

MICHAEL G. MUNZ



A
MEMORY
IN THE
BLACK

BOOK TWO OF THE NEW AENEID CYCLE

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CHAPTER 1

Northgate. The city was a cesspool. Though it served Joseph Curwen's needs, its heat always flared during his visits. Its pollution choked him and stung his eyes. Even the jet lag he felt upon arrival always refused to let him go until right before his departure. It was as if Northgate itself believed he didn't belong there. Crazy as the idea was, the loathsome city was right. This wasn't even his hemisphere.

It was August of 2051, and he was running out of time.

Curwen passed through the security point at the monorail station's exit. The lights, the crowds, and the pressure of the security scanners that checked him for weapons and explosives added to the heat. The sweat that rolled beneath his suit made him further aware of the extra weight he'd put on over his usual bulk since the beginning of the whole clandestine affair some months ago. The snug material around his waist gave his skin little room to breathe. It would be time to give his long-suffering tailor some more business when he returned to Europe.

The concourse doors slid open. Curwen passed through them into the suffocation of the late afternoon swelter. He popped a second dose of antacids and made his way toward the crowded escalator that would bear him down to the street. Too much stress, not enough downtime. Especially with the risks he was taking lately. At least those risks would pay off soon, if he could just carry on a bit further.

Other travelers packed around him suffered the escalator rigidly and forced him to restrain nerves that would otherwise have sent him bounding down the moving steps after being stuck rigid on the monorail. The corner of a briefcase ground into the small of his back as its owner's lung-rumbling cough shook the city air. Ahead of him stood a woman whose perfume trailed in a wake behind her. As his eyes dropped to study the way her skirt fell over her hips, he tried to hold his breath and wondered if he would be sick from the fumes.

Frogs' balls, he wanted this day over with. He reached the bottom without passing out and turned onto the sidewalk toward his destination: the Nexus Tower Hotel and the restaurant housed on its twentieth floor.

This was his fourth visit to Northgate in the last six months. He should not even be there today, but the deal he originally brokered with Raven Defense Technologies

Vice-President Ken Wallace had proven fragile and, ultimately, disastrous.

Wallace had stolen equipment from his own company, hired someone to cover the theft with arson, and then tried to sell the spoils to pay Curwen. When evidence surfaced of Wallace's crimes, he turned up dead soon after. Curwen felt no guilt from knowing that Wallace died trying to raise money to buy the secrets he was selling. Wallace was a business partner, not a friend—one who'd made poor decisions and failed to live up to his promises.

Yet the mistake of approaching Wallace at all was Curwen's own. Dealing with one person working secretly in his own organization was too unstable of an arrangement. Curwen was toeing that line already. When Wallace died, Curwen sought to partner with an entire company.

Hindsight allowed him to realize that he'd hurried more than was wise that first time. When he'd first contracted with Wallace and offered him a line on the secrets of an actual alien spacecraft the European Space Agency had found on the Moon, Curwen had deemed it prudent to move quickly. As time went on and ESA erred on the side of caution, it became clear that he would be afforded more time. And so he had felt out Marquand Cybernetics and taken his time in negotiating a deal for the soon-to-be-stolen technology that would leave him set for life. He was certain he had hooked their interest. Today's meeting would close the deal.

As far as he told Marquand, however, he had found another partner and they were about to lose a deal that would otherwise rocket them to the forefront of the industry. It was only a negotiating ploy to make them increase what was already a very lucrative offer. He would listen to their new offer—they had called the meeting, after all—and he would, after feigning apprehension, agree. Curwen smirked.

And yet, what if they called his bluff? *Easy now. Things are nearly done.*

He strode past the Marquand building while trying not to look at it, though maybe that was being overcautious. Even if anyone was watching him, how much could they glean from even a long glance? Curwen looked over his shoulder regardless. No one was following—at least, no one he recognized. He quickened his pace anyway. The Nexus Tower loomed a block away. A crosswalk light changed ahead of him. Curwen stopped short on pins and needles and waited for the traffic that filled the street in his path to clear.

For him, it never did. Two bullets ripped through Curwen's heart. He had only a moment to blink before he collapsed on the pavement.

Diomedes watched the fat man collapse from a room on the nineteenth floor of

the Nexus Tower Hotel. He raised his eye from the scope of the rifle. People scattered from the body. A few fools crouched by the mark, perhaps trying to help him. But the shot was clean. There would be nothing they could do. The man on the pavement was lost and gone, like all the rest.

Sirens rose from below. An ambulance appeared on the scene almost too quickly. Diomedes moved back from the window. His job was over.

As quickly as he could, he broke down the rifle, folded up the tripod, and slid it all under the bed. The rifle was a RavenTech HG-113. It was powerful, and among the most accurate he'd ever fired. Both bullets hit the mark perfectly. More than once he'd considered taking it with him. It had been waiting for him in the room. It was provided for the job. His instructions: leave it under the bed. Taking it would complicate the prospect of future jobs from this employer. Still, if he could have thought of a way to get the rifle out of the hotel undetected, he might have risked it.

He let the weapon go. There wasn't much choice.

The rifle was one of the things provided for the job. The other was the security grid suspension.

Scanners were heavy throughout the Corporate District. A sensor screen able to detect any objects passing through it above a certain velocity netted any building taller than four stories. The point of origin would be determined within a second. Alarms would sound. Guards would respond. Or so it was said. The grid was rarely put to the test.

His employer had approached Diomedes on the street: a blonde woman, dressed in upscale business attire. Though she looked familiar, he didn't know her. He'd been leaving the freelancer bar he—and countless other mercenaries—frequented. She gave him the job's time and place in a way that made him think he was the first she'd ever hired. Yet she'd been determined. The rifle, the grid suspension—both would be taken care of. Even without the clothes she was obviously corporate: Marquand or Aegis Security if she could disable the grid.

Diomedes didn't ask. She paid him in full and promised further jobs. The money was good. The rifle was there. He took the risk that she was lying about the grid.

Or had he even considered it? The prospect of future jobs and steady money persuaded him not to care.

And it was easier not to argue.

Diomedes took the elevator to the twelfth floor. No alarms had sounded inside the building. He exited the elevator in front of a group of suits. They ignored him. He looked down on them as he passed. A little over a minute later, he crossed to the other

side of the building and swiped the keycard on the door to his room. He would stay there for the evening. Security would scrutinize anyone leaving the building now. Though no grid alarms had gone off, the dead mark outside wouldn't be ignored. A room reserved under a fake name on the opposite side of the building would be the safest place. If security did contact him, his statement would be brief and dull. He locked the door, drew the shades, and turned on the news to pass the time.

This job was nearly done. It was only a matter of time. Two bullets, then wait. More straightforward than the other job he had going. He checked his messages: nothing yet from his contact on that one. The man had told him to wait, but Diomedes wouldn't wait forever. The man was powerful, yes, but he didn't hold all the cards. They had worked together before. The first time had gone bad, and Diomedes wasn't about to let him jerk him around a second time. As soon as he got out of the hotel, he would have to see about that.

From a window table in the Skylark Restaurant on the twentieth floor of the Nexus Tower, Ondrea Noble watched events unfold on the streets below with bittersweet satisfaction. Diomedes had done his job, and the man from ESA would never make the lunch meeting to which her superiors had invited him. As panicked pedestrians ran from the fallen man, the waiting EMTs heroically swooped in and gathered the fallen man into their "ambulance" floater.

He would never reach any hospital. Marquand's plan—her plan—was going as devised. The secrets he had turned around and promised to another company would belong to Marquand, or they would belong to no one. She had told her project leader the same when she proposed her idea. The technology she designed would do what they needed; she had insisted it.

Confidently.

In truth, Ondrea was only partially convinced the procedure would allow them to recover the information Marquand needed, but she didn't care. The possibility of its recovery merely got her the approval she required. While Curwen's promise of alien technology certainly interested her, the procedure would allow her a much more personal accomplishment.

Getting Diomedes for the assassination was a further boon in the mix. Trusting her at her word that she knew someone qualified to do the job, Marquand allowed her to set up the details herself. It was their way of separating themselves to protect the company, but it worked to her advantage. She found him. She hired him. It was utterly poetic in its justice.

Ondrea sipped her ice water. Her gaze drifted across the intersection to the

nineteenth floor of the Marquand building. There, almost directly across from the hotel room set up for Diomedes to take the shot, Ondrea had placed a camera. No one else knew. When footage from that camera reached the authorities, Diomedes's life would be over.

She smiled ruefully. It would be a fitting end for the man who six months ago pulled the trigger on her brother.

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