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POWELL

FUTURE'S  
EDGE

**TITAN** BOOKS

# PART ONE



MASS EXTINCTION

CHAPTER ONE

A TREE FALLS

“Guv?” My barman was a mechanical, multi-limbed lifeform from a system in the vicinity of Arcturus.

“Yes, Siegfried?”

“You’d better get in here.”

I sighed. “What are we dealing with?”

Siegfried looked like a football thrown through a cutlery drawer. “Attempted shakedown.”

“Another one?” I rolled my eyes. “What’s that, like three this month?”

“Four.”

“Where are they?”

“Standing at the bar. You can’t miss them. They’re the ones that look like geckos in sweatpants.”

I pulled open my office door, to be greeted by the buzz of a dozen conversations in half a dozen languages. The place smelled of desperation and black mould. The only illumination came from a row of lights hanging above the counter. Tonight’s would-be gangsters were standing in a tight group at one end, trying to look simultaneously menacing and inconspicuous.

“For goodness’ sake,” I said. “They can’t be much older than hatchlings.”

I walked around the counter to face them. The tallest only came up to my chest, but they had pointed snouts filled with sharp teeth, and scalpel-like claws on their three-fingered hands.

“Are you the owner?” one of them asked in the Common Tongue. Judging by the length of the spines protruding from between his shoulder blades, he was the oldest of the bunch, and probably their leader.

“How can I help?”

“We have an offer for you.”

“Let me guess.” I folded my arms. “Does this offer have something to do with me paying you a percentage of my takings in return for protection?”

Eyelids flicked back and forth across large, black reptilian eyes. “Uh, yesss.”

“Sorry, kids. Not interested.”

The leader pulled himself up to his full height. “We could make things very difficult for you.”

“I don’t doubt it, but I’m still going to have to say no.”

A hush fell as the patrons smelled a confrontation. Some of the smaller reptiles in the group looked around, unnerved to suddenly find themselves the centre of attention. The tall one didn’t seem to have noticed. His attention remained fixed on me. “This is your last chance,” he hissed. “A place like this, with a lot of wood and packing materials. Very flammable. Anything might happen.”

I uncrossed my arms. “You boys must be new in town. I assume you’re trying to carve out a little territory for yourselves. A little notoriety?”

“What of it?”

“You think you’re the first to try something like this? I’ve been here two years, and there are always parasites about, looking to take what they haven’t earned. I’ve seen gangs come and go. You’re no different.”

Claws flexed. “Are you going to pay or not?”

I shook my head. “The thing is, kids; if I needed protection, I’d already have it. There are plenty of hoodlums to choose from, and a lot of them are tougher than you.”

The leader held my gaze for a few seconds, then he held out a three-fingered hand. One of his henchmen produced a stolen emergency flare and passed it to him. “How about we torch the place now?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Oh, really?” The leader twisted the flare’s base, igniting it. For a moment, the only sound in the bar was the roar of the red flame.

I sighed. The flare was designed to be seen through rain and fog by search helicopters. It probably contained a mix of strontium nitrate, potassium perchlorate, and an energetic fuel such as aluminium or magnesium. Which meant it had a burn temperature of at least a thousand degrees centigrade—certainly hot enough to set fire to anything in this place. I couldn’t let that happen, so I reached out and snuffed it with my hand.

The reptiles looked at me aghast. The leader said, “How did you do that?”

I smirked and held up my hand. In the overhead light, my palm glistened with an iridescent rainbow sheen.

“Alien nano-virus,” I said. “I picked it up on an archaeological dig, a long way from here.” I slapped the extinguished flare from his hand. “It makes me very, very hard to kill.” I hauled back and punched him across his scaly face. His jaw snapped shut and he crashed back into his little entourage, who fled, leaving their fallen leader sprawled unconscious on the concrete floor. “And a lot stronger than I look.”

Scattered applause broke from the tables around the room. The locals always appreciated a show. I ignored them, turning instead to where Siegfried hovered like a rotund Swiss Army knife. “Drag that outside, would you?”

“My pleasure, guv.”

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As the conversation among the drinkers turned back to the latest reports from the front line, I stepped out to the small concrete yard at the back of the ramshackle bar. Leaning there against the corrugated iron wall, nostrils filled with garbage fire smoke from the surrounding refugee encampment, I gazed up at the vast foam ships being constructed in orbit and wished I had the guts to book a berth.

Beyond the lamps and circles of firelight, the night was very dark, and a cold breeze ruffled up from the salt marshes to the southwest to flutter tent walls and fluster laundry. Like everyone else, I had come here fleeing the war; but unlike the majority in the camp, this was where I had stopped, too scared and too stubborn to cash in my chips and leave altogether.

From the campfires, I caught snatches of competing songs; the crackle of burning plastic; children crying; food cooking. From further afield, the brine stink of the marshes and the occasional echoing thunder of a shuttle lifting from the civilian port. I kicked aside a tin can. Once, a lush grass analogue had covered the ground here; now, the passage of thousands of refugees had worn it to a bare, hard-packed dirt, strewn with the detritus of their half-abandoned, makeshift lives. Beyond the sea of tents, barbed wire gates marked the camp's entrance. The wire wasn't there to keep the refugees from leaving; it was there to deter the local wildlife, especially the nocturnal Komodo-jackals that prowled the edges of the salt marsh and picked off the occasional incautious security guard.

Whenever a completed foam ship broke orbit, which happened about once a week, the entire encampment looked up. Some of them muttered blessings and good wishes, kissed prayer beads or raised their hands to the skies in the knowledge that another ten thousand sleeping souls had cast themselves into the abyss in the hope of finding sanctuary among the uncharted stars on the far side of the gap. Others shook their

heads and cursed at the sight, lamenting a missed opportunity. They knew there would only ever be a finite number of foam ships, and never enough to take every refugee. Eventually, the Cutters would find their way here along the tramline network.

The tramlines were a web of furrows in the undervoid, which a correctly positioned ship could use to glide from one star system to the next, expending very little energy. Every known species employed them. They had been arteries for colonisation, conflict, and commerce, the roads of empire; but now the enemy were using them against us.

That was the part I didn't want to think about.

I pulled a joint from behind my ear. Smoking wasn't one of my customary vices, but one of my regular customers had slipped the little hand-rolled cylinder to me in lieu of payment and it seemed a shame to let it go to waste. I cupped my hands and lit the end with a borrowed lighter. The first drag made my head feel light. The second brought a surge of nausea. I managed two further inhales before coughing, giving up, and flicking the butt over the fence. If I wanted to feel sick, I could huff the toxic smoke from the garbage fires. I stood for a moment, letting the wooziness subside. The bar was a familiar presence at my back, its conversational weight sensed rather than heard. It had been mine since I'd taken over from its former owner when he shipped out. He had left it a stripped-out derelict mess and I'd been the only one interested in fixing it up and reopening. It didn't really have a name, but under my stewardship, it had become one of the few places on the planet where people said the beer came cold, and the gin didn't taste like a reactor leak.

Sparing a final, rueful glance at the orbital construction platforms, I turned back through the door into the storeroom where, between the stacked kegs and cases of spirits, I kept a small bed made from pallets.

The one thing I had in common with every other lifeform in this stinking camp was that I'd left somebody behind. The

trouble was, I didn't know how to move on. At first, owning a bar had seemed like a good survival strategy. If I was going to be stuck in a place where everybody else was just passing through, it made sense to have something permanent. But now, after two years of waiting, the novelty of it all had worn thinner than a twice-used tissue. I sat down and regarded my palm. Closing my hand over the flare had been momentarily agonising, but now there wasn't even so much as a scorch mark. My knuckles, which should have been torn to shreds where they'd impacted the rough hide covering the kid's jawbone, were similarly unscathed.

*I should get out of here, I thought. I should just throw my clothes into a bag without bothering to fold them and apply to be on the next foam ship out.* It didn't matter what waited on the other side of the gulf, it would be preferable to a life spent rotting here.

"Guv?" Siegfried drifted into the storeroom like a spiky balloon.

"Don't tell me those lizards are back?"

"No, but someone's asking for you."

"Who is it?"

"I didn't catch his name." The barman moved two of his tool-tipped metal limbs in an approximation of a shrug. "But he says he's your ex-husband."



CHAPTER TWO

ON THE BEACH

I stepped through the connecting door and immediately clocked Jack. He was sitting at a table, leaning on one elbow and watching the front door as if expecting someone. He'd shaved the nearest side of his head, and a silver earring gleamed from the exposed lobe. His long black coat hung loosely from his shoulders. He hadn't noticed me yet, so I picked a bottle of gin from the shelf and sidled up behind him.

"Freshen your drink, sir?"

His shoulders stiffened. "Ursula?"

"Who else were you looking for?"

He swivelled on his barstool, and I caught my breath. I'd forgotten how striking he was, in a hard, square-jawed kind of way. A dancer's body with a sword-fighter's poise. He said, "Charming place you have here."

I wanted to tell him it was a shithole, but my regulars were within earshot, so I just nodded, and said, "Coldest beer in the whole camp."

He tapped a fingernail against his glass. "And roughest gin?"

"I'm told it does the job. The first one numbs your taste buds, and after that, you're golden."

He laughed. "Oh, Ursula, I've missed you."

“I’ve missed you, too.”

“They told me you were still here,” he said. “But I couldn’t believe you really would be.”

“I told you I’d wait.”

“I’d hoped you wouldn’t. I wanted you safe.”

“I’m as safe as anyone here.”

He looked up at the corrugated iron ceiling and exhaled.

“What?”

“Nobody’s safe.” He leant across the bar and seized my free wrist. “Nobody here’s even remotely safe. You know that.”

I thumped the bottle down on the counter. “Keep your voice down.”

He pursed his lips. “You could try to be civil.”

“You could just tell me where the fuck you’ve been.”

Jack shook his head. “Trust me, you really don’t want to know.”

“The hell I don’t. You left me—”

“I told you.” He rubbed his forehead. “I told you why I had to go.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

“Then why are you angry?”

I leant my hands on the bar and took a long breath. “Why on earth do you think?”

“Less than a minute, and we’re back to this?”

“What do you expect? You got us berths on the last freighter out. I abandoned everything and everyone. And you never showed.”

“I had my duty.”

“I thought you had my back.”

“And I thought you understood. My comrades were counting on me. Our world was counting on me.”

“Yeah, and how did that turn out?”

He scowled. “You know what happened.”

“Everyone died. Earth fell, and you being there made no difference.”

“That’s not entirely fair. Some transports got away under covering fire from our forces.”

“How many?”

He picked up his glass and glowered into the amber centimetre of spirit at its base. “Maybe two dozen. Yours among them.”

“You should have come with me.”

“I had to stay.”

“You knew you couldn’t defeat them.”

He swigged down the dregs of his drink and managed not to cough. He pressed his lips against the back of his hand while the burn passed, then whispered, “We had to try.”

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*Those final hours in London had been nightmarish chaos. With the interstellar tramline network collapsing like a broken spider’s web, confirmation of attacks on other worlds arrived only hours before the routes connecting them went down completely. The damaged ships that limped through to spread the alarm were often the last to make it before those tramlines decohered altogether. And yet somehow, the Cutters still advanced.*

*When the shit hit the fan, I was in the process of being discharged from hospital. I’d been in there for months and knew most of the nurses by name. Since picking up the alien parasite, I’d had every scan and test you could imagine, and a few you’d probably rather not. Suffice to say, I’d been prodded and poked in places you’d usually not get anywhere near unless you’d at least bought me dinner.*

*“Whatever it is,” the doctor had said, “it seems to have adapted and fused with your DNA.”*

*I sat back in my chair. “So, you can’t get it out of me?”*

*He looked apologetic. “We wouldn’t know where to start. We’re not even sure where you end, and it begins.”*

*“I’m stuck with it?”*

*“If it’s any consolation, it doesn’t appear to be contagious, so we’ll be able to release you from quarantine. Nor does it seem to be doing*

you any harm. On the contrary, all indications suggest it's going to great lengths to keep you healthy."

I looked at the back of my hand. The skin seemed smoother than I remembered, and the nails were hard and glossy, more like carbon fibre than keratin. But nothing had burst out of my chest or turned me into a terrifying blob of fleshy protoplasm, so I guessed I should be grateful.

"We will, of course, be referring you for further tests."

"I thought you might."

Once the paperwork had gone through and I'd been officially released, I collected my things and left. Outside, the sky and the Thames were the same shade of brutalised steel. I started walking towards the tube. I wasn't up to raw-dogging reality, so I had my earbuds cranked to eleven, blasting out the playlist I'd been putting together in preparation for this day. Around me, dead leaves fell from the trees, car tyres hissed on the wet roads, and I watched the advertising holograms flicker and strut above the glass towers on the river's far bank. They looked wan and insubstantial in the overcast light. The news about the parasite wasn't what I'd hoped, but I couldn't let it slow me down. I had to convince Doctor Vogel to select me for his next off-planet expedition. I'd been a fucking idiot last time out, taking off my glove when I did, but at least I hadn't brought back anything infectious. That had to count for something, right? With my hands firmly wedged in my pockets, I dodged around an elderly Korean woman and her umbrella drone. If I didn't get on another mission roster, I could effectively kiss my PhD, and perhaps my entire future career, farewell.

My phone buzzed for attention. I blinked up the call and frowned as I saw Jack's number. He was on shore leave and had been looking after my flat while I'd been in hospital. I'd been hoping he would be here to meet me, so I was kind of annoyed he was nowhere to be seen. I tapped the side of my eye socket to answer, and saw his face overlaid on my vision.

"Ursula?"

"Jack, I thought you were coming to meet—"

"Ursula, listen to me. You need to get out, right now."

*The signal glitched, then reasserted itself.*

*“Out? Out where?”*

*“Get to Heathrow,” he said. “There’s a transport called the Mango Feedback. It’s evacuating the families of serving crew. I’ve told them you’re my wife.”*

*“You told them what?”*

*More static. I heard sirens in the streets.*

*Jack said, “New York’s gone. It’s just gone. And Mexico City’s under attack.” People were slowing their pace, holding their hands to their ears as they absorbed the breaking news reports. The lady with the drone umbrella let out a cry and collapsed into a sitting position on the wet pavement. When Jack came back through, he was gripping the sides of the camera and shouting into the lens. “London might be next. You must move. I’m sending you the flight details. There’s a berth waiting for you. Don’t stop to think or pick up luggage; just get to the airport. There isn’t much time.”*

*“You’re not coming?”*

*“I need to report in. My ship needs me.”*

*“I’ll wait for you.”*

*“Just get to Heathrow. Let me check with my ship, and I’ll find you. I promise. Get to the transport and I’ll find you.”*

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I refilled his glass.

“Do you know how hard it was to get from Chelsea to Heathrow while civilisation literally collapsed around me?”

“You made it, though.”

“A lot of people didn’t.”

Jack lowered his eyes. “I know.”

He was silent for a moment, and I looked away, trying not to remember. As the self-driving networks broke down, the cars had choked the streets. There were fights. I got caught in a few scuffles. If I hadn’t had the protection of the alien infection, I doubt I would have made it through the gridlock alive.

“It was a surprise attack,” Jack said, and I honestly couldn’t tell if he was talking to me or himself. I watched him scratch the label from the bottle, scrunch up the paper, and flick it away across the tabletop. “We didn’t have time to warn everybody. We did what we could.”

I reached over and touched the back of his hand with my fingertips. “I chose you over everybody. I didn’t go back for anyone. I fought my way through crowds of people who are all now dead, just to be with you.”

“And also, to live.”

I glanced around at our surroundings. “You call this living?”