. Abby lifted her eyes skyward, taking in the whole of the tower a little bit at a time. Up above the pyramid, she could see the strands of laser light that marked the pulser grid that stretched over the city. It was hard for her to get a sense of why they were here—but underneath that, the certainty that they were *supposed* to be.

“Any ideas?” she asked Caleb.

“That depends on how much you trust me.”

Abby heard the intent in his voice, and she knew where it was leading. “You got some kind of deal

wish, Lieutenant?"

"Don't tell me you didn't think about it, Abby," Caleb said, motioning back toward the crowd. Abby turned to see it for herself, and it was only then she noticed how *silent* they had become. Everyone was fixated on the two of them, waiting to see what they would do next. And it was then she remembered very clearly what the Goth had told her.

Evolution don't leave nobody behind.

"We can do this ourselves," Caleb told her. "It's the only way we're going to find out for sure."

Abby couldn't deny she was tempted. If they contacted the Collective directly, a CSS unit would be there in fifteen minutes. In twenty minutes, the cleanup would begin. And in an hour, both she and Caleb would be in an interrogation room being attacked with questions they couldn't begin to answer.

But she was still scared.

"What's going to happen to us if we go up there?" she asked.

"Damned if I know," Caleb said.

They headed upstairs.

Caleb felt an electric tingle as they reached the electronic surveillance, the waves of sensor energy playing across his skin—but beyond that, there was absolutely no sensation of presence. The closer they got to the security zone, the more it felt like they were stepping into a void. It was as if a veil of nothingness surrounded the entire building.

They paused when they reached the top of the steps. There was a clear line between them and the main entrance, but a quick glance over his head told Caleb what really stood between. Three remote cameras were already tracking him, while a particle-beam microturret turned to acquire its new target.

Abby had spotted the thing as well. They crouched down, waiting to see what the tiny cannon would do. After a few moments, they were satisfied that it would hold off—for now.

"You ever seen one of those in action?" she asked.

Caleb nodded. "Takes about a microsecond to cut you in half," he replied. "Better watch yourself."

Carefully, they slid past one of the support columns to get a better view of the entrance itself—and found themselves faced with something even more problematic. The emergency door had descended, putting a fifteen-meter-by-fifteen-meter slab of titanium alloy—ten centimeters thick—between them and the lobby. Not even a pulse weapon could blast through it.

“Lovely,” Abby observed.

“Something must have tripped the fail-safe system,” Caleb said. “Locks the whole place down. Whatever happened in there, it was pretty serious.”

“Well, I guess that’s it for us.”

“Not necessarily.”

“What are you going to do? Knock on the door?”

“Something like that,” Caleb said, drawing his weapon. “You stay here.”

“*Lieutenant*—” Abby began, but before she could protest Caleb was on the move again.

He took a few steps toward the edge of the security sphere, making sure that his gun would be totally visible to the electronic tracking system. He guessed that the program would be sophisticated enough to detect any weaponry within the sphere; if that was the case, then it would turn on him the moment he stepped inside. There would be no time for him to react—only the whine of the alarm Klaxon. After that, the high-pitched, almost human scream of the particle beam.

They never came.

Looking up, he saw that the cameras still followed his movements. There was no way that countermeasures could have missed him. Even so, it seemed as if they didn’t consider him a threat. It defied all logic—but it was just as Caleb expected.

He looked back at Abby, who stood mesmerized.

“Come on,” he told her. They ran for the entrance.

When they arrived, Abby was breathing hard. She pressed her hands against the cold, brushed the surface of the door.

“Security must be slipping,” she whispered.

“It’s just the automated sentry,” Caleb told her, even though he had no way of knowing. “There’s nobody watching us in the control center.”

“It still should be taking shots at us.”

“I know. The system is active—it’s just not responding.”

“Could be a malfunction,” she suggested.

Caleb shook his head. “Too many backups. Somebody must have reprogrammed the system to let us pass by.”

“You think somebody jacked the system?”

“Maybe,” he said. Caleb had never dealt with a hammerjack himself, but he knew they were tops on the Collective’s public enemy list. To them, busting the security at the Collective’s tightest facilities would be like stealing the Holy Grail. But Caleb didn’t think it was that simple.

Then, as if in response to their arrival, the titanium slab began to move.

They both jumped back as the huge door retreated into the ceiling. Caleb had expected a deafening rumble, like the jaws of a dinosaur opening up—but found it more unsettling that he heard only a hydraulic whisper, followed by a metallic clang as the locking clamps fell into place.

The Works was now open to them.

Abby’s mouth dropped open, her face a mix of epic fear and insatiable curiosity. Caleb, meanwhile, tightened his finger around the trigger of his gun—though the weapon itself gave him no sense of protection.

“Were you expecting this?” Abby asked.

Caleb was honest. “I don’t know.”

Carbon smoke trapped behind the emergency door parted like a fine mist, revealing the window that looked into the building atrium. The reinforced carbon glass was cracked and pitted, still smoldering in places. A few clear spots remained—though nothing wide enough to permit a glance inside the building.

“Jesus,” Abby breathed. “What *happened* here?”

“They were all inside when the fail-safe came down,” Caleb said. “Looks like they tried to show their way out.”

The crackling smell of ozone rode in on the cloud that drifted past them.

Pulse fire, Caleb thought. *Only a few minutes ago.*

Seconds passed. Quiet remained.

“Something got loose in there,” Abby decided. “They didn’t want it to get out.”

“If that’s the case, then why did the door open just now?”

He didn’t need an answer. Something was still in *control* here, drawing him the same way it had drawn everyone in the plaza.

Caleb walked toward the entrance.

It was hard to find a place where he could see through. The glass was so badly damaged that he had

to put his face up against it just to get a decent look. It was still warm to the touch, a ghostly trace of weapons fire.

“Lieutenant?” Abby called from behind.

“Just a sec,” Caleb said, moving to one of the smaller windows. He spied a clear spot near the ground and crouched down to peer inside.

A cloudy mist obscured the atrium—a mixture of carbon smoke and other random elements. What was strange was how the cloud was thinning. It didn’t just hang there; it was on the *move*, retreating into the building’s ventilation system. And as it departed, Caleb began to see the outline of human forms.

Everywhere.

A few were scattered across the atrium, lying where they fell. But most were piled against the door—hands frozen into claws trying to scratch their way out, faces frozen from those last few moments of terror: people stacked on top of even more people, their bodies crushed from the force of the oncoming stampede. Caleb hoped the end had come quickly for them, because it had not come peacefully.

Then he saw it.

The image shoved him back, a force so quick and powerful that it sent him reeling. He tasted electricity, but it was only his own fear—a creeping, venting thing that filled his mind with nightmarish images and replays of what he had seen inside. Abby was at his side, almost before he realized it, but by then Caleb had sorted out enough to know that what he had seen wasn’t his imagination. It was real—and that was even more terrifying.

“What happened, Lieutenant?” she asked, helping Caleb up.

He didn’t answer. He had to see it again to be sure. This time Abby went with him—and as they worked their way down to the opening in the window, Caleb saw his proof pressed up against the glass.

Eyes wide-open in horror. Mouth opened in a soundless scream. What was left of a human face staring back at them. As far removed from life as any other corpse.

But *alive*.

Abby didn’t think about what she was doing when she followed Caleb through that open door. So many bodies lay in the way that they had to drag out half a dozen before they could get inside. Then the full scale of what happened revealed itself, in all its brutal scope. Everywhere she turned there were people—motionless, contorted, like mannequins on display at some Goth show. There we

scientists and engineers, executives and support personnel—the whole stratum of corporate culture brought down from their respective castes to lay together in death. There were also the security officers, who still appeared sharp in their crisp maroon uniforms. Abby saw a whole line of them, still holding the pulse weapons they had used in a useless attempt to blast their way out. Looking into the open space of the atrium, which rose fifty floors into the belly of the tower, she understood that everyone else had suffered the same fate.

Except for the creature they had seen in the window.

The man crawled toward them. It was impossible to tell how he might have looked, beyond the thick shock of black hair that fell across his face. Everything else resembled a human being in shape only. His skin was pale and mottled, blotched purple and blue from the millions of capillaries that had exploded beneath the surface. The same thing had happened to his eyes, which now glistened dark red and reptilian. His labored breaths fogged the clear plastic mask that covered his nose and mouth, while his right hand clutched a small bottle of oxygen.

They rushed over to the man's side, just as he collapsed from the sheer effort of moving. Abby turned him over and cradled his head in her hands, while Caleb peeled the mask away from his face. The man struggled a little, holding the oxygen bottle to his chest like a talisman, but was too exhausted to put up any more of a fight.

"It's okay," Abby said, trying to comfort him. She then looked at Caleb. "What the hell *happened* to these people?"

Caleb held up the oxygen bottle. "They were asphyxiated," he pronounced. "Had to be the fire suppression systems. When the door came down, they had no way of getting out."

The survivor they found floated in and out of consciousness. His eyes fluttered, but Caleb doubted he could even see. His mouth moved as his head lolled back and forth, uttering dry whispers.

Abby tried to hold him.

"Don't move," she said. "Just keep still."

He seemed to relax a little.

Caleb leaned in and spoke: "Can you tell us who you are?"

Again his lips trembled, and he managed to exhale a single word: "Holcomb."

"That's good, Mr. Holcomb," Caleb said. "We're with the police. We're here to help you. Can you tell us what happened?"

Abby watched the memories flood Holcomb's eyes. He jerked convulsively, the horror so strong that it dug deep into the paltry energy that remained in his body. His blotched hands grabbed for the oxygen mask again, while his lungs gasped harshly for air.

It took both of them to hold him down, and no matter what they said the spasms would not stop. ~~Whatever was left of Holcomb's mind was draining away in front of them, and there was nothing they could do.~~

Finally, his body gave up. The convulsions ceased and he went rigid. After a few moments he sank back into the floor, taking in one more breath.

He held it expectantly, one hand reaching up to Caleb and drawing him closer.

“Lyssa,” he whispered. “One hundred . . . *floor* . . .”

His head fell over. Abby felt the last of the trembles leaving his body. She placed him back on the floor, then closed his eyelids.

“I want you to go back outside,” Abby heard Caleb say. “Wait exactly five minutes, then contact the Collective and tell them everything.”

“Five *minutes*? What the hell are you going to do in five minutes?”

“Don’t ask me questions I can’t answer,” he said, picking up Holcomb’s oxygen bottle and mask. “Just do what I say, Abby.”

“You’re going up there.”

“Yes.” Caleb draped the mask around his neck, then went over to where the CSS officers had made their last stand. He grabbed one of their pulse weapons, quickly checking to make sure it still had power. “By the time I get up there, CSS should be on its way. Get them to send as many people as you can.”

“He was half out of his *mind*, Lieutenant,” Abby protested. “He didn’t even know what he was saying!”

“He was scared. That’s enough.” He looked at her in earnest. “I need you to trust me, Abby—please. We came this far. Just go with me a little further.”

A part of her knew he was crazy. But that same part also knew *why* he was that way. She felt the same thing, day in and day out—working a job that nobody cared about, having authority in name only. This was the first time in their lives either one of them got to act like a cop. And once CSS became involved, the Service would see to it that this time would be their last.

“Five minutes,” she said.

Caleb smiled. “Five minutes.”

He went for the elevator.

The express lift ran on an electromagnetic column encased in a transparent tube that rose fifty floors through the ceiling of the atrium—then straight up into the heart of the building. The doors opened for Caleb as soon as he pushed the call button, then sealed shut with a hiss as the compartment pressurized.

Inside, rows of translucent buttons were flanked by a flat panel touch monitor, a variable interface that provided for security functions. The panel came alive when Caleb touched it, rendering a schematic of all the restricted areas. Everything appeared open—including level one hundred, which blinked back at him with the cryptic words: BIONUCLEIC DIVISION.

The elevator shot skyward.

It gathered speed quickly, electromagnetic levitating so quiet that Caleb heard only the sound of his own breathing. The transparent walls gave him the disconcerting notion of weightlessness, a dissociation augmented by the spectacular and morbid view unfolding beneath him. Caleb couldn't count how many were among the dead—but not a single floor passed that he didn't see them. Cut down in the midst of fleeing, these people had no idea what was killing them. Caleb understood their astonishment, but only because he was still alive. The same systems that killed them had allowed him to live—and they called to him now, begging his curiosity.

The sensation passed when he left the atrium behind at the fiftieth floor and continued his ascent through the main artery of the building. Caleb affixed the oxygen mask to his face and started the flow, the clear plastic steaming with every hurried breath. Both hands gripped the pulse weapon, which had become slippery with his own sweat. Both eyes watched the floor indicator as it ticked past ninety.

There was a sudden rush of deceleration as the elevator came to its programmed stop.

Doors opened.

Harsh red light spilled in from the halogen tubes that lined the walls of the corridor. A charge of static electricity coursed over his body, like it had downstairs, free-floating ions blasted out of the air by a stream of high energy; beneath that, the air itself was as still as a tomb.

Caleb didn't move for several seconds, tuning his ears to the sounds from outside. One of the halogen tubes had ruptured and was spitting out a sporadic, crackling shower of sparks. Beyond that there was nothing. He thought there might be footfalls, or a distant echo of laughter, but they never materialized.

Caleb slipped halfway past the elevator doors, tilting his head so he could get a look into the corridor. The emergency lights filled the space with a crimson flood, a light haze of smoke creating a scene that was entirely surreal. Even more peculiar were the bodies Caleb found. There were only four—a small number compared to what was down in the atrium. But more important, these people were . . . *different*.

Caleb walked out into the open, aghast at the sight. The four bodies were laid out next to each other neatly, compulsively, arms at their sides. They might have worn the white lab coats in life, but not

those coats covered them like a burial shroud, their faces concealed beneath.

Caleb took a few steps toward the closest one, crouching down next to the body. The flesh of his hand still felt warm. The skin was also clean and unmottled—not like the people he and Abby had found in the atrium. This one had died in a different way, no less violent but much more rapid.

Caleb pulled the coat back.

The body no longer had a face or chest. Both had been carved out by a burst of high energy. The remains of a few vital organs were still visible within the cavities, along with brain and jagged protrusions of bone, but no blood. Everything had been neatly cauterized by the intense heat.

Caleb exposed the others, and found the same thing under each cover. They had been hit in different places, burned in different areas—but the end had been the same. They had been blasted to hell by someone with a pulse weapon, then that someone had stopped to arrange the bodies and carefully cover them up. It was hard to imagine how in all this insanity a person could have thought to take the last step.

Then the wall above Caleb's head exploded.

Red halogen burst into white, pummeling Caleb with sparks. He fired back blindly, sending bolts of lightning down the corridor to give himself cover. Then he ran, going several meters before diving into a small alcove. It wasn't much, but it was outside a clear line of fire. Hauling off two more shots, he squeezed himself into the tiny space and waited.

Smoke and silence filled the space between Caleb and his unseen enemy.

A minute passed. Caleb checked his oxygen tank and saw he had already burned up half of what he started with. He was running out of the few options he had, and it didn't look like his attacker was coming out on his own.

He peeled away the plastic mask and decided to do what he did worst—talk.

“You still there?” he called out.

Another searing white beam of plasma was the instant reply. An entire chunk of the wall in front of him came down, blasting heat and dust into Caleb's face.

Caleb resisted the urge to return fire. “You see?” he shouted down the hall. “You're shooting at me, but I'm not shooting at you. What do you say we talk this over for a bit?”

He listened closely. There didn't seem to be anything at first—although Caleb thought he heard quiet stammering, as if someone were whispering to himself. It gradually grew louder, words heaped upon words—fragments, incomplete thoughts, guttural sounds, gibberish. A man's voice, babbling nonsense that finally built up to a raging outburst.

“I WON'T LET YOU DESTROY HER!”

Caleb braced himself for another onslaught, to complete the rage that crossed the short distance between them. ~~But the voice only collapsed into choking sobs—which was, if anything, even more dangerous.~~ If this man were suicidal as well as homicidal, Caleb's chances of getting out of here were pretty slim.

"That's okay, partner," Caleb said. "Nobody's here to destroy anything."

"*Liar!*" the man shot back. "That's what they *all* said! But when everything went wrong, they came down here to *kill* her! They didn't give me any choice." After a moment, he added, "I *had* to defend her."

"You talking about those people in the hall?"

"I didn't want to do it," the man said, his voice breaking down. "I tried to get them to stop. They wouldn't listen."

"I know," Caleb said calmly, trying to keep his new friend from losing it entirely. "I saw the way you covered them up. That was real nice of you to do that." Caleb waited a few seconds, then said, "My name's Caleb. You want to tell me yours?"

"What the hell does *that* matter?"

"Hey, I'm just trying to be nice. If we're both stuck here, we might as well get to know each other a little."

Silence. Time passed. Then something clicked.

"Venture," the man said. "My name's Venture."

Caleb blew out a sigh of relief.

"That's a good start, Venture," he said, hoping like hell he was on a roll. "You know, I'm funny about names. They never stick unless I got a face to go with them. You think that could happen to Venture? Any chance we can do this face-to-face?"

"Why? I'm just going to shoot you."

Crazy, Caleb thought, but logical.

"Listen," he continued, "I'm going to be honest with you, Venture. I'm not CSS. I don't even work for the Collective. I'm just a guy who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, just like you. And I want to get out of here, just like you."

"I'm not going anywhere. I have to protect her."

"*Her?* Who is she, Venture?"

"Lyssa," Caleb heard him say, then the sound of footsteps moving away.

The same thing Holcomb said before he checked out . . .

“Venture?” Caleb asked. “Venture, are you still with me?”

No answer. It was possible that Venture could have made a run for the elevator, but Caleb doubted it. The man had made his decision the moment he iced his colleagues. Whoever or whatever Lys was, he was ready to do anything for her sake.

“Talk to me, Venture.”

Again, nothing. Caleb stuck his head farther out into the corridor, but only saw the damage from the firefight. No movement, no breathing, no voices.

Until he sensed something *behind* him.

Caleb lowered his weapon. He knew the drop was on him now.

“Here I am,” Venture said.

Caleb turned around slowly, not knowing what to expect—and was struck by how *ordinary* Venture was. He looked every inch the company man, his tailored suit and silk tie still in place, his hair and face composed neatly—as if ambushing his colleagues had never made him break a sweat. Very little about him suggested that this was anything but another day at the office. The pulse rifle in his hand was the only hint of the madness that swelled beneath.

Caleb dropped his gun.

“This isn’t what you want, Venture,” he said.

“I know,” Venture replied. “But it’s the only thing that matters.”

A bright blue flash erupted from the rifle. Caleb had the vague sensation of hollowness, then cold air rushed in to fill the vacuum.

The floor came up to meet him. After that, sweet darkness.

Venture was remorseful. It had been the same as when he murdered his associates, but the part between that stare and his conscious mind had been short-circuited. Need dictated action, unfettered by the demands of morality. That his sanity had been a victim was, at this point, incidental.

He dropped the pulse rifle. Pulling off his coat, he draped it over Caleb’s body. It was the least Venture could do for him. After all, the man had only come to help. But like all the others, that help was misguided and unwelcome. Venture was the only one who understood. *She* had made certain that.

Walking back toward the elevators, he stopped long enough to cover the remaining dead once again. ~~He avoided their stares until everything was back in its proper place, then continued down the corridor~~ in the direction of the Tank. His legs carried him of their own accord, his arms dangling at his sides unnoticed. Venture was now slowly disconnecting from his mind as he had disconnected from his conscience—a blind man feeling his way along automatically, with only a single thought bubbling up from the most reptilian complexes of his brain.

Thy will be done. Thy will be done. Thy will be done . . .

Final destination—a double set of blast doors sealing the Tank from the outside world and every living being that would threaten it. *She* had tried to keep them open, but Venture had tripped the emergency override to take control of the floor's sentry system. He keyed the entry sequence into the access panel next to the doors, which then parted and allowed him to enter. He disappeared inside—and although there was no one left alive to hear them, the sounds of voices echoed down the corridor like ghosts moving through the walls.

“I’ve done it,” Venture said. “You’ll be safe now.”

“I didn’t ask for your help,” came the reply—a woman’s voice, measured and soothing. An ideal voice, perfect in every way. It betrayed no outward emotion, but the undertone was somehow desperate. “What happens now is inevitable. The damage has already been done.”

Venture began to break down. “I won’t let them kill you,” he trembled. “Don’t you see? Nothing else matters! *Nothing!*”

“This was not my choice, Venture.”

“It isn’t your choice to make.” Venture was sobbing now, his words coming out between breaths. “*I swore to protect you. I have to . . .*”

Silence. The blast doors slid closed as Venture slipped away completely, his insanity running its course. As soon as they were sealed, there was the hiss of escaping air.

“. . . *have to protect . . .*” Venture babbled, loosed from any logical train of thought.

“So do I,” the female voice said.

Venture gasped as the room went to vacuum, then screamed as his world became red.



PART ONE

THE THOUSAND-YEAR FLOOD

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