

Stephen HUNT



EVEN THE INVINCIBLE MUST DIE!

RETURN OF THE ATOM-SMASHERS

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Chapter 1
THE GREAT ESCAPE

I heard voices. Irate voices. Some part of me labelled the first voice Mr Angry. The second, Mr Furious. I tried to focus on the two figures and realised the reason they were in blur-vision wasn't because the room was dark. No . . . I was coming out of unconsciousness. I felt beat-up. Like someone had tied me behind a garbage truck and dragged me for ten miles before checking to see if I was still alive. I couldn't remember that actually happening. The garbage truck part, at any rate. Trouble was, I couldn't recall much of anything.

'Why am I here out of hours?' asked Mr Angry.

'This is important,' retorted Mr Furious.

My vision started to clear slightly, the two figures swimming in and out of view. The room was white. Bright and clean. I was lying down on an operating table that felt far too hard and uncomfortable. Maybe I was cheap . . . maybe I hadn't paid for the nice soft operating table option? That's a terrible thing to realise about yourself. The two men looked like surgeons. Dressed in identical doctors' scrubs every bit as white as their coldly clinical chamber. It occurred to me that maybe I had been struck by a car while crossing a road, and this could be a Sunday. That these two jokers were arguing about who was going to do the honours when it came to my emergency surgery, rather than spending the rest of the day on the golf course like they'd planned.

Mr Angry consulted what I judged to be a tablet computer, pecking away at the screen with one hand while he gripped the device tight with his other. 'I don't even have a name here.'

Neither did I? I was going to speak then, but I bit my tongue. I should know my own name, shouldn't I? But I didn't. Not who I was; where I was; or why I was here. My memories were gone. Everything I was, everything I should be.

'It's James Harding, but that doesn't matter.'

It sure matters to me, chuckles. James Harding? I was James Harding? No memories fired up, triggered by this information. Shouldn't I receive a flood of old memories on hearing my own name spoken? This disorienting loss of sense of self was like being smothered. Who was my family? Who were my friends? Did I have a job, a decent life? I panicked and decided to speak at last.

'Anaesthetic,' I groaned. 'I'm coming out. If you're going to operate on me I need another dose of anaesthetic quick.'

Mr Angry harrumphed as though my unwanted presence in his obsessively clean room was seriously denting his golf time. 'Why is he awake? This is not possible?'

'Anaesthetic,' I begged again.

'That's the last thing you need,' said Mr Angry.

What does he mean?

Mr Furious turned to a mirrored wall and spoke towards it. 'He is awake. This is not expected. Should we try to sedate?'

A new voice, metallic and slightly robotic-sounding drifted out of speakers set above the mirror. One-way glass, I guessed. 'Natural observations will yield us more data points. Proceed without further chemical interference.'

'No!' I coughed, tensely. I tried to get up, but suddenly realised my arms and legs were bound by straps. I was tied down to their operating table. I was also wired up to enough consoles and machinery to launch a space rocket. 'I *want* further chemical interference! If you're going to operate, I demand you give me a local anaesthetic at the very least.'

'What is the date today?' Mr Furious demanded, snapping his fingers above my face, as if this would help encourage some sense out of me. 'Who is the current President of the United States?'

'I-' really didn't know, I realised. He might as well be asking me what his wife's favourite flavour of ice cream was. 'Strawberry and choc-chip?'

'Brain damage,' said Mr Angry. 'For this, you waste my time.'

'His mind resisted the magnetic resonance scan,' said Mr Furious. 'But not without cost.'

'That is not possible,' said Mr Angry.

'And that is precisely why you were summoned here,' explained Mr Furious. 'We need to go about this the old-fashioned way. Extract what we need and then scan the remains fully.'

The implications of their coldly callous conversation, as though I wasn't even present, echoed around my mind like panicked pinballs. *What is going on here?*

'Well, I am an old-fashioned man at heart,' sighed Mr Angry. He walked to the opposite side of the operating table. There was a steel cart waiting full of medical instruments. He held up a scalpel to the harsh unforgiving light, tutted, and then placed the blade back down in the tray with a nasty click. Mr Angry smiled cruelly then and shot me a frosty glance. The kind of glance a man who really likes strangling chickens would give a juicy plump bird inside the abattoir. Shouldn't this guy have nurses to pass him his bits and pieces? I really was a cheap-ass. I hadn't even paid for a team of pretty nurses to assist these two jokers. Mr Angry approached a big steel piece of apparatus that looked like a dentist's drill. If the dentist in question was planning to try to tunnel to the very centre of the Earth's core. 'But the old ways may not work here. I think I will need something shiny and new.' He patted the drill device as though he expected it to purr at his touch.

'I actually prefer the old ways,' I offered, thrashing across the operating table to no avail.

'What will it take?' asked Mr Furious.

'I shall start with a one micron tight beam powered up to ten thousand gigawatts.'

'The laser's solid state core is going to melt if you fire drawing that much power from cold.'

‘Warm it up then.’

Mr Furious rotated the drill towards a thick steel panel standing on a pair of wheels. It looked like someone had lifted an armoured door off a bank vault before dropping it down here. He fiddled with the console on the dentist drill’s side and triggered a bright white beam of light, a spot on the door the size of a small coin glowing red and then bubbling as metal melted, tears of liquid steel dropping on the floor.

‘That should do it,’ said Mr Angry, sounding satisfied.

It certainly did for me. I lashed madly about on the table, trying to escape. The straps were weird-looking . . . like dozens of multi-coloured plastic strands woven together. The substance restraining me was almost alive, growing tighter the harder I struggled. Then one of the strands snapped and I redoubled my efforts to break out of this madhouse.

‘Did he just break a carbon-weave bond?’ asked the watcher’s disembodied voice behind the one-way mirror. The voice sounded shocked, despite the speakers’ machine-like echo.

‘I’m afraid he did. The poison is wearing off. Bring in the Tatudium,’ ordered Mr Furious. ‘Now!’ There was a reassuring hint of panic in that last word.

A few seconds later a door appeared in the side of the operating theatre, hissing open like a lift. An orderly dashed in, his face concealed by a surgical mask. He entered pushing the type of stand that should hold an intravenous drip, but instead this one had been mounted with a pulsing blue crystal the size of a basketball. It resembled a flower head, a horrific blue flower, rough crystalline petals that hummed ominously while it furiously sparked.

I don’t know what this rig was for, but I had an awful sinking feeling it wasn’t some Hippy attempt at crystal healing. The light from the crystal washed over me, making my whole body itch. My skin grew hotter and hotter, as though I was breaking out in hives. I wretched, then. Only just avoiding throwing up. How could this weird blue sapphire tulip be making me nauseous? Was it radioactive?

‘Do you expect this to heal me?’ I screamed, resisting the urge to be sick.

‘No, Mister Bond, I expect you to die!’ said Mr Angry. He chuckled at his own joke while Mr Furious lived up to his nickname and glowered sourly at the other man. ‘Sorry, I always wanted to say that. Actually, I expect to carve your brain into slices. Nice, easy to handle slices.’

‘Wouldn’t that kill me?’ I stuttered.

‘Well, it really won’t be terribly pleasant for you if you survived the procedure,’ said Mr Angry, making another bad joke. ‘Now, try not to scream too loudly. I have the most thumping headache from being woken up for your dissection.’

He was unhappy about being woken up? I looked at the high-powered laser drill. And this clown wanted to trade headache war stories with me . . . *really*. They couldn’t do this. But they were clearly going to. Terror gripped me as the orderly trundled the device forward and the weapon tip

that would discharge the killing beam was focused against the side of my skull. 'Who am I?' I begged. 'Why are you doing this to me? Please don't!'

'Shhhh,' urged Mr Furious. 'You are a lab rat. And dissection is the inevitable destiny of all lab rats.'

The three of them fired the contraption. It even whined like a dentist's drill. Pain flared across my head as though I was suffering from the world's most intense teeth-ache while a mob of angry monkeys smashed hammers against my noggin. Its activation was answered by a terrible hissing noise. I whipped my skull side to side, imagining my bone melting and my brain carved into salami-thin slices. But of course, it was my brain imagining this, which was rather a curious contradiction. I tentatively opened my eyes. The hissing came from their laser drill, dark sulphurous smoke leaking out of the thick cables that wrapped the machine's body.

'No,' said Mr Angry, tapping at his tablet, 'No. This is not—'

Maybe it was the throbbing headache. Maybe it was the fact these three bumblers seemed deadly-serious about the questionable merits of human dissection. Maybe it was the extra spurt of adrenaline given to someone because they had only just escaped death due to an industrial laser's overloaded circuit. I finally snapped the ties holding my right hand, then whirled to the side, using my free hand to rip away lefty's restraints. Mr Angry hurtled towards me, screaming, that nasty-looking scalpel back in his hand. A panicked glance down. My legs were still securely tied to the operating table. I yanked the head of the laser drill and spun it around on its mount, sending the device lashing into Mr Angry's face. He went down like he had slipped on a banana skin. He didn't get up again.

'Wake up from *that*, doc,' I coughed as I stretched down towards my feet and the remaining restraints. My feet were bare. I noted I wore a pale hospital gown with not much else going on below the thin cotton fabric. I hoped this choice of garment had been imposed on James Harding; otherwise I possessed some truly questionable fashion sense. I glanced up as I started to yank madly away at the cables wrapped around my ankles. Mr Furious was sprinting across the operating theatre towards the orderly. He shoved the orderly forward towards my table, as though the man was expected to sacrifice himself for this doctor of death. The orderly reached under his hospital whites and I saw that he was wearing a pistol holster. This dismayed me enough to frantically rip away the strange rubbery restraints, a bare second left to roll off the operating table as the orderly opened up, a fusillade of deafening shots exploding in the confined space. Wires and cables fixed to my body ripped painfully away as I fell. I hit the floor. Then I desperately scrambled behind the medical machinery. My shelter of consoles still bleeped and pinged as the bullets tore into metal, cracking circuits and sending showers of sparks arcing out.

Oddly, my captors didn't press their advantage. The door hissed open again and both Mr Furious and the orderly threw themselves through with indecent haste, the orderly retreating while still firing at where I had taken cover. Then the door sealed shut, almost all sign there was an entrance there concealed. I stood up and gingerly examined my surroundings. Mr Angry lay prone on the floor, as unconscious as I had been before waking up. Apart from the doc, I was alone inside here.

I inspected the laser, hoping there might be a way to get it back online . . . use it to carve a James Harding-sized hole in this surgery-shaped prison cell of mine. But it smoked dead and useless, the computer screen attached to it flickering fitfully. Whatever my job was in my previous life, I guessed it wasn't Industrial Laser Engineer.

Just then I caught my reflection in the mirror. Quite a shock. I was younger than I thought. Maybe late teens or very early twenties. The way my six-foot of aching bulk twinged, I thought these bones of mine might be closer to seventy years old. My face put me in mind of an actor, particularly my green eyes. Like so much else, his name didn't come to me. Hell, maybe I *was* the actor. Dark hair that hadn't seen a brush for a week. Whatever hairstyle I possessed had gone into hiding some time during my incarceration. Was I handsome? Sure my mother thought I was. But the skin down one side of my face was tanned red, the rest pale and taut. The kind of uneven sun-tan you picked up from a misfiring laser. Didn't think this look would catch on.

'You don't know,' rumbled the speakers above the one-way glass. *No. Not quite alone yet.* 'You can't even begin to imagine . . .'

I stared angrily towards the mirror. 'You're right. Don't know about me. Don't know about you. Don't understand how to fix laser drills. I know one thing, though, chuckles . . .' I darted over to the trolley with the large radioactive blue crystal just hanging there and gave it a little flick. Cold, hard, and razor-sharp around the edges of its unearthly crystalline petals. Still made my skin itch. 'Diamonds are way sharper than glass.'

I sprinted with the trolley clutched tight, accelerating toward the arc of mirrored glass, cracking the trolley into the glass wall and seized the crystal with both hands. Damn, but it was heavy. Far heavier than any basketball-sized diamond had a right to be. Weight didn't concern me right now, though. It was its *sharp* I needed. This was my scalpel and it was time for Doctor Harding to operate. As I started to scratch a wide circle in the glass the horrible screeching noise was joined by yellow gas fizzing into the room from a series of floor vents. Smelled like spoiled mustard, really rank. Not laughing gas, then. I figured I didn't have too many window-etching minutes left in here before I suffocated.

'You've still got your surgeon on the floor,' I hacked, humping the crystal and scraping a second slow, deep circuit in the mirrored glass. Glass shrieked like I was cutting flesh.

'A necessary sacrifice,' echoed the concealed voice.

That statement truly got my goat. 'What, necessary to him? To me? That's the kind of thing only a real scumbag would say. Let's see what kind of cowards you people are.'

I completed the second circuit of my cut and let the blue crystal fall to the floor, then smashed both fists into the mirror. A manhole-sized circle of glass went flying back. I caught sight of a number of shadows running around like headless chickens in the dimly lit room on the other side. Then I glanced back to Mr Angry. He deserved to die. He deserved to be left here and take his medicine. Didn't he? No great loss to humanity should he choke to death in his sleep. But what would that say about me? I sprinted back to where he lay, then dragged an oxygen mask down from a tall canister behind the operating table, attached it to his mouth and flicked the tank's supply on. Before the others could lock the observation chamber I ran to the mirrored wall, gripped the sides of

the sliced-out hole of glass and threw myself through. A dark room lined with a semi-circular padded leather bench. Everything the merciless psychopath needed to watch a human dissection in comfort. I caught sight of a watcher's legs disappearing out of the only door to the room. Poisonous gas started to finger through the broken gap. I lunged for the disk of fallen mirror-glass and pitched it like a frisbee towards the shutting door, wedging the mechanism as the door motor clicked and wheezed in frustration. That wasn't a bad throw. I was actually kind of handy.

I squeezed through the gap between the door and the doorframe below the disk. A sign on the wedged door read *Level Ten Personnel Only*. I was in a corridor, lots of passages leading off. Metal walls. Floors with grey plastic tiles. No sign of any of the sadists from the viewing gallery. I jumped as a loud screeching alarm ripped into life above me. Ba-boop! Ba-boop! Ba-boop! *Ask not for whom the bell tolls. For it tolls for thee.* Sounded like a quote. Maybe it was mine? Maybe I was a writer? An escaped, dangerous writer who needed to be cut into tiny pieces. Well, it was a theory. I didn't wait to discuss it with the armed trigger-happy orderlies who would surely be showing up any second now. I picked a passage and hurled myself down it, keeping my ears open for pursuit or maybe some of the watchers ahead of me, making their own escape. As I fled, I considered how eager all these people here seemed to be to avoid me. I was fairly sure I wasn't carrying any nasty plague-like diseases, or the staff in the operating theatre would have been sent in wearing sealed hazmat suits. After a few minutes of fleeing through the maze of corridors I finally came to a window in the riveted metal wall. Possibly a way out of this lunatic asylum. But as I drew closer I realised it wasn't a window. It was a porthole! I pressed my face to the circle of armoured glass. Dark crashing waves as far as the eye could see. Not nice warm tropical waves, either. The deep ocean. Cold and terrifying and endless. Possibly the Atlantic. *I'm on a ship. No, wait, we are stationery. Too high a view. An oil-rig, maybe?* My heart sank as I looked out. Well, I didn't know jack about myself. Maybe I was an Olympic swimming champion? Perhaps I could manage to paddle home. Then I considered Mr Angry. How annoyed he had been to need to come here. No, that man hadn't been roused from a bunk inside this dump. He'd been dragged in from a lot further afield. There could be a speedboat moored up outside or a helicopter sitting on a landing pad nearby. My way out, too. I examined the porthole. No way of opening it, seemingly designed to remain locked. I was casting my eyes around for a wall-mounted fire extinguisher I might use to shatter the porthole when I heard the noise of approaching footsteps. I sought a side passage to duck away from more gun-toting orderlies. But it wasn't a team of armed thugs who rounded the corner and came sprinting towards me. Instead, a comical-looking pair, one male, one female. Both close to my age.

The girl was blonde and wore a one-piece mostly silver jump suit with a large red letter 'A' stamped on the buckle of her oversized belt, formed in the same red as the crimson colour of her suit's arms. Briefly, I wondered what the heck a woman in a lurid cheerleader costume was doing wandering these corridors. And what was her boyfriend dressed as . . . a circus acrobat? Same weird, garish jumpsuit, but dyed green with blue-coloured fabric along his arms. At least neither of them carried a pistol. And they didn't instantly try to murder me. Instead, they slowed to a halt and stared at me with much the same suspicious look I was giving them. In fact, the girl gaped at me with some measure of recognition.

'Do I know you?' I asked, hopefully, hesitantly.

The girl quickly shook her head. 'Of course you don't. I'm Heart-of-Glass.'

‘What’s that . . . a name, or the way you treat your ex-boyfriends?’

‘It’s my superhero tag,’ she announced, somewhat contemptuously. ‘First name’s Holly.’

‘Your *what?*’

She shook her head, sadly, as though I had just failed a test. ‘This has to be some kind of mistake. It’s like rescuing Forrest Gump.’

‘If you don’t know me, what the hell are you doing here? How—?’

‘Professor O’Good sent us,’ said the girl, like that was all the answer anyone should need or expect. ‘We got an intercept that said The Kabol was taking a delivery here today.’

And I guessed that I was the parcel. Lucky me. I pointed at Holly’s belt buckle. ‘Shouldn’t that read “H” rather than “A”?’

‘We’re with the A-men, idiot,’ said Holly.

‘You’re not a man,’ I pointed out, somewhat helpfully. ‘Shouldn’t that be *A-persons?*’

‘Dude,’ sighed the male sidekick. ‘The A-men were founded in the 1930s. It’s the oldest superhero group. Gender equality wasn’t exactly a priority back in the day. You must know that?’

Sadly not. And again with this superhero gibberish. I was either being rescued by a pair of supreme egotists or a couple of dangerous escapees from a lunatic asylum. A nasty thought occurred to me then. Maybe this was some kind of asylum and your truly was one of the inmates. A-men? More like *Amen*. I think God was telling me I better drop to my knees and pray for a way out of this fix.

‘Come on,’ said her male sidekick. He pushed his mop of sandy-coloured hair back out of his eyes. This chump could do with a haircut. ‘We need to take him out of here.’

That was the first thing I had heard today that actually made any sense. ‘If you could, that would be just peachy. I’m James Harding. At least, I think I am.’

‘They really did a number on you, didn’t they?’ said the young guy who seemed to be dressed for forest camouflage. Or maybe he was a member of the local Robin Hood Re-enactment Society. ‘I’m Green Fist . . . Jason.’

Green Fist? How much did his parents hate him, exactly? I looked at his fists. He wore lime-tinted gloves, same colour as his jumpsuit. I suspected his fingers were more or less the same colour as mine, though, and certainly not emerald. His belt had a metal buckle with the large ‘A’, just like the woman. Other than that, his costume could have belonged to an oversized leprechaun. Only thing he was missing was a sign advertising a travel company specialising in Dublin city-breaks. He rested a hand on my back and shoved me back along the corridor in the direction they had appeared from. ‘You got a tag, Harding?’

‘Yeah, mine is “Please Wake Me Up Man.”’

Jason grunted and jogged along by my side, Holly taking up the rear. The young man appeared pretty fit and athletic. To be honest, I'd rather have had the curiously named Heart-of-Glass running by my side. I hoped I was too young to be married or seriously involved elsewhere. Jason noticed the way I was staring back at the girl and frowned. Well, trespassing was probably the least of my crimes if someone had decided I would benefit from dissection.

'You need a real tag,' said Jason, sounding disapproving of my previous flippancy.

Actually, what I needed was to be a thousand miles away from this joint. Preferably yesterday. 'Is this place an oil-rig?' I asked.

'A marine research station, supposedly,' said Green Fist. 'That's their cover. The Kabol likes to do their dirty laundry out of sight.'

The Kabol? Giving my enemy a name didn't help as much as it should. I kept quiet about the full extent of my ignorance. James Harding probably knew all about this stuff. Sadly, all I had was his face. 'A cover? Yeah, I guessed something was jinky on board. The large laser cutter and the weird blue crystal were kind of the giveaway.'

'They're using Tatudium?' called Holly, jogging behind. She addressed Jason. 'I knew I felt my powers diminishing. I told you someone here was wearing a Tatudium broach.'

Powers? What powers? The power to get any male who had passed puberty agree to go on a date with her? 'Wasn't any broach. It was a big radioactive diamond large enough to play beachball with.'

'You have to be kidding me!' whistled Green Fist.

'More fool them,' I said. 'If those jokers hadn't wheeled their crystal in, I wouldn't have been able to use it to slice an escape route out of their dissection chamber. Oddly heavy, though.'

'Yeah, like *that's* what really odd about it,' said Holly as she fled.

It seemed that the details of my desperate escape were as puzzling to the pair as my presence in this nut-house was to me. Medical types who'd sooner kill you than heal you. Armed guards. Lasers. Fizzing crystals. And the only two friendlies I had met were dressed like mobile advertising hoardings without the furry animal heads. If there were memories that actually explained this insanity, it was no wonder my poor suffering mind had suppressed them. I didn't tell Green Fist and Heart-of-Glass that I had lost my memories, though. It seemed as though they knew just enough about me to want to help rescue me. If they realised I was a big walking blank mess, they might reconsider extending their assistance.

We weaved through the corridors until we reached a dead end in the maze of corridors. No way forward. We needed to turn back. Holly had other ideas, though.

'It's glassing time!' shouted Holly. She raised her gloved fists, a stream of frozen ice-like material hosing out of her hands, covering the metal wall in miniature-glacier. Still the ice came, building up. Glaciers on the march could crush continents. Didn't have much trouble with a

bulkhead. The grey steel buckled and crumpled under the weight; a crackling sound like a fireworks display without the light. Instant doorway.

I stared at the girl in astonishment. 'What the hell are you?' The pair weren't circus freaks. These two were *monsters*.

'I thought I had covered that. Superhero. Heart-of-Glass. I'm an atom-smasher, just like you.'

I didn't even bother to ask. Instead, I resisted the urge to run away from her. I certainly had to retract my generous and as yet unspoken offer to take her out to catch a movie and grab a burger. 'You're *nothing* like me.'

Holly fingered my white hospital gown, exposing little rips in the fabric. 'Really? What do you think this is, James Harding?'

'Cheap tailoring?'

'They're holes. *Bullet* holes.'

I recalled the orderly emptying his pistol's magazine at me while I was rolling off the operating table back in my cell. At the time I thought that was just really poor aim on the guard's part. But the two of us had been kind of point-blank when he had had unloaded on me. Just how bad a shot would he need to be to totally miss me?

'But, but, I'm still . . . alive?' I stuck my head out of the hole looking around. It was freezing outside, the wind whipping across my cheeks. Multiple levels of building sitting on a metal platform that circled the construction. All held up on four concrete legs, the angry sea churning violently a long way down – maybe four hundred feet.

'Yes you are. And yes, that's the point.' Holly shoved me through the broken bulkhead. The three of us emerged on the circular platform. There was just a railing protecting us from tumbling into the dark waters, cranes huddled on mounts, ready to lift containers up from supply ships. 'We need to bounce. Tiny Tom isn't going to wait forever.'

'Who's Tiny Tom?'

Holly pointed to a futuristic-looking aircraft lifting out of the sea where it had been hiding, dripping water from its fuselage. Rotating jump-jets on its arrow-shaped wings carried it level with the platform. 'He's piloting the A-craft.'

I was about to answer Holly when a flurry of bullets zipped past my head complaining like angry mosquitos. Looked like some *A-holes* were looking to stop us reaching our *A-craft*. Around the corner of the nearest building a squad of guards rushed out, more fighters ducking under the opening doors of a large hangar. These weren't orderlies. They wore dark green flak jackets with webbing shoved full of ammunition pouches, grenades, daggers, their heads protected by modern ballistic helmets. All of them charged out clutching assault rifles or submachine guns. I noted the hangar gave onto an external landing pad where transport helicopters squatted. I guessed one of them was the chopper which had carried Mr Angry here to do his James Harding-carving duties.

Holly flung an angry hand out and a wall of thick shimmering ice rose up from the metal platform, its crystalline surface splintering as the furious fusillade of automatic rifle fire crackled in our direction. 'It's glassing time!'

'Do you have to shout that every time you use your powers?'

'Battle-cry,' said Holly, not taking her eyes off reinforcing the makeshift bullet-proof shield. 'Traditional. Everyone needs one.'

Jason pushed his right palm out and sent an acid-green fireball leaping towards the soldiers. It was smaller than a baseball, but struck the side of the hangar with the force of an exploding comet, a fierce energy wave blasting out and bowling over the nearest guards. Now, I guess I know why they called him Green Fist. 'Evil's Might must be banished by Green Fist's Light!'

He has got to be kidding me. 'You really need to work on a new battle-cry.'

The roar of the plane's engines grew ear-splitting. Whoever this Tiny Tom was, he was a dab-hand on a pilot stick, backing up the jump jet like a reversing garbage truck, albeit without the claxon warnings. A ramp at the craft's rear slowly lowered in our direction, tantalizingly teasing me with the promise of freedom.

Out by the hangar entrance a guard came stumbling into the cold air with what looked like a very large rocket launcher hanging against his right shoulder. For a second, I wondered whether the ground-to-air missile in the pipe was going to be heat seeking or radar guided. Wouldn't make much difference to my aerial taxi out of Dissection Central, though. Smoking pieces of aircraft were smoking pieces of aircraft, whichever way you cut it. Something in me snapped. I had a name, James Harding, but zilcho else. I was tired. I ached. I was hungry. I was cold. Nobody had fed me. Nobody had even offered me a cup of coffee since they'd tried to remove my admittedly defective brain from my bruised, laser-burnt head. The incoherent battle cry I heard echoing across the ocean was mine. Spilling out of my throat as whatever possessed me carried me around the ice barrier and sent me crazily sprinting at the soldiers. My body stung violently, bees swarming me, the station's metal walls pinging with ricocheting lead. Then I was in the shadow of the first helicopter, its bulk sheltering me from the guards' fire. But I didn't use it as a shield . . . it was a mace I needed. I saw red, literally, gripped in the throes of a berserker fury so terrible it would have made a Viking raider think twice, then decide to calm down and sup a nice herbal tea before he burst a blood vessel. But I didn't have camomile tea bags to hand. I had a chopper and it was time to chop. *Maybe that can be my battle-cry. Chopper time! Or, when you need wickedness to hop: let James chop chop!* I seized the elevator wing on the tail boom and lifted the whole helicopter off the ground, roaring as I hurled the machine towards the squad. The skids snapped off the chopper while it slid across the station's landing platform, turning the guards into bowling pins as they chewed fuselage. More guards appeared out of the hangar, machine guns shaking in their hands as they targeted me. But I wasn't standing still. My hasty, ill-thought out suicide rush carried me to the second transport helicopter. I felt its weight as I seized the tail boom, two hands crumpling the aircraft's skin. Painfully heavy, yet cardboard-light at the same time. It occurred to me then, of all places, as I whirled the remaining helicopter around my head before releasing it towards the open hangar, that the laser drill inside this dump hadn't misfired. I'd taken the intense killing bolt against my noggin and survived with an

uneven tan and singed sideburns. If Holly and Jason were monsters in gaudy acrobat costumes, what on Earth did that make me?

The second flung helicopter gave me my answer as it broke apart, crashing through the half-open hangar doors, a wave of burning fuel licking out from the wreckage, pooling towards the fuel stores caged inside. Detonations ripped away that section of the research station while my legs powered me towards my two rescuers. Their A-craft hovered in the air with the cargo ramp swishing a foot off the platform, the pair gripping door pistons inside the cargo chamber. I leapt and hurled myself into the plane, heard them yelling that I was safely on board, then the plane bucked and began to turn, putting the nut-house behind us. An intense whine over the roaring engines as the ramp began to slowly rise and close.

‘Dear God,’ said Green Fist. ‘What did you do down there? That was some truly *major damage* you dished out, Harding.’

The ramp was still shutting, half-open. I stared down at the smoking research station being wracked by explosions, parts of the building lifting up on exploding fuel barrels. My legs swayed and I felt Holly’s hand grip the back of my hospital gown to stop me tumbling out of the plane. Yes, Doctor Harding had certainly taken a scalpel to Dissection Central. Station staff desperately swarmed into the cold air to lower lifeboats towards the water, the self-contained type, bright one-piece moulded plastic hulls that were more submarine than boat.

I sighed. Please Wake Me Up Man hadn’t just left the building. I reckon he’d departed the whole damn planet. ‘Don’t call me Harding,’ I growled. ‘My name’s . . . Major Damage.’

They both stared at me like I was the crazy one.

I waved a dismissive hand at the pair. ‘Yeah, I’m back. I’m back and I’ve never even been here before.’

In truth, I still didn’t know who the heck I was, but I understood one thing well enough. Somebody was going to be really, *really* sorry that they had ever erased me from the world.