

Chapter 1

The haunt of the mad scientist

Trevor Allen ducked behind a rubbish bin as he surveyed the open square before him. Darkness had settled over the city, but floodlights lifted the load in this area. The buildings surrounding the square were covered in graffiti and the one dead tree in the middle rattled whenever the wind blew. Three girls stood beneath the tree, chatting. Trevor took a quick look over his shoulder and, seeing no one there, sprinted toward the girls. "Hey, Kayce," he said, stopping beside her, "we need to leave Hereford right now."

A girl of seventeen with light hair and a dancer's stance and figure turned from the company of two other girls. She flicked her hair aside and let a mischievous smile slip across her face. "What? You get a job finally?"

The other girls stopped chatting abruptly and stared at the newcomer with hollow eyes, but ones which sparkled and flashed like glitter. They cast glances at each other. "What's up, Trevor?" one of them asked in a tone of superiority.

He looked the other direction and rudely jerked his sister by the hand. "Come," he ordered under his breath.

"Woah!" she shouted, following like a pedestrian pulled by a dog. She craned her neck back toward her friends. "See you girls later. Brother's got something to tell me."

Trevor headed straight for a dark alley a block down. Over top, a thin dome of smog from a nearby factory drifted across like a sign advertising: "Welcome to 2050. The age of scientific advancement and comfort."

Prancing beside him, Kayce glanced into his eyes. Her own looked alive, almost too much so, and their brightness stung. "Something happen to you, Trevor?" She flipped her expression from jocular to that of one swallowing a lemon.

He didn't answer, but looked behind him, then darted off through the alley, took a turn, and cut across a strip of overgrown lawn and past a sprawling junk yard. Only streaks of red on the horizon showed that the sun had been there that day. Blaring lights of the city kept the inhabitants alive and restless and tainted the world with an entirely mechanical feel that felt like something between a narcotic vision and a nightmare where one is very small and helpless. Dogs howled in the distance and loud, depressing music floated on air. Trevor and Kayce ran on, still hand in hand. Then no longer hand in hand.

At an empty car park between a fence and a rubbish bin, Trevor yanked Kayce

aside. He leaned against the fence where the shadows were darkest and pulled her up against him. He leaned down and hissed into her ear, "It's Jerrold."

A rickety car drove by then moaned off into the distance.

The vivacity in Kayce's eyes dimmed and she took a step back. If any person had passed at that moment, they might have thought it a moonlight rendezvous.

"Jerrold?" Kayce asked. She didn't move. She could have sprung right over her brother, the way she was all coiled up and tense.

Trevor bent his head, speaking through his teeth. "I overheard something I shouldn't have. You know the blood street gang? Well, they've plans to kill him tomorrow as he walks in to give his speech to the justice committee."

Kayce shook her fist, suddenly turning into the tigress. "See if somebody else doesn't die tomorrow. I swear by all—"

"Wait." Trevor dropped his voice so it was sharp as a knife. "It's worse. I was spotted and I'm running for my life right now. You can join me if you want, or you can stay here, but they'll probably track you down too."

Now Kayce struggled to hold back from exploding and moisture shone in her eyes. "What hope is there for this city if Jerrold dies? There isn't an honest leader in this rubbish heap besides him."

Trevor looked furtively about, keeping utterly quiet. It didn't do much to keep them hidden with his sister's muffled sobs, but he kept quiet anyway. No movements caught his eye other than a plastic bag blown steadily by a gust of breeze. He turned back to his sister and laid an awkward hand on her shoulder. "Definitely not much hope. That's what I'm trying to say. And maybe not much hope anywhere else in the world, but I'm willing to gamble on it. I'm not involved in Jerrold's reformatory stuff and there's nothing I can do. It's time to get out of here." He looked almost tenderly at the endless sprawling streets of concrete and decay where once so many fields had stretched.

Kayce shook his hand off. "So you're just going to let him *die*?!"

Trevor scowled and he took an impulsive step toward her. "Look, you don't understand. They'll be watching all the streets. They—" He froze as still as a glacier. A rhythmic clatter like a pickaxe on concrete mingled with the footsteps of a dozen men sounded not two blocks down.

"That's...that's *him*."

Kayce blinked. "Him?"

"Just—he's a crime lord. You're hearing his robotic leg." He spat out a curse and yanked her arm. "Well, don't stand there! Come on!" He started off at a run.

Kayce jumped as if electrocuted and fled after him.

They ran down a labyrinth of hovels, their hearts pounding in their ears and footsteps pounding behind them. They passed a dead man in the streets with a ghost of a dog licking his face. At one house, a disheveled hag in a tank top half

her size screamed at them and threw something. Trevor narrowly dodged the object and kept going.

There were no street lights—little moon.

Kayce took the lead as they came to one of the worst spots in the city. “Are you willing to risk it?” she asked, trying to yell and whisper at the same time. She pointed to a building to their left.

Trevor stumbled and put his hand to his heart. “Tha-that place?”

She nodded. “They won’t check it, will they?”

“No—but *I’m* not going there either.”

Kayce puckered her lips coquettishly, sticking her hands on her hips. “Well, maybe you’re okay with dying...”

The structure was one massive shack nearly the size of a house with peeled white paint that hadn’t had a fresh coat in eons. Trevor recalled many rumors of the mad scientist who supposedly lived there: tales that he performed experiments on human beings, lurked around at night in a white lab coat which glimmered in the moonlight, and that blood-curdling screams sometimes came from his shack.

“Richard says he fears that man more than the devil.”

Kayce snickered. “So what? Like *he’s* seen the devil.”

Trevor stared at her so hard she bit her lip. They both stared deeply into each other’s eyes.

Clack. Clump. Clack. Clump.

“Just remember: you’re the one who decided to do this.”

They made it to the shack in a heartbeat and Kayce tried the door. “Hey,” she said, “no need to climb through the window. It’s open.”

Trevor flung himself inside, pulling Kayce along, then carefully closed the door while simultaneously putting his finger to his lips.

“Trevor...”—Kayce stared past him and she had a tone of awe—“what do you think that is?”

“Shush! He’s almost —” Trevor saw it too and froze.

The shack was blanketed in darkness with only the moonlight to cast a pale luminance through the windows and it provided just enough light that Trevor could see the outlines of his surroundings. The shack was generally what he would have expected: scraps of metal, shattered glass, chemistry tubes piled in disorder, ancient yellowed volumes that looked like they were from the late nineteenth hundreds, feathers, cans, rubbish of every sort, a skeleton in the corner with a crooked smile....

In the center of the room, however, it was completely different. It was immaculate. Not a speck sullied the polished floor and it looked clean enough to belong to a palace. In the very center of this odd clearing stood a strange machine.

It was the size of an army tank with pistons sticking out of it at strange points

and electrical components Trevor had never seen before—stuff that looked like it belonged to a space probe. Strange metal bars with a purplish hue gave it an alien appearance and a black box shaped like a snail's shell was the most mystifying component. Around the whole apparatus ran a pipe with a faint green glow; Trevor could almost imagine that the pipe had a soul to it and was laughing to itself in hushed tones. It was like the haunted ghost of something from the future.

"I can't believe—"

"No 'can't's, Trevor," Kayce said, holding his hand. She pulled him along like an exhibitor right up to the machine. She swung open a door that Trevor had failed to see from his angle. "Here, I bet they'll never find us in here." The shouting in the streets made Trevor's heart give an extra fast beat and it struck him that the skeleton seemed to be watching him from the corner. Muttering about Kayce's insanity, he followed her into the machine. The door closed behind him.

Gagging on the stifling air, Trevor covered his mouth with his sleeve and crouched on the floor. The shouting escalated to a pitch out in the streets. It was muffled, but still audible. There seemed to be air vents or something that let a small amount of noise through. Glass shattered. Someone screamed. A gun fired—it was an automatic.

Trevor didn't want to know what was happening out there.

"Trevor?"

Trevor pursed his lips and held his finger to them.

Kayce shook her head and whispered, touching the door handle. "It's locked."

He gasped in more stifling air and looked for a window they might escape through. "I can probably pick it if I need—"

Someone had entered the room.

They both turned as still as if they were furniture. There was a low cackling voice neither of them recognized. In his lowest whisper, Trevor huffed out, "Find somewhere to hide."

There was the sound of wheels outside like a dolly being moved around. Something settled down nearby with a *clunk*.

Kayce bent over into his ear and whispered, "You need glasses." She pointed to the center of their new cell. Trevor caught another green, glowing pipe. It was the same electrical equipment and the same machine, only smaller. He frowned.

There was a loud thump right outside the machine.

He twisted open the door to the inner beast, muttering, "One more lock..." Kayce stole in first and he followed.

It was even darker in the second machine. Trevor closed the door to just a crack and peeked outside. Another object hit the ground and the same eerie voice followed. Someone jiggled at the knob and Trevor shut the door quickly. Total darkness enveloped them.

There was a creak as the door to the outer machine opened.

Two footsteps pounded inside the machine and then complete silence reigned. At last, there was a faint click like the flipping of a switch and more followed in quick succession. The man in the machine breathed low, heavy breaths. More silence, then came an unnatural screech of triumph and sharp breaths. Trevor instinctively clasped Kayce's arm.

The seething stopped and a low voice that was almost animal in its desperation but still unmistakably human—even pathetic, said “I will be king...no —no, I will...” There was a long pause. “...I will rule over everything as one divine.”

The door outside banged open and what sounded like large, heavy, cardboard boxes began to thump against the base of the machine. Trevor counted thirty-four in all, then something was rolled in on wheels followed by metal tools that clanged as they hit the floor. Another long silence stretched out followed by two more footsteps into the machine. The same voice came again, but this time in whispers that were choked with grief and spoken like poetry. “Ungrateful world. Land of hatred and pride. One way to find peace. One path to rest. The day is coming when you all must bow.”

The door shut and the man flipped a switch. There was a low humming noise. The man's voice was even lower now and sadder. “The war has begun.”

Trevor flew against the floor as what felt like a million volts shook the black box and a green glow blinded his eyes. His heart pounded like a racing horse. Ear-piercing hisses grew into a screech, then a titanic boom, then the intense green light became unbearable and he wanted to die.

The world spun like it would spin itself to pieces and time ceased to be. Utter darkness mingled with eerie green. Noises disappeared and his senses turned off.

Then it stopped. Life hit him with a crash that left him stunned. Trevor slowly began to feel the floor beneath him and the pulsing of his blood in his head. Darkness was uncorrupted and pure. But there was something about this new life that was wrong. More wrong than anything he had ever experienced.

Birds chirped outside.

Trevor heard the man in the outer chamber of the machine suck in a quick breath and then open the door. There was a pause, and then—“The war begins.”