

A Blink in Time

Episode 2, Scene 1

The Past

Shit. Back in the military again. I was getting bounced around the back of an army transport truck heading to who-knows-where. The truck's suspension was OK, but the concept of road maintenance was as dead as a cop's conscience, and my ass was getting rattled off. The two pricks who'd press-ganged me were sitting up front in the cab, and it was just me and a medic in the back. He'd given me excellent drugs and my roughly stitched-together head was feeling no pain. Not everything about the army is bad.

The truck hit a smoother piece of asphalt, and the juddering was replaced by an annoying whirring from the off-road tires. I judged that now was the time to test out my conversation skills.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to base, I guess."

"You don't know, then," I stated.

"Shit, you've been in the military," said the medic. "Since when does anybody tell the grunts what's going on?"

The man had a point. Ever since The Blink, communities and information had become tighter. The military had been like this forever, and since the changes, informational control had gotten stricter.

“OK, where’s base then?”

The guy scrunched up his face and shook his head. “What the hell does it matter?”

“Canada, the US?” I tried again.

The guy got a puzzled look on his face. “Where the hell have you been the last few years?”

“Around, you know, going from place to place.”

My headache was returning. I was failing the conversation test.

“Oh, you’re one of those walk-the-earth dudes, a gun for hire, never stays in one place for too long. Shit, maybe they can write a song about you.”

Christ. The prick had an attitude. “So what is it, a Canadian or US base?”

He sighed. “Personnel’s about evenly split, some Canadian, some American, some military, some civilian.”

“And you?” I asked.

“Short history. Medic in the marines, ambulance driver in reality, and back to medic in this time-screwed shithole.”

He sighed again and took a deep breath. “What about you?”

Excellent, he’s warming up to me—the Trewayne charm at work.

“Army, then cop,” I began. “Then I guess I started to walk the earth.”

He laughed. “Listen, Gunslinger, while you’ve been off saving the planet, some of the armed forces banded together with civilian groups to try and get order outside of the cities.

Geography, countries are not so important.”

“So, countries don’t exist?”

Shit, I knew I wasn’t keeping up with the news, but I thought I’d have heard of this. The tires continue their annoying buzz. The medic removes his cap and runs a hand through greasy hair.

“Man,” he said, shaking his head and ignoring my question. “You must be important.”

“Why’s that?”

“We’ve spent the last few weeks traipsing across God’s green earth looking for someone that took on a Scyther and survived.”

“Yeah, well, now you’ve found me.”

“That we have, Gunslinger,” he sighed, squeezing his cap on and leaning back. “Aren’t we the lucky ones?”

Episode 2, Scene 2

The Present

What a mess. Chunks of radiation-hot Scyther are strewn everywhere. When these blow, they leave a mighty big hole. I roll up to the main chunk of carcass and poke it with my boot. Not much to see, as usual, just a mess of black oily blood and biomech parts.

I move over to the Scyther’s machine. I flip down my visor and get my bike to run a deep scan. What the hell? I flick a quick n-comm confirmation to my bike. My bike coos in agreement. While the guts of the machine and its outer covering are mostly spread around me,

the basic architecture of the vehicle's still whole. This is damn interesting, but it can wait. I need to start looking for Mikey.

I needn't have bothered.

"Christ, Keeper. You call this a search and rescue?"

The rig-rat clammers over the rubble. She stands on the edge of the depression and wrinkles her nose in disgust.

"And what the hell's that smell?"

I wish I had more Mikey-free minutes to get my thoughts together and get a plan going, but this, along with most of my wishes, has not been granted.

"Dead Scyther."

"Shit, it smells like someone cooked rotten meat in used machine oil. It stinks."

I raise my eyebrows. A nice description.

"You OK?" I ask.

Mikey does a less-than-elegant pirouette, but her point's clear. She's on the grungy side, but nothing major's broken.

"Get over here and take a look at this," I order.

Mikey scrambles over the broken building and moves alongside. She looks down at the light shard-blasted vehicle.

"Is that what it was riding?"

"Yep. Notice anything strange about it?"

She takes a closer look, and her brow crinkles in concentration. She pulls out a pair of gloves from one of her many pockets and slips them on. They look to be asbestos lined. Good,

given the heat coming off the frame. She crouches, glances up and gives me the “May I?” look. I respond with the “Go ahead” nod, and she gets stuck in.

Mikey plunges her hands into the vehicle, and soon she’s elbow deep in Scyther machinery. A brief memory of Dwayne doing something similar flares into my mind. He must’ve trained her. She looks completely at home doing this. There’s nothing better across time and space than a depot-born rig-rat when it comes to taking technology apart. Soon she’s depositing Scyther components at my feet. This shouldn’t be happening. Sure you can move the basic parts around on a Scyther bike, but these vehicles are future made and can’t just be pulled apart by hand. Maybe the explosion rattled stuff free.

Mikey grunts and wipes away the sweat on her forehead. She looks happy. My bike makes the pigeon noise again. I’m feeling left out.

“So what do you think?” I ask.

She looks me straight in the eye. “What do you think, Keeper?”

Ah, great. Getting tested by a teenager.

“I think it’s wrong.” I know what the problem is, but I want her to tell me.

“Let me ask you something,” she says.

“Go on.”

“Your ride. Your bike—it’s got reflexive morphology tech, right?”

“Sure, re-morph’s standard issue.”

“So you adapt to different eras, different times.”

“Right. When we cascade in, my ride and suit automatically change. We’re supposed to fit in.”

“And Scythers have similar tech?”

She's good. She knows what the problem is. And she got this from rooting around in the busted-up Scyther bike. I had to get confirmation from my ride before I was sure.

"Same basic principles, as far as we can tell."

"Then this ride's fucked up."

"Is that a technical term they teach you in rig-rat school?"

"No, no. It's all messed up: different tech from different times. Noncompatible, or should be noncompatible," she answers, shuffling her feet.

"This crap here," she kicks at the pieces on the rubble in front of me, "doesn't belong with this crap here." She kicks the Scyther bike for emphasis.

"So how did it work?" I ask.

"Beats the hell out of me. It shouldn't have even moved, let alone shoot."

I grunt in affirmation. Dwayne has taught her well.

"Did your pa teach you this?"

"Dwayne?" she says, giving me a look of curiosity. "Mostly, but he's not my dad."

"But he said . . .," I start.

"Let me guess," she interrupts. "He said something like 'that's what her mother told me.' Christ, Keeper, were you born yesterday?"

I take the hit like a man. Fuel depots, communities, religio-groupings, the whole lot of them are tight as hell, and the chances of me or any Keeper getting straight information out of them is impossible. I know this. I don't give a shit that Dwayne has fed me a line, but this is new information, and it may be relevant. It may be connected with why the Scyther was chasing her.

I take a look around. Being in the open's not a safe place to be. Time eddies and other nasty shit don't shut down for the night. The question of who her real dad is can be left for later. The plan for now is to get bedded down.

"Yeah, OK, right. We've got to get you saddled up and find somewhere to camp."

I go to infrared and scan the surrounds. The glowing remains of Scyther machinery make it tough to locate the ATV horror Mikey rides, but my bike spots it tucked around a still-standing corner of the heavily damaged building. Good. It looks functional. I pop open a compartment on my ride, reach in, and throw her a heavy lead-lined, all-purpose bag.

"What do I do with this?" she questions.

"Pick up as many different chunks of machinery as you can. From different time eras."

"And?"

"And your ride's around the corner. Stick the bag in the sidecar and meet me over there."

I point at a solid-looking building.

"Why can't you do it?"

"Because I don't want my man parts anywhere near that Scyther shit."

I slowly tool off toward the designated building. Maybe I should've mentioned that a Keeper's exo-armor is impervious to radiation. Nah, probably not. She already has so much to process.

Episode 2, Scene 3

The Past

I'd done my time in the military. I'd done my time in the police force, and I'd sat in enough transport vehicles to last a couple of lifetimes. When they told me to get out of the truck,

I was happy enough, but when they told me I was to be debriefed immediately, I told them to fuck off. My head hurt, and the medic had refused to give me anything else for the pain. One moment you're bonding with a dude and the next he's quoting rules and regs at you. Join the army, see the world, and kill your initiative. Fuck 'em.

"But you don't understand," insisted the junior officer. "Time is of the essence."

I'd clambered down from the back of the rig and was stretching my sore and sorry-assed body.

"If time was critical, you'd have sent a chopper."

The two officers shared a glance. The penny dropped. They didn't know the capability of the Scythers and didn't want to risk an aircraft. These years immediately after The Blink had taken a toll on the air force. The War Clans were a ground-based force, and while the air force could help out when the Clans were away from population centers and communities, it was of little use when the barbarians were at the gate. The human population was now spread too thinly for friendly-fire casualties to be as acceptable as they'd once been. The end result: the army got the good toys, and the air force was left sucking the hind teat. But now, because of the Scythers, the focus was changing, and aircraft were becoming increasingly precious.

"How about we all take a step back and focus?" suggested the superior officer. "We can all work together."

It sounded like he had a management training manual shoved up his ass. It was all right for him; he'd been sitting in the front of the truck. He didn't have a headful of stitches and a belly full of nothing. A compromise was in order.

"Fuck the lot of you. No food plus no drink equals no info. How's that for working together?"

The medic jumped from the truck and laughed. “Hearts and minds, Gunslinger, hearts and minds.”

Shithead. A little less attitude and a little more medication would’ve helped the situation. I glanced around the camp. It was different from the usual military camps. Sure, it was mostly squared away, and the defensive perimeter was solid, but the number of people not wearing uniforms was unusually high. How did they keep discipline here?

There was a crunch of gravel behind me, and the officer pricks snapped to attention. Even the medic made an attempt to look sharper. We must be in the presence of top brass.

“Is this the man?” barked a voice.

I didn’t bother to turn.

“Yes, sir,” responded the senior prick.

“Look at the state of him. Get him food. Clean up his head. Have him report to me when he looks human.”

Now that’s a set of orders I could respect.

“And get it done in thirty,” continued the voice.

Shit. Thirty minutes. That’s bullshit.

The two officers stood ramrod straight. Any straighter and you could’ve fired them from a bow. I turned to argue the thirty-minute part of the order and promptly bit my tongue. I know a commander when I see one, and this colonel reeked of authority. I fumbled my way to a half salute, and she laughed.

“Christ, you look like a piece of shit. Make it sixty,” she said.

Damn. I was in love.

Episode 2, Scene 4

The Present

“Get up, sunshine.”

I give Mikey a poke in the ribs with my boot, and she groans and opens an eye. The morning light seeps through the busted windows of the building. It’s weak after refracting through the protective curtain a hundred yards or so away. I stare at the curtain’s shimmering surface. The buildings inside the dome are still beating their syncopated rhythm, and trying to focus on them is making my brain ache. I give a firmer shove with my boot, and the other eye rolls open.

“Jeez, all right, already,” she moans. “I just got to sleep.”

I know what she means. Through the night my bike’s proximity detector kept blaring every five minutes. The time eddies have been crazy. Probably something to do with the Scyther going boom. But there’s nothing I can do about it.

“You properly fueled up?” I ask.

I walk over to her ATV/sidecar combo and lift the cover. I take out a can of gas and roll it in the direction of Mikey. She grumbles, picks it up, and takes care of her ride. I rifle through the contents of the sidecar. Some of the cobbled-together weaponry’s on the useful side. Some of it I can’t identify.

“What the hell’s this?” I ask, holding up a Y-shaped piece of recurved steel with two slots grooved into the divided ends.

She looks over at what I’m holding.

“Unscrew the cap at the bottom.”

I turn it over, give the bottom a twist, and a piece of flexi-wire with a pouch in the middle springs from the hollow space in the handle. I instinctively jump back. She laughs.

“Shit, Mikey! You know what this is?”

Flexi-wire’s one of those dubious gifts from the future. Its basic form’s comprised of nano-thin carbon tubes, and it can slice through anything. Spin these nano tubes together and you get an extremely strong, flexible wire. Hence the name. This wire has a variety of uses, most of them connected with separating one part of the human body from another. It’s truly nasty shit.

I prod at the flexi-wire with my boot. “You got the gloves to go with this crap?”

“In the sidecar.”

I root around in the vehicle until I find the diamond-dust-coated gloves. I slip them on and pick up the wire. There’s a small loop at each end; they match the notches carved into the steel at the top of the Y-shape.

“A slingshot?” I guess.

“Go to the top of the class, Keeper.”

“What the hell does it fire?”

“Anything you can fit in the pouch.”

Christ. Who made this? And how come the wire doesn’t slice through the steel? They make weird shit in fuel depots.

“What’s its range?”

“How far can you see?” she replies.

I laugh. “You ever shot anything with it?”

“Nothing that came back alive.”

I grunt and carefully feed the flexi-wire back into the base of the Y-shaped steel. Even with the diamond-dust gloves it requires careful handling.

“Where did you get this from?”

“The wire? Trade probably.”

Fuel depots by their nature are trade entities. And trade entities like to do business. But cascading up and down the line brings with it clear currency difficulties. Providing fuel across a variety of eras means barter’s now the primary system to grease the wheels of commerce. Still, bartering batteries for fuel pales against getting flexi-wire. What had Dwayne swapped to get this?

I put the weapon back into the sidecar and grab a food pod. I’m starving. I rip open the top and take a sniff. It smells like crap, but it’s better than the dead Scyther smell that’s wafting through the smashed windows. I should’ve picked a building farther away. I take a knife and give the paste inside the pod an exploratory jab. It doesn’t react, so it’s not an aggressive food form. It may even be something from this era. The shit that passes for food up the line can get agitated if you don’t give it enough respect.

I throw the pod over to Mikey. She sniffs, smiles, and gets stuck in. Rig-rats have digestive systems that make real rats envious. I grab another pod and go through the same routine. It tastes like refried shit. Reminds me of the crap they served in the army.

“So, Keeper. What does today bring? Hard to beat blowing up a Scyther.”

“Getting out of Sync City.”

We’ve been here too long, and the influx of time eddies is becoming a real issue.

“And?”

“And heading to HQ. The Deacons seem to want you.”

My bike gives a warble. Another time eddy. The whole area’s rife with them. It can’t just be the Scyther I got yesterday. I’ve killed Scythers near the temporal sink before and nothing like

this happened. I focus and commence a full n-comm link to my ride. I need to find a way out. My world opens up. I search for a way through this mess, a way through the maze of eddies.

“What are you doing?” interrupts Mikey before I complete my search.

“What?” I mumble. I’m still n-linked to my ride and concentrating on finding a way out.

“Why are you making that face?”

“What face?”

“The one that looks like you haven’t had a shit for two weeks.”

Christ, teenagers. “I’m talking to my bike.”

“Oh,” she says. “Maybe it hasn’t had a shit for two weeks.”

See what I mean?

“I’m getting us out of here,” I try.

“Good. That Scyther smell’s really getting to me.”

Shit. I sigh and resume my n-link. My mind again opens up. The nearby curtain shimmers and flares in the high-resolution search. Shit. Even a Scyther would be good news now. Anything to get me away from this conversation.

Episode 2, Scene 5

The Past

“So, Trevayne . . . or what’d the medic call you? ‘Gunslinger’?”

“Trevayne’s fine.”

“You’ve created an impression on my officers,” stated the steel-haired colonel.

She really was an arresting-looking woman.

“Positive impressions,” I answered. “It’s what I do.”

My clothes were clean, my belly was full, and my head was restitched. If I could've got a decent drink, my life would've been complete.

"And I'm getting reports that this isn't the only community you've helped."

"Just being a regular good Samaritan," I shrugged.

Who the hell was keeping tabs on me? With all the other crap going on in the world, why would one former cop be of interest? The War Clans were on the back burner, but the Scythers had picked up the slack. The Scythers hadn't killed as many people, but they were interfering with the agricultural sector, and this would, ultimately, kill more of us. Less farming meant less food. Less food meant more dead people. A real simple equation. But definitely not my problem. The lack of a drink was.

"Anyway, what's a hero got to do to get some booze around here?" I demanded.

"The reports are accurate then."

"What's that?"

"You really are a prick."

I'm a prick. Yeah, yeah. Not news. I want to get moving.

"Listen, why don't we get whatever you want done, done, and then I get out of here."

It was her turn to shrug. "OK, let's do it your way."

I smiled at her. Excellent. My transient colonel love had already been replaced by my natural antipathy to command.

"What do you want to know?" I asked.

"Scythers. First impressions."

"Fast, technologically advanced, more so than us. Predictable and somehow limited."

Her eyebrows rose at the description. I could tell she was impressed. I was one concise dude.

“Predictable and limited. How?”

“You have to know this already. My Scyther positioned itself at exactly the same spot and did exactly the same thing over and over again.”

She grunted in acknowledgement. “Why are they doing this?”

Now that was the real question. I’d thought about this while getting my ass beaten around the back of the transport truck.

“They’re testing us,” I concluded.

“Testing us how?”

Up until then I’d been standing in front of her desk, assuming the old position of subservience. I pulled up a seat and sat down. I was a goddamn consultant now.

“Essentially, they are doing the opposite of the War Clans.”

“Go on.”

“The Scythers are testing our ability to project beyond the immediate, to see if we can deal with a threat from a distance,” I answered, but the colonel had to know this already. If I came up with it, it’s got to be obvious.

“What is it you really want to know?” I asked.

She stared at me. For a full minute. It was unnerving.

“Are they human?”

I ran my hand over my shaven lumpy head. I’d never been a pretty boy, but I did OK with the ladies. The wounds the Scyther had given me made for more scar stories. Cool.

“Yeah, he was human, or at least mostly human.”

“Mostly,” she echoed. “Did he say anything?”

I needed to make a decision, one that could affect my immediate future. It knew my name. It wanted me dead. I weighed my options. Easy. Look after number one.

I shook my head. “It didn’t make a sound.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Not until I stabbed it with my Ka-Bar,” I replied and again rubbed at the welts on my head. “Then it made a booming noise.”

Episode 2, Scene 6

The Present

The time eddies have thinned out, and we’re making good time. Mikey’s Frankenbike is grumbling along ten or so yards away, and we’re putting Sync City farther in the rear view. The blessed quiet I’ve been enjoying while keeping an eye out for threats is about to break. I know it. I can feel it: there’s no way she can shut up for this long. She’s a teenager.

“Keeper,” she chirps up. Bingo! “All that crap you had me pick up back there, it means something.”

“The Scyther chunks? Yeah, of course.”

“That shit doesn’t belong together. That bike was messed up.”

She’s right. Up until fifteen hours ago, there were clear rules. The rules of engagement, for example. They’re simple: kill or be killed. And protect those from your own timeline. The order is officially the other way around; however, if I’m dead, I’m no good to anyone. But the rules of technology are rigid. Tech across eras doesn’t combine. A “temporal resonance issue”

the Deacons told us, but then again, it wouldn't be the first time the grunts on the ground weren't told the complete story.

“Yeah, listen, you ever seen that before, you know, tech all mixed up?” I ask her. “Maybe something at the depot?”

“No. Nothing even close.”

We tool along a while longer. There's not much to see around Sync City. The freaky physics in this area mean people don't live here. Too much weird shit happens. Could be that's why the Scyther was all messed up. Shit, who knows? And on top of all this, I'm getting a bad vibe. Real bad.

I slip into n-comm with my ride and run a general diagnostics. Something's definitely wrong. Fuel's OK, major systems are fine, but my threat tubes show access to different ordnance. What the hell's all that about? Once you're locked into an era, your ammo doesn't change. I should still have the light shards and the DUCs. I don't. I goose up threat detection.

“Mikey, get over here.”

Nothing's showing on the display, but the re-morph tech that keeps me a generation or two ahead of the locals should be fixed. That's another rule. And that's another rule that's been violated. My change of munitions is as wrong as the mixed-tech on the Scyther bike. Something's way off. A small warning light blinks on. It's soft blue in color, the lowest level for a nonspecific threat. My bike considers nearly everything a nonspecific threat. It's covering its ass. But just in case . . .

“Mikey. Now. Over here. Do it!”

I slow a touch, and she bumps in alongside. My bike's now less flaky about its dumb cousin. Surviving a Scyther attack has softened its feelings about Mikey's ride.

“What is it?” she asks.

“My ammo’s changed. Something’s not right.”

I pull to a complete stop but don’t get off the bike. On the bike, I have both suit and shield to protect me. Off the bike, I’m more vulnerable. I flick back to the n-comm and shoot my ride a question. I’m not happy with the answer. Fifty-fifty is great odds if you’re at a casino, but not good if you’re dealing with someone’s life. My shield may not be able to cover her. There must be stuff in Mikey’s sidecar that’s not era compatible. Maybe the flexi-wire’s from too far up the line. Or the pieces of the Scyther’s ride. Shit.

“Get closer. You need to be inside the field,” I order.

I’m hoping proximity will make a difference, but I doubt it. That’d be too easy.

A time eddy flickers into existence. I frown. They can occur anywhere, but the farther away from the time sink you are, the less likely you’ll see one. Mikey drops back a touch, wary of getting too close. I gesture at her to move closer. Another one winks in. What the hell is this, a convention? A third one’s starting to appear when my bike shrieks and slams up the shield. I scream a warning to Mikey, but I’m too late. She’s not close enough. There’s a flood of temporal radiation, and I’m cascaded. Up or down the line—I can’t tell.

All I know is this is wrong, so very wrong.

Episode 2, Scene 7

The Present

The pain in my head’s horrendous, and my exo-armor’s in full lockdown. It’s got me absolutely rigid and has initiated a full-body scan. In terms of protection, this is fantastic. In

terms of knowing what the hell's going on, it's completely useless. I'm utterly isolated and have no idea what just happened.

I throw an n-comm burst through my ride's dedicated emergency channel and get a reply that almost rips my head off. There's an immense keening of pain. My ride's in serious trouble. I shut out the screams, compose my thoughts, and run through the crisis scenarios wetwired into my brain. I hate using this shit because it reminds me that I may not be completely human. The Deacons assure us the wetware is noninvasive, but having seen Scyther carcasses, I'm not convinced.

I locate lockdown protocol. Shit, good news: it includes a system reboot for my ride. Someone was using their big brain when they designed this. The file size is at the limit of my n-comm burst capabilities, but then they probably knew that as well. I shift the files around, concentrate, and send out another pulse. The wailing stops. Blessed silence.

I try shifting, and my exo-armor starts to soften. That's got to be good. My internal visor display spits and fritzes itself back to life. It begins to scan the surroundings, visible spectrum only, as all higher functions are linked through the bike. Nothing looks familiar. No surprises there, and there's no hint at what era I've ended up in.

I check my threat tubes for clues. My available ammo will provide approximate info on when I am, but they are set to default mode: big, chunky shotgun slugs on one side and a stock laser on the other. I sigh. The slugs I like. They take big meaty lumps out of just about anything. Kinetic energy works in any era. The laser, on the other hand, is only useful for heating your morning coffee. Decent lasers weren't developed until well into the 22nd century.

I struggle to my feet and look around. Nothing takes a shot at me. I spot my bike about ten feet away, lying on its side. Shit, I hate bikes not standing on two wheels. I check my power

indicator. Good. Five green bars show: my exo-armor's fully charged. But how did that happen? It was at about 70 percent last I checked. Whatever cascaded me here must've given me a boost. Standard operational procedure in a Deacon-controlled cascade, but unheard of in any other situation. Still, it gives me the juice to get my ride back on two wheels. That ain't happening under human power alone.

I heave the bike upright and give it the once-over. It's a nondescript, matte black, two-wheeled vehicle, just like when it first rolled out of the shop. It, too, is on default setting. I check its power gauge: fully stocked up as well. Interesting. Another linear gauge shows me it's about halfway through its reboot. Once it's up and running, I'll get on the intertemporal communicator and radio through to HQ. Hopefully the re-morph tech will also come on stream and give me an indication of where the hell I am. Until then, time for an explore.

I key the visor for full magnification and start scanning the surroundings. Nothing on the horizon and not much in between, but there's strange-looking shit out there. As I swing around, there's a sharp crack and the scrabbling of falling rocks. My threat tubes whirl and rise. I spin to focus on my target, and, as I do so, a figure raises its hands. My jaw drops open in astonishment.

"You're shitting me! What the hell are you doing here?"

Episode 2, Scene 8

The Past

The answers I gave didn't add a lot to the military's overall knowledge of the Scythers. That only came after years of conflict between us and them, and the blood cost was extraordinary. All they really needed to know was that Scythers were killable, and I was the first to have done it. In looking at me, the army guessed if I could do it, then others could too. They

were nice enough to ask me to stay, to join up again and serve the greater good. I was nice enough to say no. The green machine and I were no longer a natural fit. I wouldn't have minded boning the colonel, though. I'd never screwed anyone higher than a captain.

My next stop was the road. They armed me, gave me food and water, and even gave me a ride. The motorbike was a gem. I'm not sure where they got it from, but I was damn sure nobody wanted to be riding around on one now that the Scythors were out there. It was green, a solid no-imagination military green, and it ran on diesel. Absolutely awesome. I geared up, got astride the bad boy, and headed for the compound gates. They couldn't open them quick enough, and I was soon dodging potholes on the road to freedom.

The first community I came across took one look at me and refused to open their gates. They hadn't had any problems recently and didn't want an extra nonworking mouth to feed. I had no issue with that. At least they didn't shoot me. I turned my bike around and headed back to the road. It was getting dark, and I was about to enjoy my first night in the open in months.

I set up camp, made a fire, ate a little, and went to sleep. It was to be the last night in my own era for a long time.

Episode 2, Scene 9

The Present

“Jesus Christ, Sling. What the hell are you doing here?”

Oh great. “Sling.” My Keeper training nickname. A corruption of “Gunslinger.” I must've been drunk when I let that story out.

“Good to see you too, Vic.”

My threat tubes whir down. Now that I have a visual, they realize there's no direct threat, at least not from weapons. My exo-armor, however, remains solid. This is good. Vic's not afraid to have a go at someone if she feels she's not being listened to. I know this firsthand: she's my partner.

"Is your ride up?" she demands.

She's not much for small talk, either, something for which I'm normally grateful. But right now I'd like a heads-up on where we are.

"Spooling up. Give it a few minutes."

"My piece of shit's as dumb as dirt. Can't even access the ITC."

Whoa, no ITC access. The intertemporal communicator is a robust piece of hardware. The Deacons designed them to survive anything the Scythers throw at us. For hers not to be working is completely out of line. An ITC's also essential for a cascade to be attained. No ITC, no temporal travel. Then how did she get here?

"You treat your ride like crap. No wonder it's down," I tell her.

"Yeah, whatever, but the ITC has always worked."

"Shit, any idea where we are? Beyond the 25?" I ask.

A *partner*, as far as Keepers are concerned, is a loose term. We usually ride solo anything south of the 26th century. Our weaponry and protection below this timeline's more than a match for most of the nasties out there. Up beyond AD 2500, or the "25" as we call it, shit gets freaky, and you need someone to watch your back.

It's not just Scythers you have to worry about in the quarantine zone. There's other weaponry lurking around that has breathtaking firepower. This is where the Deacons and the

Scythers dump their failed experiments. The ones they can't destroy. Whenever you're north of the 25, there needs to be two of you.

Vic shakes her head. "Beyond the 25, no idea. Never been here before."

"Are you on default?" I ask about her idle threat tubes.

She nods but offers nothing in response, a standard conversational tactic for her.

"What do you have?" I ask.

We need to take stock of the situation, and weapons are a good place to start.

"Don't worry about it. I'm good."

"Come on, Vic, you show me yours, and I'll show you mine," I tease.

"OK, OK. Forty-four Magnums in this one." She raises her right shoulder.

"And?"

"A pissy water cannon in the other."

She has the decency to look embarrassed.

"And you?"

"We make a great team." I dribble sarcasm into my tone. "I've got decent shotgun slugs on this side."

"OK."

"And we can use that water cannon of yours to put out the tiny fires I light with this one," I say, raising my left shoulder.

"Laser?" Vic says. "I've never understood the whole default-protocol thing."

I'm about to explain, then I decide to shut up. Vic knows why the weapons are set like they are. We can't have intertemporal weapons pollution. If something too advanced gets into the hands of, say, a Goth War Clan, that can have an impact up and down the line. Munitions that go

bang, like bullets, are now widespread, so their introduction would be minimal. The water cannon and laser would be largely ignored by these groups as well, because they'd recognize them as the piece-of-shit weaponry they are. At least that's my theory.

"OK, what about defense? You got shielding?"

"Sort of," she replies, banging herself on the chest with her fist. The exo-armor makes a dull thudding noise. Sounds solid, but not active.

"And it's fully charged, right?"

"I know," she says. "Ain't that weird? I was nowhere near full last I checked."

"When was that?"

I want to find out where she was before she got jerked here. Perhaps we can find a connection and figure out what to do.

"Somewhere in the early 1700s. Running protection."

Running protection. A standard assignment. She would've been the defensive anchor for a community from our mutual time era, making sure they weren't taking too much flak from the local War Clans. And making sure that our lot weren't getting out and making too much of a dickhead of themselves. The whole protection game's a two-way street. According to the Deacons, it's all about keeping the timelines clean. I don't know what the hell it's about, as there has already been so much temporal mixing. Still, it means I get to ride around and shoot bad guys.

"What about you?" she asks.

I look around at the shifting landscape around me. "Babysitting. Taking a rig-rat back for training."

Shit. Did Mikey make it through? Was she caught up in whatever had dragged me here? The fact I ran into my partner in the middle of nowhere sounds like someone has their hand on the joystick. Coincidences become a lot less coincidental when you can play around with time. This has Deacon stink all over it.

My partner has arrived at the same conclusion. “We’re getting jerked around here, Sling.”
“When’s that not the case?”

But she’s right. Keeper chatter over the years has developed an idea, a conspiracy to the less sophisticated, that the Deacons aren’t one big happy post-human family. That there are factions and rivalries within their group. I buy into this completely. Of course there are divisions. The Deacons are post-human, not nonhuman. Petty jealousies and political infighting are a genetic trait shared by all of our species, I don’t care how enlightened they pretend to be.

“So what now? Any bright ideas?” she asks.

I’m about to admit I’m clueless, something I’m loath to do, when there’s a sharp beep. My ride’s online. The reboot has finished. Excellent timing. As I head back to the bike, there’s a deep-throated roar as it self-starts. This is followed by a chunky burble as it settles into idle. I glance across at my partner. Beneath her raised visor she doesn’t look happy.

“Mine didn’t do that,” she complains. “I had to kick-start the damn thing.”

“What’d I tell you? You’ve got to look after your ride. Let’s see what it can tell us.”

Episode 2, Scene 10

The Past

I rolled over. My head ached. I rolled over again, searching for the position of minimum pain. It wasn’t happening. I scanned the immediate surroundings for the bottles responsible for

this epic hangover. There had to be at least two of them, and they had to be at least eighty proof. The throbbing in my skull surged higher. I lifted my head and took in the branches above. My eyeballs lagged about half a second behind the movement of my cranium. What the hell kind of hangover was this? At least the tree stayed in place, and it was the one I went to sleep under last night.

I levered myself up to a sitting position, lowered my head, and vomited up last night's meal. Strange, I didn't remember eating carrots. I staggered to my feet, shuffled a waltz of uncertain steps, and braced my shoulder against a tree. The horizon stopped swooping, and the headache backed off a touch. Then a man stepped forward.

"You all right, mate?" said the man.

I twitched. Where the hell had he come from? I took a look at him, a real close look. The accent was strange and his tan was ludicrous. Who the hell stands out in the sun long enough to turn that brown? And what the hell was he wearing? He had on a broad-brimmed hat with a solid, no-nonsense khaki uniform, complete with heavy cotton shorts. I say nothing. My speech center had yet to overcome the pain in my skull.

He walked across to my ride and took a closer look. "Not from around here, sport?"

I rolled myself off the tree and managed to stand under my own power. He continued to study my bike.

"Your first time, mate?" he asked.

What's he talking about? I cleared my throat. It was a dry, hacking effort, but it worked.

"Any chance of a drink?" I croaked.

The man laughed and reached down to a pack at his feet. It looked to be fifty years old in design, but it also looked brand-new. He opened the pack and pulled out a dented aluminum water bottle, the type the military uses.

“Try this,” he offered, unscrewing the cap.

I took the bottle and sniffed the contents. It’s always best to check. The man laughed again.

“Not completely stupid, then,” he said. “Go ahead. It’s only water.”

I raised the bottle in the international bottoms-up salute. He stared at me blankly.

“Just drink it, sunshine. We’re not at a garden party.”

Fair point. This hangover was heroic, and I was acting like a wimp. I took a swig. It was blood warm, but it was water. I took another gulp. It was sweet, like real water, not the crap that comes out of a tap.

I looked around more carefully. My eyesight was gradually reasserting its primacy over my brain. The tree next to me was familiar, but the rest of the landscape wasn’t. The countryside wasn’t exactly barren, but the earth between the scraggly underbrush was a vivid red. We weren’t in any part of North America that I knew of. This was one hell of a hangover.

“Where am I?” I asked.

The man smiled again. “Maralinga, mate, but that’s only half the answer.”

“Only half the answer to what?”

“The real question, sunshine. The real question.”

I looked him over again. There was a casual alertness about him. I handed him the water bottle. He screwed the cap on and returned it to his pack. *Military*, I thought. Army most likely, but which one, and where did that accent come from? A lot of shit had happened since The Blink

and paramilitary units had popped up everywhere, but none of them I knew of included heavy khaki shorts as part of their uniform.

“What question should I be asking?” I tried.

“Look at this.”

He stepped closer and extended his arm. He unclipped the protective leather covering of his watch. Its black face contrasted sharply with the white digits. Good for military personnel. Easy to read. I looked closer. It was too old-fashioned for my taste, but functional.

“What do you think?” he asked.

I shrugged. A picture of cool indifference. My cop training was back.

“A little old-school for me, dude. But thanks for sharing.”

“Dude. Dude. Dude.” He tried out the word, it seemed new to him and sounded weird with his accent.

“So,” he continues. “The watch. Old or new?”

“Old, obviously,” I started to say.

But it was gleaming new. Not a scratch on the watch crystal. It was something my grandfather would have worn. Oh, shit. My eyes widened, and I made an uncoordinated jerking motion with my head. I’d been cascaded. That was why I felt like such a piece of shit. Now I knew what the question should be.

“When are we?” I tried.

The man laughed again. He must’ve belonged to the happiest army in the world.

“I knew you’d get there eventually,” he smiled. “Dude.”

Episode 2, Scene 11

The Present

“You expecting someone?” asks my partner.

“What?” I answer, not really paying attention.

“You’re looking around. Looking for something.”

“Nah, just checking.”

I’m cycling through a program with my ride. The n-comm connection’s molasses-slow, and it’s pissing me off. Wherever we are has reset everything back to basics, not just the factory-settings basics, but the basic basics.

“Bullshit, Jack. What is it?” asks my unusually persistent partner.

I glower at my ride and give it a mental kick in the ass. It drools at me like an overstuffed bulldog and continues digging its glacial way through the software. Getting the ITC up and running is frustrating.

I sigh. I should answer the question. “My last gig, the one I was doing before I got yanked here . . .” I start.

“The babysitting?”

“Yeah. I thought she might’ve got pulled through as well. She was right next to me.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“You’re an expert all of a sudden?”

I stare at the landscape. It looks underformed, like someone’s idea of what a landscape should be, but they couldn’t be bothered finishing it. The area immediately around me, the trees, grass, and the earth all look fine, but as you scroll out, the detail becomes fuzzy. Even on full magnification, the scenery slips away from my eyes. It’s giving me the shits.

“Well, it doesn’t. You know that. We can’t pair up in a cascade, especially if you’re from different time zones,” continues Vic. “You need two events.”

She's right. Whole communities can get cascaded up or down the line as long as the material and people inside the cascade zone are roughly from the same era. They all get scooped up in one time zone and plonked down in another. No problem.

Keepers, on the other hand, with their access to Deacon tech, are a mishmash of eras and don't travel well with others. We barely travel well alone. The amount of energy it takes to move one of us and all the crap associated with us is immense, more so than cascading whole communities. It's got something to do with keeping the integrity of the associated timelines intact. Apparently much of the energy used to cascade us is used in repairing rips and tears in the temporal web. At least, that's what I heard when I managed to stay awake in Keeper school.

"I know that. But do you think this was deliberate? It felt off to me. Not like a Deacon cascade," I argue.

"Hmm . . . something had to be deliberate if both of us are together."

"Why us?"

"How the hell do I know?"

There's a niggle forming in the back of my mind. Something scratching on the edge of my awareness. I'm tempted to access the wetware, but I can't bring myself to do it. A couple of synapses decide to fire. Shit, it's the rig-rat. It's something to do with Mikey. Vic's looking at me. We went through basic training together. She knows me as well as anyone. She takes a solid guess.

"Tell me about the kid, the rig-rat," she says.

"Standard depot life, except she nailed a Scyther with a gun-rig."

"Shit," says Vic, impressed. "How'd she do it?"

“Shot the crap out of it as far as I can tell,” I answer. “And then shot the crap out of it some more.”

“She must’ve been lucky.”

Again I look at the scenery, and again it slides away from me. It’s doing my head in.

“Yeah, luckier than her granddad. He’s well dead.”

“She had a granddad? That’s weird.”

By this time after The Blink, it was strange to find three generations of a family together outside of major metropolitan centers. Either they’d been cascaded to different eras or were dead. Or often both.

“Yeah, turns out it’s not her real granddad; now it’s just her and Dwayne and some mechanic types,” I say. “At least until I took her away.”

Vic turns serious. My bike has almost finished running the program, so we’ll get the ITC up in a minute or two. My partner grabs my arm to get my full attention. My exo-armor hardens slightly.

“Was she in a fuel depot?”

“Sure, that’s normal, though.”

Depots are our primary source of Keepers-to-be.

“And she’s got a dad called Dwayne?”

“Well, he’s not exactly her dad, more of a guardian type and . . .”

My partner shoots me a look. I shut up.

“Yeah, Dwayne’s the daddy figure,” I confirm.

“And she has a brother?”

“Yep, but we took him. Why? What’s up?”

“Shit, Jack, I know the connection,” says Vic. “I was the one who grabbed her brother.”

Episode 2, Scene 12

The Past

“So, when are we?”

The man surveyed the landscape. The bright red dust was hard on the eyes, and the glare of the sun gave it a washed-out look. It was also furnace hot.

“The '50s.”

“The 1950s,” I tried for confirmation. “I’ve been cascaded?”

“Yep, that’s it.”

Shit. I’d been cascaded. It was my first time. I stumbled over to my ride and gave it a quick check. It looked OK. My kit looked fine as well. I dug into my pocket and pulled out my keys. I looked over at the man in the slouch hat.

“You’re an Aussie, right?”

“Got it in one, sport.”

Great. An Australian. When I was in the military, I’d been involved in joint exercises with the Australian army. They had a hard-on for their hats. I waved my keys at him.

“Is the bike going to start?”

The man stared at me. “Do I look like a fucking mechanic?”

Christ. Hard cases. The army’s full of them. But then, it needs to be. I stuck my key in the ignition, turned it, and thumbed the start switch. It roared into life. At least the bike was working. I turned it off and faced the soldier.

“So, Maralinga, right?”

He nodded. I looked at the harsh country surrounding me. I knew Maralinga. It was where the Brits ran their nuclear tests in the 1950s. Kicked out the indigenous people and set the place on fire. Dickheads.

“Atomic tests, nuclear tests, yeah?” I confirmed.

This got a raise of the eyebrows. “You know your history.”

Shit. This place must glow in the night. “It’s safe here, the radiation I mean?”

“It’s safe for our purposes.”

The Aussie wasn’t big on expanding his answers. I didn’t know what was going on. I needed more info.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I’m here for you, Jack.”

I said nothing. My face remained impassive. He knew my name. Big deal. It seemed everyone did these days. The man looked surprised.

“But I know who you are,” he stated, trying again.

“Listen, buddy. You whisk me back, what, sixty, seventy years in time, you’re here waiting for me, and you think I’m going to be impressed you know my name?”

“But everyone is shocked,” he complained, as if one of his favorite party tricks had been exposed.

“Yeah, well, whatever, and you can lighten up on the whole Yoda routine. It’s getting old.”

“Yoda?” scoffed the man. “You might ease up on the cultural references, mate. *Star Wars* isn’t out for another twenty years or so.”

I thought about this. He was right.

“So you’ve been into your future?”

He waved off my question. “Not important.”

He stood there saying nothing. It was my move. So I made one.

“Well, this is fascinating and all, but I’ve really got to get going.”

This was just for show. I wasn’t going anywhere. I was in the middle of a desert in a country that’s basically a giant sandbox. I didn’t have a clue which way to go. And he knew this.

“It’s a big country, Jack.”

“Yeah, yeah, OK,” I said.

This was getting me nowhere. Time to hit the reset button.

“Let’s start again. What’s your name?”

“Payne. Dennis Payne,” he answered.

“And you’re army,” I guessed. “It’s the hat.”

Like an idiot I waved my hand around the top of my head. I was pretty sure he knew what a hat was, but I couldn’t help myself.

He smiled at my performance. “Former army. Retired. I’m doing something different now.”

I frowned. “And you’re here for me?”

The sun had climbed higher into the sky. It was still only morning, but already waves of heat were rising off the hot sands. I saw little wiggly mirages in the distance. At least I hoped they were mirages, as I’d no idea what radiation waves looked like.

“Yep, I’m here for you and others like you.”

“What are you, then? What do you do?”

Dennis looked thoughtful. I knew he had been asked this question before, but he was trying to come up with something that'd satisfy me.

“I guess you'd call me an orientation officer. I'm here to help you.”

“Help me what? Get home, back to my time?”

“Is that what you want, Jack? Do you want to go home?”

I thought about this. I didn't know what the hell was going on, but then I wasn't doing much back in my own time.

“No, not particularly,” I replied. “So you're here to help me get used to this era, this time period.”

Dennis laughed again. Either I was the funniest person on the planet or he was one relaxed dude, and I didn't remember saying anything funny.

“Nothing so dull, mate,” he said, still smiling. “I'm here to help you become a Temporal Enforcement Officer.”

“A what?” I asked. I hadn't a clue what he was talking about.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I keep telling them it's a fucked title,” he said. “You're going back to school, sport. We're going to make you a Keeper.”