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Dedicated to Robert Bentley for his pragmatism
and encouragement—LWE
Dedicated to Prof. Charles Blinderman for his support
and encouragement—CP

Chapter One

A siren screamed somewhere on the streets below, then faded, and Casper Beech tried hard not to take it as an evil omen.

After all, whoneeded evil omens to know he was facing disaster? Any time he got called in to see the boss, it*had* to be bad news. Casper's entire life had been an ongoing demonstration of just how horrible the alleged Chinese curse, "May you come to the attention of people in high places," could be.

He supposed it had been bad enough even in the old days, before the perpetual Crisis, before everything, as the propaganda put it, had been made more efficient to meet the economic and geopolitical challenges of the twenty-first century. Now, though, when all the people in high places, all the bosses,

were working together, it was hell. Any time he had to talk to the boss, any boss, his life got worse.

But maybe this time it wouldn't be *too* bad.

He hesitated in the doorway of the cubicle, peering in. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Quinones?" he asked.

Quinones looked up at him, smiled, then leaned back in his chair. The chair did not squeak, as Casper's would have, but sighed faintly as the cushion reshaped itself under his weight. Behind Quinones the towers of Center City Philadelphia were visible through the broad expanse of window, towers that formed a panorama of glass and concrete glittering in the sun. A vapor trail straggled across the sky above the gleaming skyline.

"Ah, yes, Casper," Quinones said. "Please, come in and have a seat."

Casper entered, his feet silent on the thick carpet, and nervously perched himself on the hard edge of a handy chair.

Quinones leaned forward again, and pulled at a hardcopy folder on his desk. His screens were folded down out of sight, as usual—he was fond of saying that his work was with people, not computers. "I'd like to discuss your job performance, Casper," he said, opening the folder.

"Is there some complaint?" Casper asked uneasily. If he'd screwed up a liability trace he was dead, he knew it—but he didn't think he had.

Of course, someone could have complained anyway.

"Not exactly." Quinones smiled. He turned over a few pages in the folder without bothering to look at them; it was clear to Casper that the documents were just props, something to keep his hands busy, to help him time his words for maximum dramatic effect. Anything important would have been on a screen, not on paper.

"Casper," Quinones said jovially, "we've come to the conclusion that your job skills are outdated. We need to keep up with the latest software, you know, and we're going to. An entire new system will be installed over the coming weekend, and it doesn't look like you'll know how to run it."

"No, sir," Casper admitted, "I probably won't." Damn, he thought, am I about to be fired? If he once lost this job he'd probably never find another one anywhere in the Consortium, and outside firms didn't pay enough for him to live on. He was still paying off his parents' legal fees; any cut in his income would mean he'd starve.

He couldn't stop paying the debts, or they'd come and take everything he owned, up to and including a few body parts. Starvation, though, wasn't their problem.

"We've considered our alternatives," Quinones told him, leaning back again. "It's not cost-effective to re-train you by ordinary methods—it's simply too time-consuming. And bringing in someone new to do the work wouldn't be any better—again, too time-consuming. We need to have someone running traces *within minutes* after the new software comes on-line next Monday morning—*minutes*, Casper." He waggled a fat finger to emphasize his point, then continued, "We have come to the conclusion that the most practical course of action—the *only* practical course of action, really—will be to send you in for a full course of imprinting in the use of the new software."

For a moment that didn't register; then the words sank in. Oh, God, Casper thought, neuro-imprinting was supposed to hurt like hell. He pressed down into his chair; he hated pain.

At least this meant he still had his job, though. He wouldn't have to join the unemployed and homeless, living in the streets. He'd still have both kidneys.

"I suppose it's for the best," he said, his voice thin and weak.

"We think so," Quinones said. Once again, he produced his artificial smile, this time a variant that was probably meant to be comforting and paternal. "And, Casper," he added, "you won't be the only one. We've made arrangements with NeuroTalents LLC for a group discount. We'll be having quite a few people imprinted."

"And I got *lucky* enough to be sent off first?" Casper asked.

Quinones nodded, deaf to the feeble sarcasm. "The work schedule decided it. You're the most available at the moment."

Casper remembered the list of jobs he had found on his screen when he had arrived at the office half an hour before, and he wondered what his co-workers were faced with if that schedule left him "most available." He made no comment on that; he just nodded and asked, "When do I go?"

"You'll see Dr. Jalali this afternoon for a physical. Assuming she doesn't find anything that would keep you from going, you're scheduled for tomorrow morning at ten."

Casper suppressed a shudder. "I suppose it's well to get it over with quickly," he said, trying unsuccessfully to force a smile.

Quinones nodded again. "And you'll need a day or two for the new information to settle in," he said blithely. Casper shuddered, and his discomfort with the idea finally seemed to register with his superior. "Don't worry about the imprinting," Quinones told him, with another falsely paternal smile. "Those problems they had in the early days have all been taken care of. You'll be fine."

Casper nodded. "I'm not worried about that," he lied. He was quite sure Quinones had never been imprinted, and never would be if he could help it. The bosses didn't need to worry about such things. The Consortium took care of its managers, and the Democratic-Republican Party took care of the Consortium.

Anyone who wasn't in the Consortium or the Party, though, was on his own.

"Good," Quinones said. He closed the folder. "And Casper, don't worry about coming in to work tomorrow, either. Just go straight over to NeuroTalents in the morning, and relax afterwards." He smiled beneficently, as if he had just conferred a great favor.

The smug bastard probably thought he had, Casper told himself. Aloud, he said, "Thank you. That will be nice."

Then Casper slipped out of the office and wove his way back across the big room to his own little niche, where he collapsed into his chair. He sat motionless, sunk in gloomy inertia for several minutes before he managed to lift his fingers back onto the keyboard and start the day's first liability trace.

A California drug company had sold a Mexican factory a bad batch of stimulants and killed three workers. The drug company was a member of the Consortium, but its insurance company wasn't; the factory was Consortium-owned as well, and had no insurance. Casper's job was to trace ownership, liability, and contract terms to establish just who should sue whom in order to ensure that the Consortium, its member companies, and their stockholders either lost as little money as possible, or, if it could be arranged, made as much as possible off the incident.

He began the search, calling up personnel files on the dead workers and their families, with notations on what waivers had been signed, and when.

Imprinting was not something he looked forward to, but his mood improved as he worked. New software might make traces like this less tedious, and the imprinting would be quick, at any rate.

And he still had his job. That was the most important thing. He wouldn't starve.

Within an hour he was over most of his depression.

Casper got the call to report to Dr. Jalali around 2:00; he shut down his screen and headed down to the medical offices on the third floor. The checkup was routine; the scanners found nothing which would prevent Casper from taking the imprinting as scheduled.

He had mixed feelings about that. It was nice to know he was healthy, and his brain activity normal, but he almost wished that they had found a neural anomaly or something that would keep him from accepting an imprint.

Of course, if he had had such a problem, he would have lost his job—but it wouldn't have been for cause, and he might have qualified for a disability income, or even have been able to swing a discrimination-against-the-handicapped suit. He'd heard the Party sometimes used those to keep companies in line.

No, he told himself as he pulled his shirt back on, that was daydreaming. Nobody won discrimination suits against a member of the Consortium, and Data Tracers was a member in good standing. They had access to the best lawyers in the world—and of course, to people like himself, who would find ways to re-route any responsibility.

And it didn't matter; his brain was perfectly healthy. Dr. Jalali said so. She had told him that he could take the imprint without any trouble at all.

He sighed, and headed back to his cubicle.

When Cecelia Grand called to say she had to work late at the law office, he snatched at the chance to cancel their date—he was too worried about the imprinting to deal with Cecelia and her whims. Instead he spent the evening home alone, drinking cheap beer and playing old, faded CDs until he finally fell into bed around midnight.

That was Tuesday.

Wednesday morning he awoke at the usual time without meaning to; since his appointment was at ten he had intended to sleep late. Instead he took his time over breakfast, and left his apartment an hour later than usual.

He reached NeuroTalents in plenty of time despite his dawdling, and walked slowly through the Institute's lobby, admiring the fountains and the greenery that grew toward the high glass ceiling. Studying the scenery put the inevitable off for another minute or two.

NeuroTalents' receptionist was a handsome young man; the way he was dressed made Casper feel shabby.

Which was reasonable, really—Casper *was* shabby. He knew it, but he didn't like to admit it.

"May I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"I hope so," Casper said uneasily. "I'm scheduled for an imprinting at ten. The name is Casper Beech, 3036-94-7318."

The young man sucked on his teeth as he checked his screen. "Ah, yes," he said, "I have it here. We've received your records and the report from Dr. Jalali." He swung a screen around and handed Casper a stylus. "If you would just sign this waiver of liability, we'll take care of you immediately."

Casper read over the form; it was a standard corporate waiver, with NeuroTalents and his employer agreeing to cover any medical expenses that were incurred in exchange for his forfeiting his right to sue.

He grimaced. He was already uncomfortable about the procedure, and this waiver was not encouraging in the least. Every day at work he saw reports on what could happen to people who signed these.

It wasn't as though he had any real choice, though. He signed the form and tapped ENTER.

The receptionist checked the signature against a display on his primary screen, then nodded. "Very good, Mr. Beech," he said. "If you would take that elevator there up to the fourth floor, a technician will see you."

He was even more nervous than he had realized; when he first tried to give his floor the elevator answered, "We're sorry, sir, but your order was not understood."

"Four, please," Casper repeated, trying unsuccessfully to distract himself by wondering, as he had for years, why so many machines were programmed to speak of themselves in the plural.

When he reached the fourth floor a green-smocked technician with a clipboard awaited him. "Please follow me," the technician said brusquely before striding down the corridor. She didn't look back, and for a moment Casper thought wildly of making a run for it.

But where would he go? Meekly, he followed her.

His guide brought Casper to the open door of a small room and pointed inside. "Put your clothes in there," she said. "I'll be back in five minutes."

The technician left. Casper was relieved to find a paper jumpsuit and slippers on a shelf; he began to change, and pulled on the second slipper just as the technician returned.

"This way, sir," she said.

He was strapped into a large, complicated chair in a smaller room a few doors down; then the technician attached electrodes and placed a headpiece on his head.

"There's nothing to worry about," the technician said, clearly reciting a set speech. "The monitors are just to keep tabs on your bodily functions. Once we start the procedure, a sleep inducer will put you under for the duration. When you wake up, it'll be over." She smiled mechanically.

Casper smiled back shakily, and closed his eyes. The technician flipped the switch to start the sleep inducer, and Casper quickly slipped under.

The technician checked him over swiftly and efficiently; then she waved the go-ahead signal to the monitor camera and slipped out of the room. In the central control room another technician saw the signal, hit a button, and turned away.

The procedure was fully automated, with technicians present only to troubleshoot when something did not go according to schedule. Under most circumstances, unless an alarm went off or the machines told them something was wrong, their attention was directed elsewhere. After all, watching someone sleep is impossibly dull, even if the subject's brain is doing various interesting things.

Casper's chosen skill file consisted of a few gigabytes of data on a microoptical disk, tagged and ready to be fed into his brain; first, however, the scanners had to examine Casper's neural pathways and brainwave patterns. The file would be imposed on these pathways, but the machines had to be sure that the file was not so radically opposed to the recipient's mental structure that some harm could occur. Dr. Jalali's preliminary survey had shown that Casper's brain could accept imprinting, but not that he could accept any particular program; since the individual programs were all proprietary information owned by NeuroTalents or their independent vendors, not to be distributed freely to other companies' doctors even within the Consortium, the doctor had not had the information to verify that Casper could handle this specific skill-set.

The central computer began matching program details against neural pathways, checking for conflicts.

While the mapping was taking place, however, a badly-worn sector of old disk storage finally gave out, dropping approximately sixty bytes from the system's primary command programming, from a total of some two and a half million lines of code.

When the time came to check the scan against the waiting skill file, an uninitialized variable came up garbage—the code that should have set it was missing. The error-handling software, never tested in this particular situation, attempted unsuccessfully to compensate.

The waiting skill file was ignored. The mapping continued, into secondary and then tertiary areas of detail, levels that were totally unnecessary for an ordinary skill imprint. A set of restricted-access files, quite separate from the scheduled one, was accessed and readied.

A technician looked up casually from his magazine at the monitoring panel, then stopped and looked again. He had thought the subject in Suite B was in for a regular skill imprint, but his instruments showed that he was in the middle of optimization programming.

He didn't remember anyone scheduling any optimizations. Weren't there supposed to be extra precautions for optimizations? A skill imprint just added a few new patterns to the subject's brain, plugging in a little new information and some artificial habits, but an optimization more or less rebooted the entire brain, streamlining the entire personality and redirecting it toward a predetermined goal, adding

whatever information and habits might be useful for that purpose.

Optimizations went *deep*, messing with parts of the brain not entirely understood, and were thought to be risky. NeuroTalents hadn't done any in months, and at last report didn't expect to do any—so why was this man getting one?

The technician looked for warning flags, but found none. The system appeared to be running smoothly.

Well, he told himself, it wasn't any of his business, as long as the machines were running properly. With a shrug, he went back to his reading.

The computer's optimization program examined the map that had been made of Casper's brain. It then compared this map with its available imprint programs, matching more than seven million points of comparison. The more closely the map and the program matched, the more efficiently the subject would assimilate the program; the more efficiently the program was assimilated, the less likely it was that parts of the program would be lost.

It took the computer seven minutes and forty-three seconds to find the program that most closely matched the map it was using. Having found this match, the computer checked its insertion options.

There were no options specified in its damaged instructions, so it went to its ancient default settings, unused for half a decade. The computer prepared for a wetware flash.

Up until now Casper had slept peacefully, but when the flash began his body stiffened under the shock.

A brain flash had been described by one of its early recipients as the mental equivalent of being force-fed a large apple in one bite, and most people who had had the experience since agreed with this description. An optimization was an extreme case, however, and Casper felt as if his entire brain and sensory apparatus were being overloaded, burned out, then instantly rebuilt and overloaded again. His mind, unable to handle this, simply shut down.

The flash was over in one and three-tenths seconds, but Casper's twitching body didn't begin to relax until several minutes later.

The technician on duty, between bites of a sandwich, noticed the readings on his panel and sat up abruptly, dropping his lunch back into its bag. He took a moment to make sure that the readings weren't into the danger area, and then he sent another technician down to check on the subject.

Casper was waking up when the technician arrived and began hurriedly to disconnect him. He lay passively, not really aware of anything, until the technician handed him a cup of water.

Forcing his hand to close on the cup served to jar his thoughts into motion again. He sat up and tried to drink the water, but as much went onto the floor or his shaking fingers as into his mouth.

"...sure you're all right?" he heard.

Casper realized that the technician was talking to him. He made a conscious effort to find the technician with his eyes and bring him into focus. His mouth worked for a moment before he could force any sound out.

He didn't want any trouble; he might lose his job if anything was wrong, and there wouldn't be a

disability pension, not when he'd gone this far. "I'll be fine," he said at last. "Just let me sit for a minute."

The technician nodded and began examining the chair. The first thing he did was to check the chair's recording devices, assuring himself that they were working properly.

Casper pushed himself upright, swaying slightly as he stood. "I think I'll be okay after I get some fresh air," he said.

"Yeah, I hope so. Here, let me help you," the technician said. He took Casper by the arm and led him to the changing room.

The technician did more of the work of dressing him than Casper could manage for himself, but after several minutes he was in street clothes again. The technician helped him to the elevator.

By the time they reached the lobby Casper was feeling well enough to proceed on his own. He scrawled his signature illegibly on a paper acknowledging completion of contracted services, then managed to make his way unsteadily down the mall to the subway.

He began feeling worse again on the train. He barely recognized his home station, but got out before the doors closed and staggered back to his building. He stumbled twice on the broken steps, but finally fumbled his way into his apartment, where he undressed and stumbled into bed.

At NeuroTalents the technician who had spotted the irregular procedure said angrily to one of his shiftmates, "I thought they didn't flash wetware any more."

"They do in emergencies," she answered. "But you've got to have a doctor present."

"Well, there wasn't any doctor on this one, and it wasn't much of an emergency, either."

She shrugged. "Programming error, I guess. Think we should report it?"

The tech hesitated. The prospect of additional paperwork overcame his moral outrage, and he said, "Nah, I guess not."

The other nodded.

"Hell of a thing, either way." The other technician was no longer listening, he saw; she had gone back to watching her pocket video set. "No wonder they get the liability waivers first thing," he mumbled to himself as he checked over his board.

Chapter Two

Casper awoke the next morning with a tremendous headache. He sat up slowly, but as he came upright nausea boiled up in his belly. For a long uncomfortable moment he thought he was going to vomit. Black spots appeared in front of him. He lay back and put his pillow over his face.

It was twenty minutes later before he could make the major effort necessary to reach for the phone and call in to work and let them know he wouldn't be in. That done, he rolled over and went back to sleep.

He slept until shortly before six o'clock the following morning, when he awoke to find the headache gone, but not the nausea. He still felt weak and shaky.

Even as his stomach told him otherwise, he knew he had to eat something. He managed to stagger into the kitchen, where he forced down some leftovers from the refrigerator.

That relieved the nausea slightly, to his surprise. Blinking gummy eyes, he worked out the next thing to do; he went into the bathroom to take a shower.

Standing under the hot water made him feel almost alive again, and when he got out he decided he really ought to try to go in to work.

He sat on the edge of his bed for several minutes before he had enough energy to get up and finish dressing, moving slowly toward the door as he fastened buttons, zippers, and Velcro.

He stumbled down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk. As he approached the entrance to the subway he missed a turn, and didn't realize until he passed a construction site that he was going the wrong way. He turned around and retraced his path.

He had walked that same path to the subway for years. He would have sworn he could walk it in his sleep. That he had missed a turn meant he was in worse shape than he had thought.

If old, comfortable mental patterns like that had been disturbed—was that a side effect of the imprint? Did it clear out the old to make way for the new?

Nobody had ever mentioned that, and he didn't like the idea at all. If he had lost memories, would he ever even know they were gone?

By the time he reached the foot of the subway station stairs the regular morning commuter crowd had gathered on the station platform, filling the tunnel with the smell of sweat on top of the ingrained stench of dirt, metal, and urine, a stench that had seeped into the very grit on the walls.

All in all, perhaps two dozen people were waiting for the next train. Casper leaned against one of the pillars and looked at them.

In the evenings the subway crowd included many couples, family groups, and youth gangs. Here, though, the crowd was entirely composed of individuals. Casper found this oddly interesting, and watching them took his mind off the pounding in his temples.

It occurred to him that if those individuals could be unified, somehow, they could—well, could what?

They could do things, certainly—but what?

He shook his head slightly. His thoughts were a jumble, and he gave up trying to force them into coherence.

A train screeched into the station, stirring up the dirt and filling the station with noise, and he joined the others in boarding it. He was lucky enough to get a seat immediately, and he rode with his forehead pressed against the window, looking out at the tunnel.

There were a lot of details that he seemed to be noticing for the first time—the location of the pillars, for

instance, as the train pulled into the next station. Except for one broken stump near the far end of the platform the pillars provided excellent cover, and a pillar would never be more than four or five meters away. The occasional bullethole proved that the pillars were a formidable barrier—good defenses to cover a retreat down the tunnel.

What an odd thing to notice, Casper thought, startled by his own musings. Why would he pay any attention to something like that? His study of the crowd back on the platform had been curious, too. He had been vaguely aware of where everyone was, all of the time he was there. And he hadn't so much noticed that everyone was alone as he had noticed that no one was together, that there was no organization in the crowd.

Why was he thinking about that?

Why was he thinking about *anything* when he felt so rotten?

He turned to face into the train, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. The motion and stink of the train upset his stomach, though, so he opened his eyes again, which seemed to help.

He was staring at the man seated on the other side of the car. The man shifted angrily in his seat, and Casper, realizing what he was doing, averted his gaze.

The train finally pulled into the Race/Vine station, and he swayed to his feet. There were almost as many people getting on here as getting off, and Casper, in his unsteady state, had a little trouble getting through the doors. Eventually he made it onto the platform and headed for the stairs to the street.

The short walk to the office seemed interminable, but at last he made it, only slightly late.

Quinones happened to be arriving at the same time as Casper. He nodded a greeting.

"Feeling all right today, Beech?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Quinones." Casper hesitated, then added, "I had a bad time with the imprinting, but I feel fine now."

"Good, good," Quinones said; Casper braced for a slap on the back, but it didn't come. "We've got quite a bit of work for you to do," Quinones said.

"I'm ready for it," Casper told him. He didn't bother to try to smile or sound enthusiastic; he knew he couldn't pull it off, and Quinones wouldn't care in any case.

Quinones strode off to his office while Casper shuffled to his desk. He sat down, logged on, and looked at the list of work that awaited him. There were eighteen urgent traces already in the queue, some of them obviously complex and time-consuming, and more would probably come in before quitting time.

He sighed.

"It's going to be a busy day," he muttered.

Lester Polnovick stopped his crane and rubbed his forehead. He'd had a ferocious headache ever since he had left NeuroTalents the day before, after his imprinting. The flicker from the crane's monitor screen seemed to be making it worse; he couldn't turn the screen off, but he did turn down the brightness.

The headache wasn't important, he told himself. What was important was that after years of failing the qualifying exams for management positions he had scraped up the money to have the necessary skills imprinted. Crane work was getting scarce, now that robots were doing most of it, and the pay wasn't what it used to be; it was time to move on. Soon he'd be exchanging his blue collar for a white one—symbolically, at any rate, since the collar of his work shirt was silver-grey, and he hadn't seen a white shirt in years, not since the city, at the insistence of the Consortium and with the Party's blessing, had given up enforcing the clean air laws.

"Hey, Lester, get a move on!" someone shouted.

Lester waved and grabbed the control levers. He swung his load of temporary flooring around and raised it to the top of the building framework, and then looked over the growing structure while the crew was unloading the sling.

This was to be the Volcker Financial Center, Philadelphia's attempt to claim its share of the booty now that yet another string of terrorist attacks had finally driven New York's Wall Street to decentralize.

Lester was unimpressed with the structure. "It wouldn't take much to bring that whole thing right down," he mused aloud; due to spending so much time alone in the crane's cab he had gotten in the habit of talking to himself. "Just a small charge there, there, and maybe there, ought to do it." A certain warm satisfaction seeped into him at the realization.

Then he frowned. "Why did I think of that?" he asked himself. "What do I know about it?" Could there have been information in his imprinting about explosives and demolition? What the hell did *that* have to do with management?

Had there been some sort of error? Some of the technicians at NeuroTalents had looked sort of worried when he had left.

His headset crackled, and he forgot about it. "Okay, Les, go get another load," the crew boss's voice told him.

Les swung the crane back toward the pile of flooring, and waited for the next batch to be secured.

Stu and Carl had just finished strapping another load into the sling when the lunch whistle blew. Les reached for the ignition switch, then paused. Slowly, without quite knowing why, he withdrew his hand. He waited quietly in the cab until the rest of the crew had settled down for lunch, and then he slipped out the side door.

He didn't know at first where he was going, but using a stack of pipes for cover, he made his way towards the shack where the explosives were stored.

He stood for a moment at the door, uncertain what he was doing—or rather, why he was doing it. He knew what he wanted, knew that he *had* to do it, but he didn't know why.

But then he shrugged. It didn't matter why; he *had* to do it. He reached for the handle.

As he had hoped, the shack was unlocked, despite strict company regulations and city ordinances to the contrary. Convenience had won out over the law once again.

"What's going on here, Polnovick?" said the voice of Keough, the ground-crew foreman, as Les felt a hand on his arm.

"I noticed the door to the shack was open," he said, turning. "I just thought I'd close it."

"Yeah, well, why don't you just let me worry about it." Keough eyed him suspiciously, then pushed past him into the shack. "You got something going in here? Something special, maybe?"

"Nope," Polnovick answered. He smiled. He knew what to do. "You want to check, go ahead. Whatever you say." He picked up a discarded length of pipe, hefted it silently, and then followed Keough into the shack.

Casper worked through lunch, eating a vending-machine sandwich at his desk. He was having trouble working—even the simplest, most routine tasks seemed to be giving him trouble. He just couldn't get his thoughts in order; the habits of years all seemed to have disappeared. It was probably a residual effect from his bad reaction to the imprinting, he told himself, but whatever the reason, it meant that it took him longer to do his work.

And so far, he had not picked up any new techniques or knowledge that he was aware of—but then, the new software wasn't running yet. This was Friday, and it would go in over the weekend.

He was also supposed to have been given improved techniques for handling the old stuff, though, and any improvements certainly hadn't made themselves obvious.

His office nemesis, Mirim Anspack, was among the first to return from lunch, and for the moment the two of them were the only people in the main room. She was Cecelia's roommate, and in fact Casper had only met Cecelia when the latter came to the office to pick up Mirim. Even before that momentous occasion, Mirim had delighted in teasing Casper; once he started dating Cecelia he had become the target of endless double entendres, and now that the imprinting and Casper's bad reaction were common gossip she had a new topic to tease him about.

Casper didn't really mind. He was used to it. He could take it, and even dish out a little in return. If he hadn't been able to, Mirim would have left him alone after awhile; she wasn't cruel, just playful.

She loitered near her desk for a few minutes, plotting her mischief, before approaching him.

"So how's our new super-operator doing?" she asked.

"Plodding along, like the rest of you. Wouldn't want to make you look bad."

"Oh, you needn't worry; none of us would think of competing with you! No, we'll let you do everything, shall we?"

"From the job list, I believe it. Can anyone do anything around here without me?"

"We manage, although how..."

A heavy rumble interrupted her; they both looked up, startled. The first rumble was followed by a second one several seconds later; the building shook, and a window blew out, scattering glass across the floor. Mirim and Casper both ducked down behind the desk.

They remained there for several seconds, not coming out of cover until they heard sirens.

Cautiously, they crept out, side by side. Mirim was first to stand.

"What *was* that?" she gasped.

"Sounded like an explosion—probably something commercial, not military." Casper cocked his head to listen. "And that's small arms fire. Pistols, shotguns, maybe a submachine gun. I'd guess it's the police."

Mirim looked at him, startled. "Where'd you learn anything about weapons?" she asked.

"I don't know," Casper answered, puzzled. "I just seem to know it." He shrugged the matter aside and added, "Let's go take a look."

Step by careful step they crossed the room, and together they peered out the shattered window.

The street was covered with broken glass and litter; windows on other floors had gone, as well as their own. A few people lay on the sidewalk, apparently injured, and a car had gone out of control and run up onto a flight of steps.

"What the hell is going on here?" Casper demanded.

"I don't know. Maybe we'll get some answers soon, though—look there." Mirim pointed towards the end of the block. A police cruiser with its roof-speakers up had just turned the corner and was driving toward them. They leaned out the window to hear better.

"The area west of Twentieth Street between Chestnut and Arch, all the way to the river, is being evacuated," the speakers announced. "If you have someplace to go outside of this area, please go there immediately. If you have no place to go, you should go to the Thirtieth Street Station at once. The area west..."

Casper and Mirim looked at each other. "What the hell?" Mirim asked.

"Must be terrorists," Casper suggested.

"Must be," Mirim agreed. The two of them stared for a moment.

"Want a ride?" Mirim asked. "The subways will be hell."

"Yeah, thanks," Casper said. "Let me get my jacket."

"Would you like to come over to my place?"

Casper hesitated. "I don't think so," he said.

"Oh, come on. I don't have any vile purpose in mind, I'm just being sociable. Cecelia will be there."

Casper considered that. "You're sure?" he asked.

"Of course I'm sure. Her office is in the evacuation zone, too, right?"

"Well, yeah," Casper admitted. "All right, then, I guess it's safe."

"It's safe, it's safe." She paused, then grinned. "Well, *mostly* safe."

Casper groaned.

Cecelia was already home when they arrived, and the apartment also held a very large, heavily muscled man named Leonid—Mirim's current bedmate, Casper knew.

Leonid greeted Mirim with a passionate kiss, coupled with some indelicate pawing of her body; he then seemed to take sadistic delight in squeezing Casper's hand until it hurt. The first chance he got, Casper checked Leonid's knuckles to see if they were calloused from dragging on the ground.

A TV feed was on their main video screen, quietly burbling CNN's usual line. "There was a news bulletin about five minutes ago announcing the evacuation," Cecelia said as she brought in a tray of snacks. "Other than that, nothing."

Nibbling on celery sticks and tortilla chips, the four of them settled down in front of the video; Mirim found the remote and began switching from one channel to the next.

After nearly twenty minutes of nothing—CNN and al-Jazeera USA were covering the fighting in Siberia, while FoxNews had yet another congressman defending his record—she found a placard announcing a special bulletin on the city-mandated local news channel. She put down the remote, and a moment later the card was replaced by a man in light body armor, with a microphone in his hand.

"This is John Covarrubias speaking to you from the corner of Market and Twenty-First. Just a few blocks from where I'm standing a construction worker by the name of Lester Polnovick has apparently gone berserk, and committed acts of wanton destruction. The situation is still confused; details remain vague. No known terrorist organization has claimed credit, nor has Polnovick made any demands."

John Covarrubias was replaced by a view of the construction site. The partially-completed structure near the center of the lot had collapsed against a neighboring building. Police and rescue workers swarmed over the rubble.

"As we understand it," Covarrubias continued as the camera panned across the site, "Lester Polnovick, a crane operator, blew up the partially completed structure of the Volcker Financial Center, using explosives from the dynamite shack and causing it to collapse against the neighboring Takeuchi building." A closeup of the tangle of girders piled against the buckling wall of the Takeuchi building flashed onto the screen. "Most of the construction crew had gathered here for lunch. At last count, seventeen were killed by the blast or the subsequent collapse; twenty more were seriously injured."

Another shot, this time of a half-crushed police cruiser. "Officers Santiago and Hojaji of the city police were the first on the scene. Their vehicle was demolished by several steel girders dropped from Polnovick's crane. Officer Hojaji was killed instantly. Paramedics removed Officer Santiago from the scene, and we have no information on his whereabouts or condition."

Covarrubias appeared on the screen again. "After this, Polnovick apparently used his crane as a battering ram on the surrounding buildings; because of the lunch-hour break few people were in the areas assaulted, and no injuries have been reported. The area has now been evacuated. Polnovick is still in the cab of the crane, and is believed to be armed."

"I wonder what made him do it?" Cecelia mused.

"Who knows?" Casper said, "If he was already a bit over the edge, it could've been anything that set him off."

"There's been a lot of that sort of thing going on lately," Leonid said authoritatively. "Incidents taking place all over the country. The continent, even."

"Do you know much about that sort of thing?" Casper asked, looking up, wondering if Leonid might actually have a brain after all.

"Leonid works for a security firm," Mirim said.

"It's part of my job to know what's going on," Leonid said smugly.

"And there's been a lot of this going on?" Casper asked.

Leonid shrugged, then held up his hand for silence. "The SWAT team's on now. Let's see them take this guy down."

They watched as the cameras followed the SWAT team moving into position. Leonid grunted with pleasure when a team sniper fired a single round, killing Polnovick as he sat in the cab of the crane.

A thin stream of crimson trailed down the rusty metal siding below the cab window, and the news camera zoomed in.

"Oh, God," Cecelia said, flinching at the sight. Casper took her hand and squeezed it.

"It could have been a lot worse," he said.

"Sure," Leonid agreed. "Only nineteen dead and twenty injured. Why, just last month a dam in Kyrgyz was blown up. Over four hundred people were drowned. And the fighting's still going on in Russia."

"Let's not dwell on it, huh?" Mirim asked.

"Just pointing out how lucky we are to live in the States."

"I'd feel lucky if I could get something to eat," Casper interrupted.

"Good idea," Cecelia quickly agreed. "Give me a hand, Cas?"

"Sure." Casper followed her to the kitchen. As soon as they were around the corner, he lowered his voice and asked, "Where'd Mirim find that ape?"

"Shh. I don't know. He doesn't come by here very often. Mirim usually goes over to his apartment."

"Probably just as well. What do you have for dinner?"

"Chicken sounds good." Cecelia pulled the instruction strip off the end of the box of a frozen chicken dinner, put the box into the heat chamber of the oven, and fed the instruction strip into the oven's control panel. The defrost cycle began immediately.

"Have you got any plans for after dinner?" Casper asked.

"I'm open to suggestions. You got any?"

"Not offhand, but tomorrow's Saturday—no work even if they get the mess cleaned up. It's a good night to stay out late."

"Sounds like a good idea. I'll order a newspaper and we'll decide what to do after dinner." She leaned back and kissed him.

When they got back from the movie Cecelia decided that it was far too late to send Casper home—especially with the headache he had developed. Instead she demonstrated that she had some interesting ways to take his mind off the pain.

Chapter Three

A single window near the top of NeuroTalents LLC building showed a light long past closing. Behind that window five men and three women were holding an urgent meeting, called hastily that afternoon. All of these people were unhappy. Half were angry, and the other half were more than a little frightened.

"You're sure it was our doing?" the man at the head of the table asked, glaring at one of the young executives.

The executive replied unhappily, "We're still investigating, sir, but it does look that way. Yesterday the subject in question, Lester Polnovick, had an appointment for an ordinary pre-programmed imprinting to learn accounting, personnel management, and computer skills. This wasn't a corporate contract; he'd saved up for it himself, to improve his employment prospects. He showed up on time, and was handled according to normal procedure, but our records indicate that instead of the package he had requested, he received an optimization imprinting. One that had nothing to do with the skills he had wanted."

"How did *that* happen?" the man at the head of the table demanded. "Don't we have technicians watching for this sort of thing? My lord, what are we paying them for?"

"Well, uh ... well, yes, sir, we do. They saw that there was an optimization in progress, but the technicians don't necessarily know what a particular client is in for. That's all supposed to be taken care of by the computer; when the contracts are drawn up the computer is told what's wanted, and from then on it's all up to the machines."

"Nobody checked? After all, we don't do a lot of optimizations."

"Nobody checked. The computer said it was following the contract, and the technicians believed it."

"All right, then, was the contract drawn up correctly?"

"Yes sir, it was, and the right information was fed into the computer at that time. We have a hardcopy record, with print-out time and date, and it was correct."

"So it was changed? What this man was supposed to get changed somewhere along the line?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then, why did the computer make the change? Who told it to?"

"That's not my department, sir." The executive looked with relief at the woman who sat across the table from him. She cleared her throat nervously.

"Mr. Yamashiro," she said, "it appears to have been a hardware failure. A bad disk sector, compounded by a previously-unknown bug in the error-handling code."

The chairman glared. "How could that happen?"

"Uh ... poor maintenance, apparently." She looked embarrassed.

Yamashiro stared at her for a moment, then demanded, "Who's responsible for that?"

"We don't know yet."

Yamashiro snapped, "Find out." Then he sighed. "All right, what's the damage? What exactly happened? What did this bad disk do?"

"Well, sir, when the client came in for his appointment, he was scheduled for a pre-programmed imprinting in small business accounting and management. The computer lost a variable, and defaulted to an optimization program." She paused for breath.

"Go on," Yamashiro told her. "What sort of optimization?"

"Well, that's the tricky part," the woman said. She glanced at her notes. "The switch appears to have bypassed three entire levels of security—if I may say so, sir, whoever put together the unified software should be fired and blacklisted, because that shouldn't have been possible. The error-handling code apparently assumes that any lost variable should be assigned the maximum available value—I suppose the idea was to go for maximum flexibility, but the effect is to bypass limits and safeguards. That's bad programming."

Yamashiro nodded. "We bought it from the lowest bidder," he said. "Sometimes you get what you pay for."

"Yes, sir."

"Go on," the chairman said. "What happened?"

The woman nodded and continued, "The computer accessed highly classified files, material we developed jointly with ... with a certain client." She looked up. "You will recall that transaction two years ago?"

Yamashiro nodded. "You mean the black-budget government work. I don't think you need to be coy; we're all grown-ups here tonight."

"Yes." She continued, "The computer examined *only* these classified files as its available options, and finally chose the Godzilla File as the best fit for this particular subject."

"The Godzilla File," Yamashiro said. His fingers tapped the table.

"Yes, sir."

"There's something in there called the Godzilla File?"

"Yes, sir."

After a second of angry silence, Yamashiro demanded, "Who the *hell* gave it a stupid name like that?"

"Well, sir, the names are generally chosen to reflect the nature of the file. For example, the Ninja File programs the recipient as an assassin, the Houdini File..."

Yamashiro interrupted, "I don't need the whole list. All right, they've all got cutesy names. So what, exactly, is this Godzilla File?"

"Demolitions and other related skills, primarily—intended for sabotage and terrorism overseas, I suppose. It's mostly concerned with the destruction of urban areas. The title refers to the old-time movie monster, for obvious reasons. And it's a compulsory patterning—the recipient feels a need to *use* his new skills."

Mr. Yamashiro said, with acid in his voice, "You're telling me that this client was imprinted with the urge to stomp on buildings."

"Basically, yes." She nodded, then added, "We were lucky in this instance."

"Lucky?" Yamashiro stared. "We're liable for nineteen deaths and hundreds of injuries and billions in property damage! How the hell can you consider our situation to be lucky?"

The woman flinched. "Well, sir, he was taken down before he did *more* damage—it could have been far worse if he had been, say, a pilot rather than a crane operator. Also ... well, the method used with these files is a wetware flash. This involves the file being fed into the client's brain very rapidly. Optimization is a complex process, and we've discovered that slower methods can sometimes result in psychological damage from conflicts between the old and new patterns. A flash is so fast such conflicts don't have time to develop."

"Yes?" Yamashiro demanded. "So?"

"Well, sir, ordinarily, before receiving a wetware flash, the client is prepared by a medical technician, with medication and hypnosis. If this preparation is not made, the client can have very noticeable adverse reactions—migraine headaches, nausea, minor memory loss—as the brain readjusts to its new patterns. These can disguise the immediate changes to some extent. More importantly, without the preparation, the skills tend to become available a piece at a time, rather than all at once; compulsions and abilities may remain in the brain as untriggered potential for extended periods before they're accessed. Without the preparation, it may take months or even years before the skills become fully available, and some are lost entirely. We're very fortunate there was no significant delay in Polnovick's case."

Yamashiro stared at her. "Do you mean to tell me that you consider *it* lucky that this man went berserk in only a day, instead of years?"

"Yes, sir," the woman said, holding her head up. "This client was unusually fit physically, and apparently had very few old habit patterns that conflicted with the Godzilla File. He seems to have achieved fairly complete access to the imprinted file within twenty-four hours. Because of this very brief delay, we've been able to piece together what happened. Much of the pertinent information came from short-term data storage, which is kept only twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Now that we have these clues, we'll be able to go over the long-term records and see if this has happened before."

The chairman nodded. "All right, I see—we were lucky. So what's being done to see that this doesn't happen again?"

"Our technicians are completely overhauling the whole system."

Yamashiro frowned. "That's not good enough. The system messed up once, it can mess up again. I want those files, the dangerous ones, taken out of the system and locked away in the company vault."

There was a long silence around the table. The Assistant Executive Director, who had not previously spoken, rolled a pencil between her palms. "That might not be possible," she said.

"Why not?"

"These files are, technically, not the property of NeuroTalents LLC. They belong jointly to our parent corporation and that client Ms. Valakos mentioned, and we have to be ready to provide immediate access to these files at any time. It's in our contract."

"What contract?"

"Sir, our contract with that client."

Yamashiro considered that unhappily for a moment, then yielded. "All right, then. Find some way to make sure there aren't any more accidents. And find everyone that's been imprinted with one of those files. And don't let anyone else find out about any of this!"

Yamashiro rose gracefully and left the room, leaving his subordinates to handle the details themselves.

Chapter Four

Despite being active until well after midnight Casper found himself wide awake at six o'clock the next morning.

This was not customary for him; usually he needed half an hour before his eyes would stay open in the morning. He lay on his back and stared at the ceiling for ten minutes, simply enjoying the sensation.

He had too much energy to contain it any longer than that; he got up and dressed. Cecelia stirred slightly beside him, then settled back to sleep.

Casper slipped out of the apartment, went down to the lobby, and stopped at the security desk. The guard looked up from his magazine. "May I help you?" he asked.

"Hi," Casper said, "I'm staying in Four-Ten. I want to go for a walk. Will I have any trouble getting back

in without waking the people I'm staying with?"

"I'll fix you right up with a temporary pass, sir," the guard smiled. "Just put your thumbprint here. This pass will get you in, then the lock will destroy it."

"Thanks." Casper took the laminated card and ambled out of the building.

The morning was cool and crisp, and he trotted down the sidewalk. He gradually increased his speed until he was loping comfortably along, despite his uncomfortable shoes. He made it around the block four and a half times before he had to stop. Breathing heavily, he started back towards the apartment building.

A police cruiser sidled up to the curb next to him. "Need any help, mister?" the officer riding shotgun asked.

Ordinarily, any contact with the cops terrified Casper—and just about any other sensible citizen of his class. This morning, though, he couldn't bring himself to worry about it. He felt good.

He didn't know why, but he felt good.

"Oh, hi," Casper said. He leaned casually against the side of the cruiser, catching his breath. "I was just out for my morning run."

"You're not exactly dressed for it."

"Yeah, I know, I spent the night with a friend and I didn't have my sweats."

"Your friend lives around here?" the officer asked.

Casper nodded and handed him the temporary pass from the apartment building. "Just the other side of this block," he said.

The officer turned to his partner for a moment, then handed the pass back.

"You want a ride?" the officer asked.

Casper knew that his normal reaction would be to recoil in fear, that *henever* wanted to be in the back of a police vehicle, that too many people never came back from such rides—but today it seemed more important to be friendly, to observe the cops closely. And acting nervous might make them suspicious, something he'd known since he was a kid but never tried to use; today, for the first time in his life, he was *able* to not act nervous if he chose.

"Sure, that'd be great." He gave them a broad, disarming smile.

The rear door of the cruiser popped open, and Casper tumbled in. The cruiser quickly rounded the block and halted in front of Cecelia's apartment building. Casper thanked the officers as he clambered out, then ran up to the door. He noticed that the cruiser remained out front until he was inside.

Careful, those cops, he thought to himself. Good procedure. They hadn't said a word while he was in the vehicle, either. Disrupting the city force could be difficult.

Maybe they could be won over, though.

He stopped and shook his head. Won over to *what* ?

He didn't know. He went on up.

Mirim was in the kitchen making breakfast, wearing a red and white striped robe, when he let himself back into the apartment. She looked up from her batter and smiled.

"Where have *you* been?" she asked.

"I had a lot of energy this morning," Casper said, smiling back. "I was out running around the block. What're you making?"

"Waffles. Want some?"

"Sure." Casper leaned on the opposite side of the kitchen's central island from where Mirim was working. "Celia still asleep?"

"As far as I know, yeah."

Casper nodded. "Where's Leonid?"

"He went home early last night."

"Oh. I saw the bedroom door closed and I ... oh, never mind."

"I won't. What's the matter, jealous?"

"Of him? No. I just don't see what you see in him."

Mirim stirred vigorously for a moment, then looked up again. "I'm not real sure any more, either."

Casper met her eyes for a moment, then dropped his gaze to the countertop. "So when's breakfast going to be ready?"

"Have a little patience, huh? I just started. Go take a shower or something."

"I'll take the shower. I don't think I'm up to 'or something' right now."

Mirim threatened him with the spoon, and he fled, laughing, to the bathroom.

The day passed without incident. Casper took Cecelia to the art museum; they left Mirim reading at home.

The news that night reported that the investigation of the "Polnovick Incident" was progressing well, and that the clean-up of the wreckage was under way. All the buildings in the affected area had been inspected, and all but the Takeuchi Building had been declared safe; the evacuation was over. That meant that Casper, Cecelia, and Mirim could return to work on Monday.

The streets were still a mess Monday morning, with masonry and broken glass strewn across the sidewalks and into the street, and the police were allowing only pedestrians into the area. Motorists

stopped at the barrier honked and shouted constantly, but Casper had problems of his own which kept him from having any sympathy for those people.

Between the time he had taken off for the imprinting and the ensuing recovery, and the lost time due to the evacuation, Casper's workload had become nearly unmanageable. What's more, the new software had been installed, despite the disruptions, and Casper found it virtually incomprehensible. He felt a growing certainty that the imprinting had not worked, which meant he would probably be fired. He had gone through all that agony for nothing.

He stared at the screen on his desk for several minutes before he even tried to sort things out. He was tempted to just forget about the whole thing and spend his day staring out the window, but even if he could get away with it the windows were covered with black plastic sheeting, and probably would be for quite some time. That rather limited the view.

Finally, he began to sort through the job list, ordering it according to priority and skill requirements.

When he had everything in order, and it was time for him to begin work on a file, Casper quickly discovered that he was simply unable to perform his job. As he looked at the information available to him his mind seemed to be filled with half-remembered tricks and shortcuts, but all were for use with the old software, and none of them applied to the new package.

By mid-afternoon he had not completed a single trace job; he could not get the software to do *anything* he wanted it to. When he got what he thought must have been his thousandth error message he gave up and blanked the screen.

The imprinting had not worked.

He leaned back in his chair, trying to think what he could do. While he thought he picked up a handful of thumbtacks, and without paying any attention to what he was doing he tossed the tacks at his bulletin board, one by one. When he finished, a dozen tacks were all stuck into the surface of the bulletin board, forming a nearly straight line, each tack about the same distance from the next. None had taken more than a single casual toss.

It occurred to him in a vague sort of way that that was good throwing for someone as uncoordinated as himself.

He got through the rest of the day somehow without anyone else realizing anything was wrong, and somehow, despite the imminent and inevitable disaster he faced, he didn't feel particularly depressed. Unemployment loomed ahead, probably followed by bankruptcy, confiscation, and a life on the streets, begging for hand-outs or eating in soup kitchens, maybe minus an organ or two—but somehow it didn't bother him.

In fact, he felt full of energy. A nervous, uncomfortable sort of energy.

He needed more exercise, he decided.

After work he found himself walking the city streets for no particular reason, studying the people passing by, noting how they reacted to each other, to him, to the occasional cop car that prowled by.

He knew he should be worrying about his job, worrying what he could do about the faulty imprinting, but somehow it didn't seem as important as studying lines of sight through Rittenhouse Square.

Finally, around ten, he headed home—a bit uneasily. Travel at this time of night was not always a pleasant experience, even in the best neighborhoods.

Casper did not live in one of the best neighborhoods.

The worst part, he thought, was the wait at the station, staring at the spray-painted concrete walls layered with gray dirt. He waited on the platform, fidgeting nervously, looking in every direction constantly, until finally his train roared into the station and he allowed himself to relax.

Unfortunately, four street toughs, resplendent in chip-studded silver jumpsuits, stepped off the train right in front of him. Casper stepped back to let them pass, but they formed a semi-circle blocking his path.

Purple glowtubes on their suits spelled out **SOULSUCKERS** ; Casper had heard of that gang. What he had heard was not encouraging.

"Hey, man, gimme fifty," said the one just right of center, who might have been a pale black or a tanned white; he was tall, with black hair shaved bald at the top and worn long at the sides, and a laddered scar drawn on his cheek in purple glowpaint. Electrodes protruded from his scalp, but Casper was unsure whether they were connected to anything or were just for show.

"Sorry, friend," Casper said nervously. "I haven't got it."

"I'll take twenty," the youth said, bantering, trying to sound reasonable.

"I haven't got anything to give you," Casper insisted.

"I think he's lying," one of the other gang members said belligerently. "What's he got on him? Don'cha think we oughta search him?"

"Yeah," the spokesman agreed. He reached towards Casper while his three companions moved to more completely surround their intended victim.

Beech wasn't sure what to do, and afterwards he wasn't sure what he had done. He brushed his hand against the gang leader's arm, with an impact that seemed much harder than it should have been; the gang leader stumbled to the side, knocking into the shortest member of the gang, and they both fell to the platform. Casper ran past them and jumped aboard the train.

The doors started to close, but one of the toughs grabbed them and held them open. While the gang boarded the train Casper ran into the next car, slammed shut the door between cars, and braced himself against the door to keep it closed.

As he pressed up against the warm metal he realized for the first time that back on the platform he had somehow knocked down two of the hoods. He marvelled. He had absolutely no idea how he had done it.

The train started to move again. Above his head, Beech heard the door begin to fracture as the gang pounded on it.

There were several stops before Casper's destination, but station after station was empty. Fortunately, it didn't occur to any of his pursuers to get off the train and go around to the next car.

When the train finally reached Casper's stop, he abandoned the car and raced for the exit.

He could hear footsteps behind him as he pounded up the stairs. Emerging at street level, he turned in the direction of his apartment building and skidded to a halt. A police officer, his body armor and visored helmet gleaming dully in the lamplight, gazed curiously at him.

Beech had difficulty believing his eyes. A cop? In his neighborhood? But there he was, as big as life.
"Am I glad to see you!" Casper gasped.

"Is there something wrong?" the officer asked suspiciously.

Casper gestured towards the entrance to the subway as the first of the gang members emerged. Seeing the officer, the gang turned and raced back the way they had come, their metal-heeled boots clattering on the steps.

"I'll take care of this." Grinning wolfishly, the officer reached for his holstered shotgun as he started down into the subway.

Casper watched him go. He felt no inclination to follow, or to see what was going to happen—he wasn't interested in revenge, and his curiosity wasn't that morbid.

Or that reckless.

Party hacks on TV sometimes still talked about criminals being coddled, but Casper had never seen any evidence of it, not since the Crisis and the emergency decrees. Criminals weren't paroled when the jails got crowded any more; they were "shot while trying to escape."

Sometimes the cops didn't bother with the intermediate steps of arrest, trial, and jail.

And sometimes witnesses got "caught in the crossfire" if they saw the wrong thing. Casper had no desire to see anything that might be wrong. Feeling shaky, he walked the rest of the way home without incident.

It was after eleven, but he was more keyed up than ever. After a few moments of uneasy pacing around his apartment he decided he needed still more exercise. Just running or walking wasn't enough, and he didn't want to risk damaging himself, so he sat down at his computer and pulled up a webfeed, entered a few search terms, and found a catalog of exercise videos. He chose a few almost at random, and downloaded them.

As soon as the first download was complete he shifted the others to the background, and began playing this new acquisition in fullscreen video.

The title was *Basic Stretching*, and he followed the lead of the girl on the screen carefully.

It was fortunate that he started with this file, because the next three, *Aerobics for a Better Life*, *Modern Dance at Home*, and *Calisthenics*, had no warmup period, and he probably would have injured himself. As it was, none of the programs did more than tire him out.

He ran through all of them without stopping.

The last file, however, was different. *Self Defense for the Common Man* struck a chord within him.

Watching the first demonstration he felt an electric excitement. He followed along, clumsily at first, but with rapid improvement. It was as though this was what his body was waiting for, and when he had finished, he felt relaxed and at ease for the first time since the imprinting.

He ran the file through again, and burned all five to disk.

It was just after four a.m. when he finally stumbled into bed and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter Five

Once again the NeuroTalents executive boardroom was the scene of a late night meeting. This time, however, Mr. Yamashiro, looking somewhat subdued, sat halfway down the table. At the head of the table, in Yamashiro's usual seat, was an angry man in a black suit and old-fashioned red tie.

"I can't believe you people screwed up like this," the man in black said. "Those files are classified!"

"*Your* people ordered us to keep them available," Yamashiro protested weakly.

"But not in with the everyday business!" the man in black said. "You could have kept the disks to one side, ready to plug in when we told you to!" He glared for a moment, then said, "Oh, hell, it doesn't matter any more—the damage is done. I hope you realize that your carelessness may have endangered not only NeuroTalents, but the very existence of the entire parent corporation. This could get us kicked out of the Consortium!"

"I think you're making too much of this," Yamashiro replied uneasily.

"I don't doubt you think that," the man in black said, his tone flat and deadly. "That opinion is just another example of your incompetence." He frowned. "I'm afraid that extraordinary measures are called for, Yamashiro—there is simply no longer a place for you in this organization."

"What?" Yamashiro stared in disbelief.

"Your services are no longer needed, Yamashiro." The man in black spoke with quiet intensity, more effective than shouting would have been. "You're fired."

Yamashiro pushed his chair back and rose unsteadily. "You can't do this to me," he said. "I have friends, contacts—I'm a major stockholder! I'll make trouble for you. I'm not someone you can treat this way."

"I'm afraid you are. You're not active in the Party, and this is a political case." The man in black touched a button on his wrist unit, and two silent men in impeccably tailored suits entered; they had obviously been just outside the door, awaiting their signal. They walked silently down the length of the table and stood behind Yamashiro.

"These gentlemen will be escorting you out of the building," the man in black explained calmly. "You will not be allowed back. Your personal effects will be sent to you by courier."

Yamashiro tried to protest as the two silent men seized his arms and led him from the room, but the others all sat utterly motionless, totally ignoring him, until the sound had been cut off by the closing of the heavy conference room doors.

The man in black looked at the woman who had been seated next to Yamashiro. "Ms. Kendall, henceforth you will carry out the duties of the executive director. We can regularize the title later, if you like. Do you understand?"

The woman nodded.

"Good," the man in black said. "Now let's see if we can find a solution to this problem." He turned to the man seated to his left. "I appreciate your coming up, sir, especially considering the short notice you were given."

The man he addressed nodded. "My pleasure, Mr. Chairman."

"Ladies and gentlemen," the chairman explained to the others, "this is a representative of the Homeland Security Department, knowledgeable in covert activities and a coordinator of the programs NeuroTalents has undertaken in that area. You may refer to him as Mr. Smith."

Smith nodded. "Thank you," he said. "Of course you all realize that, officially, the Covert Operations Group has no involvement in this affair, any more than any other branch of the federal government or any part of the Democratic-Republican Party does. Officially, those optimization files do not exist, NeuroTalents has no connection with Covert or any other part of Homeland Security, and I am not here. That's official, and you'd all do well to remember it. However, on a practical level, we must keep on top of this matter."

The chairman nodded his agreement. He looked at NeuroTalents' new executive director. "A team of ours has been working with your people. You have a report from them?"

"Ah, yes." The woman shuffled nervously through pages on her PDA.

The others eyed her expectantly. She cleared her throat and began, "First, the technical failure. It appears that when the system was installed, no one bothered to arrange a maintenance schedule; instead it was left up to the users to judge when to check over the system. It appears..." She hesitated, then continued, "It appears that the users, the technicians running the system, were unaware that *any* maintenance was called for, *ever*. The system has been running non-stop, uninspected and unmaintained, for more than six years. It's a miracle we haven't had a breakdown before this—or at least, as far as we know we haven't. Steps are being taken to ensure that regular maintenance will be done from now on."

She paused, then went on. "The next question is the classified files themselves. The current software uses a single master program to access everything in the system. Until this can be altered, we have removed the files in question from the system. New software is being written that will handle this all in better fashion, requiring human intervention at certain critical points in any non-standard procedure."

The new executive director took a sip of water as her display brought up the next page of her report. "The next item is the identification of those individuals who were affected by this operation. We were very fortunate; as far as we can determine from the records, only two people were inadvertently optimized—other clients who were imprinted while the faulty instructions were in place were not found to be suitable subjects for any of the available optimization packages, and the program reset the missing variable accordingly, which allowed it to proceed properly." She frowned. "The second of the two was Lester Polnovick, who received the Godzilla File. The other, imprinted the day before, was a man named Casper Beech; my people have prepared a report on his optimization." She handed a document to Smith.

He glanced at it, and his veneer of absolute calm cracked. "Damn!" he muttered.

"What's wrong?" the Chairman asked.

Smith folded the document and tucked it into an inside pocket. "We've got a problem here," he said. "A *real* problem. This man was imprinted with the Spartacus File."

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with all the material involved; is that bad?"

"*Very*bad. It's probably the most dangerous of all the files in the series."

Smith looked at the Chairman as if expecting instant comprehension; irritated, the Chairman glared back and said, "Suppose you explain that a little."

Smith glanced at the others. "I don't want to go into explicit detail here," he said.

"Then don't. But give us *some* idea."

"You're familiar with the historical Spartacus?" Smith asked.

"You mean the old movie?" the Chairman asked, puzzled. "I think I saw it on video once."

"No, sir," Smith said, "I mean the slave who rebelled against ancient Rome and repeatedly defeated vastly superior armies sent against him. He was a superb gladiator, rabble-rouser, and general." He looked about, but saw only blank faces. He continued, "Well, the Spartacus File is modeled on what we assume his abilities were, and as I said, it's probably the most dangerous optimization file we've ever devised. It was created exclusively for use in nations not friendly to the United States. In a person with the capability of accepting it—and such people are extremely rare; we've never yet found a healthy one ourselves—it creates an individual of immense charisma and superb military ability, across the whole range from strategic planning down to personal combat, and with a compulsion to resist authority at all levels and to organize against that authority. The theory was that by programming a single individual in an unfriendly state with the Spartacus File, we could cheaply and easily cause a popular revolt that, even if it failed, would occupy that state to the exclusion of all other activities. Most of the other files are non-compulsive, or compulsive only under certain circumstances—that is, they give the recipient high ability, but they don't *require* that those abilities be used. Someone optimized as an assassin, for example, won't kill people at random—he'll wait until he's assigned a target. The Godzilla File is compulsive, but it's also unsubtle, very much out in the open—it's intended more as a nuisance than anything else, and without support the optimized individual is easy to dispose of, just as the city police disposed of Polnovick. The Spartacus File, however, is both subtle and compulsive—the recipient is programmed to hide, to work from concealment, and is irresistibly compelled to overthrow whatever government he finds himself subject to. And now an *American* has been programmed with the file, right here in Philadelphia."

He looked at the Chairman expectantly.

The Chairman looked doubtful. "Philadelphia isn't some African backwater or ex-Soviet hellhole, you know," he said.

"Yes, I know," Smith answered, annoyed, "but there are always malcontents and trouble-makers who can be stirred up—street people, romantic youngsters, intellectuals, people who wouldn't be satisfied with *any* government. A man imprinted with the Spartacus File would be able to stir up their discontent very efficiently; even if he fell short of fomenting actual revolution he would almost inevitably trigger

rioting, renewed terrorism, and a great deal of other unpleasantness. As I said, it's a time bomb."

"Well, then," the Chairman said reasonably, "we shall have to defuse this bomb."

"It's not going to be easy," Smith continued. "We must be careful. This man is now programmed to identify government agents, and to react negatively and often violently to them; he's conditioned to resist *all* authority and stir up as much trouble as possible. Remember, everything we knew we put into this; we didn't *want* our Spartacus to be stopped. This was our top-of-the-line file."

"He's still only one man, and I understand that the optimization was done without the proper preparation, so it may not even be complete; surely he can be stopped."

"Oh, I think he can be stopped, but it won't be all that easy. Remember how difficult it's been to bring down certain terrorists." Smith considered. "Whatever we do to him, we can't make any obvious moves to apprehend him—he'd spot it, not to mention that if he's already started gathering followers we don't need to make any martyrs. And we've got to be sure that whatever we do works the first time. A failed attempt will alert him, and may well trigger more of the Spartacus File—exactly what we want to prevent.

And we have to keep it all quiet—if the File's working the way I was told it would, the man has the capability of winning over mobs, or recruiting individual converts to his cause. As long as he's alive he'll be able to turn anything we do to him, however benevolent, into anti-government propaganda—if we give him the chance by drawing attention to him."

"I'm sure something can be arranged." The Chairman shrugged.

"Sir," NeuroTalents' new executive director asked, "are you saying this man Beech is to be killed?"

"No, I'm sure that won't be necessary," the Chairman replied. "We can have him taken into custody and neutralized by less drastic means, I'm certain."

"I'm not," Smith replied. "Optimization can't be reversed, you know—nothing short of a lobotomy will get the Spartacus File out of his brain now. I think we probably will need to kill him, just as Ms. Kendall says. And the sooner the better, before he can turn it into a martyrdom."

The Chairman tapped a pencil on the table, then looked up at Smith. "NeuroTalents doesn't kill people," he said.

"Covert does. With the proper authorization."

"What sort of authorization are you talking about?"

"Executive order. We can get one tonight, if we have to."

The Chairman glowered. "Let me see that report," he said, holding out a hand.

Smith hesitated, and then replied, "No, I think we at Covert will handle this ourselves from now on." He patted the pocket that held the report. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Chairman, but NeuroTalents is no longer concerned."

The radio clicked on on schedule the next morning; Casper lay, still half-asleep, as the regular list of catastrophes was recited. The Russian civil war was still raging, more complicated than ever, and the Fringers were still causing trouble out-system, claiming they could use non-Consortium contractors and install non-Party officials.

Then he snapped awake.

"Four youths were killed late last night in the tunnels near the City Hall subway station," the announcer said. "The youths, whose names have not been released by the police, were walking along the tracks between City Hall and Race/Vine Station when they were struck and killed by a train as it returned to the yard for the night. A corporate spokesperson for the Philadelphia police said..."

Casper rolled away from the radio and blocked out the sound with a pillow over his ears. The last thing he needed was a reminder of the previous night's events. He remembered them all too clearly.

Except, that is, exactly how he had knocked those two hoods down. His body had acted on its own, and he had somehow caught two alert young men off-guard.

He didn't understand that at all. He had never done anything like that before. And it had happened *before* he watched the self-defense video. Watching the file hadn't been like learning something new, it had been like re-learning a beloved childhood ritual.

That made no sense at all. He hadn't known *anything* about self-defense as a child. His parents hadn't even let him watch the Power Rangers or other popular shows.

When the radio's drone of speech was replaced by music Casper uncovered his head. Hoping this start was not an omen of how the rest of the day would go, he rolled out of bed and prepared for work—not that he thought he would be able to accomplish anything on three hours sleep and with the imprint not working.

The subway station showed no evidence of what had occurred the night before. Casper glanced around, looking for signs, and saw none. Later, when the train passed through the City Hall station, he didn't even think to look out the window.

He left the subway and climbed the stairs to the street.

At the top he stopped, blinked in the sunlight, and without knowing why he quickly scanned the neighborhood, noting rooftops, obstructions, and who was where. The morning commuters were marching to their duties; a leftover drunk from the night before lay against a building.

He took a step back down, unsure just why. Something had sparkled somewhere, but he had no idea why that should mean anything.

Still, it bothered him. He turned and trotted back down the steps, and went out the opposite entrance. Then he detoured around the block.

Just for variety, he tried to tell himself. He was taking a new, longer route just to be different.

In the elevator he found himself thinking that he would have to buy a gun, or at any rate acquire one somehow. It would be expected, and he might need it.

He blinked. Expected by *whom* ? Needed for what?

At his desk he looked at the job list and first despaired, then grew defiant.

What kind of a man did they think he was, giving him all this shitwork to do?

Mirim stepped up behind him and said, "Boo!"

He didn't react immediately; then his lips pulled back and his teeth showed in an expression that was only technically a smile. He turned.

"Do you respect yourself?" he demanded.

"What?"

"I said, do you respect yourself?"

Mirim blinked, puzzled. "Of course I do," she said. "Is this a gag, Casper?"

"A joke?" He waved an arm at his computer screen. "No, Mirim," he said, "*that's* a joke! Expecting a human being to waste his time on this nonsense! It's fit only for lawyers and computers, not a so-called free man!"

She laughed. "You got *that* right!" she said. "But hey, it's a steady paycheck, right?"

"Not any more!" Casper cleared the screen. "Not for me, it isn't!"

Her smile vanished. "Cas, do you feel all right?"

"I feel fine, Mirim. I feel better than I have in years. I'm setting myself free, and it feels good!"

"Cas..."

"You think I'm being a reckless fool, don't you?"

"If you're serious, yeah, I do, Cas. Are you..."

Casper laughed, not his usual high-pitched, nervous giggle, but a solid, powerful laugh. "Mirim," he said, "we were meant for better things than this. We've had our birthright stolen, and I mean to..."

"What's this, Beech?" a new voice demanded. Quinones appeared at Mirim's shoulder.

Casper looked at his boss's broad, hostile face, and the feeling of power and certainty suddenly faded. There were times to retreat and regroup, and this was one of them.

"Nothing, sir," he said.

"Then let's get back to work, shall we? You and Ms. Anspack both. I must say, that imprinting you took doesn't seem to have kicked in yet, from what you've done so far."

"I'd have to agree, sir," Casper said boldly. "I think NeuroTalents screwed it up somehow, and you should have someone look into the matter."

Startled, Quinones stared at Beech. The man was a doormat, and could always be relied on to accept blame for anything—since when would he suggest that somebody else might be at fault?

Since when would he suggest *anything* ?

"I think you're right," Quinones said slowly. "I think I might just give NeuroTalents a call myself."

"You do that, sir," Casper said. "Thank you."

"Right. Well, Beech, you'd better get some work done, imprinted or not."

Quinones turned and marched away. Mirim watched him go, throwing quick little glances at Casper and trying to suppress the urge to giggle. The whole exchange had been bizarre. *Casper* talking to Quinones that way? Sweet little Casper?

"Casper, what's happened to you?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I really do think the imprint must have been screwed up somehow. I can't do a damn thing with this new software, but I'm getting all these other weird reactions. And you know, Mirim, they might be just what I've needed to jar me out of my rut."

Mirim nodded, eyeing Casper. For the past year, maybe longer, she had been watching Casper, joking with him, watching how Quinones and the other people around the office treated him, watching how he treated Cecelia and how Celia bossed him around, and thinking what a fine man he could be if he had a little more backbone, if he weren't afraid to step out of his timid little groove—but that had been daydreaming. If it was really going to happen, she wasn't sure how to handle it. "I think I better get back to work myself," she said, and she turned away.

From the door of his office Quinones watched her emerge from behind Casper's partition and go back toward her own desk; he was just stepping inside when his phone rang.

Annoyed, he glanced back out the door; yes, his secretary was working the phone. Why hadn't she just called to him? He picked up the receiver and said, "Yes?"

"Arturo Quinones?" a cold voice asked.

"This is Quinones."

"Are you private?"

Puzzled, Quinones leaned over and closed the door. "Yes," he said.

"You have a man named Casper Beech there? Recently received an imprint at NeuroTalents?"

"He works here, yes. Who is this?"

"My name is Smith," the voice replied. "I'm with the government. Is Beech there now?"

"Yes, I just spoke to him. What's this about?"

"Don't worry about it. What we want you to do is tell us the minute Beech leaves the office, for any reason. Just call this number, 445-304-0011—did you get that?"

"No," Quinones said, groping for a pen—most people would have used a PDA or keyboard, but Quinones was proud of his old-fashioned insistence on hardcopy. "Hold on a minute." He found a pen, fished an old envelope from the trash, and said, "Ready."

The number was repeated.

"Call that number," Smith told him. "You don't need to wait for an answer, but let it ring at least twice, to make sure Caller ID gets your number. Don't call until Beech leaves. You understand?"

"I understand, but what..."

Smith hung up.

Quinones stared at the phone for a minute, then muttered, "Shit. Crazy feds," and dropped the receiver on the cradle.

He supposed, though, that he had better do what he was told.

He opened the door and tried to peer through or over the maze of partitions, but there was simply no way to see Beech from where he stood. He returned to his desk, sat, and grabbed the phone.

Mirim's cubby was in a corner where she could see the office entry, and if she turned the other way she could see Casper. She was sitting there, marveling at the sight of Casper Beech leaning back with his hands behind his head, not even pretending to work, when her phone beeped for attention.

She snatched up the headset and plugged it into her ear. "Anspack," she said into the mike.

"Mirim, this is Mr. Quinones," she heard. "I've got something I'd like you to do for me."

"Yes, sir?" she replied, puzzled.

"I want you to tell me when Casper Beech leaves the office—even if it's just to use the men's room. Just give me a buzz."

Mirim hesitated. "Uh ... yes, sir," she said at last. She fought down the impulse to ask why; she knew that Quinones didn't take kindly to questions from his subordinates.

"Good. You just call the minute he sets foot out the door, then."

He hung up.

He hadn't even said thank you, Mirim thought, pulling off the headset and glaring at it. He hadn't given any reason.

He was probably mad at Casper about some stupid little infraction that poor Cas didn't even know he'd committed. Maybe he'd heard Cas's stillborn speech about self-respect.

But why would he want to know when Cas was out of the office?

So he could search his cubby, of course. He probably thought Cas was on uppers or something—a man like Quinones would never believe one of his underlings might simply be fed up, he'd insist there was some other factor, something affecting the man's thinking.

Mirim's mouth set in an angry frown.

And somewhere in the back of her mind, a guilty little thought appeared—*was* Casper on something? Drugs or wire?

Even if he was, though, what business was it of Quinones'? Or of hers? She hadn't been hired to spy on her co-workers. Quinones had a lot of nerve, involving her in his nasty little search-and-seizure—if that's what it was.

He hadn't bothered to explain; he had treated her as if she were a slave, or a robot, with no choice but to carry out his every order.

She was no robot.

Casper's question came back to her. *Did* she respect herself?

Yes, she did. She stood up and marched back to Casper's cubby.

Casper looked up at her approach, and quickly blanked his screen. He had given up on doing the job he was supposed to be doing, tracing through the mazes of interlocking directorates, shared subsidiaries, and stock options to determine just who owned what, so that companies would not unwittingly sue their own managers or stockholders in the ongoing torrent of liability litigation; instead, he had been doing some very simple, basic searches, seeing just what in the company network he could access easily and what was relatively secure.

Mirim probably wouldn't have noticed, but why risk it?

"Come to torment me further, wench?" he asked, smiling.

"Sort of," Mirim said, not smiling back. "I wanted to warn you."

His own expression collapsed into mild wariness. "Warn me of what?" he asked.

Mirim hesitated. It wasn't too late to throw it off with a joke, to keep from offending Quinones, to avoid risking her job.

Then she got a look at Casper's face—thin, long-jawed, pale, framed by brown hair in need of trimming, and watching her intently from deep-set brown eyes.

He didn't look drugged or wired. He looked sincere, attentive, and almost ... almost noble.

"I think Quinones is on your case," she said. "He wanted me to tell him the minute you stepped out of the office."

Casper blinked once, slowly, coolly. Then he turned and looked over his cubby.

There was no way of knowing just what Quinones actually wanted. Perhaps he intended to check Casper's files—though he should be able to access those from his own computer. Perhaps he wanted to set up some little surprise.

Or ... ?

"I think he's decided you're a vicious drug fiend, and he wants to ferret out your stash before you can pollute the rest of us," Mirim said, perching herself on the edge of Casper's desk.

Or that, Casper thought.

There weren't any drugs to find, of course, nor anything else suspicious; Casper's life was dreary and utterly innocent of any wrongdoing. Even his debts weren't his own, but inherited.

However, sooner or later, Quinones would discover that Casper wasn't working. Maybe he already *had* discovered it, and wanted to see if he could discover the reason. Quinones wouldn't believe that the imprinting had screwed up, and that instead of adding to Casper's liability-tracing skills it had apparently wiped them out.

Even if he did believe, it wouldn't do any good. Casper had signed that stupid waiver at NeuroTalents, and Data Tracers, Inc. wasn't about to waste their time and money fighting NeuroTalents on his behalf. A second imprint might not do any better; Casper's brain might have undetectable quirks. Much easier to just throw him out and find a replacement whose brain was still virgin and imprintable.

He was going to lose his job.

Well, screw that. He didn't want the lousy job anyway. He was sick of kowtowing to that fat fool, Quinones. A person had to stand on his own two feet.

Better to go out now, rather than waiting to be fired.

And there was no reason to go quietly.

While he ran through all this he had been gazing mildly up at Mirim. Now he smiled broadly, reached over and took her hand and squeezed it gently. He did this without knowing why; it went against all the habits he had always had, but it felt right. He had never touched Mirim before, and he felt her start slightly at the first contact.

"Thanks for telling me, Mirim," he said. Then, to Mirim's utter astonishment, he stood, climbed up onto his desk, and shouted, "Listen, everybody!"

The normal hum of the office faded slightly as faces turned toward him. Most of the workers couldn't see him, because of the partitions, but they could hear him.

He looked across the partitions and saw that the door to Quinones' office was closed. *He* wouldn't hear anything.

"Some of you know me, some of you don't," Casper called out. "I'm Casper Beech; I've worked here for nine years now. Nine lousy, boring, painful years!"

A few voices tittered nervously.

"Well, that nine years is ending; I'm about to leave here for good. You know why?" He paused dramatically. No one replied; the decrease in office noise deepened as a genuine hush fell.

"Because last week they sent me for a neural imprint—they were too cheap to train me properly, or buy software a normal human being can run. They sent me for a neural imprint—they *ordered* me, a free-born American, to take it. They sent me to have my brain rewired. They sent me to be force-fed skills I'll never be able to use anywhere else. They sent me to be programmed like one of their infernal machines!"

Casper could *feel* the people listening. He heard a chair scrape as someone stood up for a better view.

"Well, I'm *not* a machine to be programmed. I've been living like one for nine years, but I'm not a machine! I've been taking their orders for nine years, but I'm not a machine! But I didn't rebel—after nine years, I think even *I* thought I was a machine! I did what they wanted, I took the imprint—but my *brain* rebelled! The imprint didn't take. I was sick as a dog for a week, my memory's fouled up, I can't work—but I didn't rebel. I came in here and tried to work anyway, like a good little machine..." He paused again, and then bellowed out, "And they *fired* me! Because *their* imprint screwed up, they fired *me*!"

A murmur of sympathy—probably more feigned than genuine—ran through the room.

It wasn't sympathy Casper wanted, though. It struck him suddenly that he had no idea what he *did* want, or why he was doing any of this, but he knew he had to do it, he knew he had to carry on, he knew what to say next.

"And you know what, folks? I'm glad. Because at least I'm out of here, and the rest of you aren't. But I won't be the last to go—no, I'm just the first! Because do you know what our dear Mr. Quinones told me, when he sent me to have my brain reprogrammed, my mind tampered with? I'll tell you what he told me. It seems software that runs in people is cheaper than software that runs in computers, because we can do our own debugging. It seems that dear old Data Tracers intends to do *alot* of imprinting from now on—I was just the first! And do you know what the failure rate for neural imprinting is? Do you?"

He waited, but nobody replied.

"Neither do I," he announced. "Because I'm damn sure it's not what they've published. Most of you work with data all the time, bend it around to suit management, to suit the customers' whims. You think *any* of the data we get hasn't been tampered with? Ha!"

He waved in dismissal, and his tone changed from anger to false joviality.

"Well, boys and girls, I'm out of here, and glad to be free. I'll leave you all to enjoy your imprints—or if they don't take, I'll see you on the streets, with the other unemployables. Stop by and say hello, and remember—my name's Casper Beech."

Then he jumped down, grabbed Mirim by the hand, and said, "Come on."

"Come where?" she said, startled.

He stopped in mid-stride, turned, and smiled at her. "Wherever you like," he said, "but back to your

desk for a start. You don't want anyone to tell Quinones it was you who warned me, do you?"

The room was buzzing; several people had emerged from their cubbies and were approaching Casper uncertainly.

Mirim hesitated.

Casper abruptly leaned forward and kissed her, taking her head between his hands—and as he did, he whispered, “I need to leave *now*, or it'll ruin my exit.” Then he released her and strode toward the door.

Mirim blinked, then ran after him. She detoured just far enough to grab her purse.

Together, they marched out the door. A crowd gathered in the doorway, watching them go.

When Mirim and Casper had vanished into an elevator, the crowd gradually dispersed. It wasn't until almost five minutes later that somebody thought to tell Quinones that two of his subordinates had just walked off the job.

Chapter Seven

The man dozing on the rooftop heard the buzz; he rolled over and looked at the read-out on his phone.

It was Quinones' number. He didn't know that; he only knew that the number matched the code he had been given. The target was on his way out of the building—or at least, he might be.

The man really hadn't expected anything for hours yet, but that was fine; he was eager to get it over with. He picked up the Remington 700 in one hand, the binoculars in the other.

The damn phone kept buzzing. That wasn't in the plan. He was supposed to get the code number on the read-out, the target was supposed to come out the front door, and then the sniper was supposed to put a bullet through the target's head. Then the cops and paramedics would go to work, and make sure the target was securely dead and that everyone was convinced it was the doing of some unknown crazy or terrorist.

He didn't see the target. He put down the binoculars and took another glance at the holo.

The phone was still buzzing. Annoyed, he reached over and flicked it open, but didn't say anything.

After a few seconds of silence, a worried voice said, “Mr. Smith?”

The sniper grimaced. His name wasn't Smith; nobody involved with the operation was named Smith, so far as he knew, but then, he wasn't supposed to know any names. “What is it?” he whispered. He whispered to keep his voice from being recognized, not because he expected anyone else to hear him.

"I'm sorry, but Beech left early, and I missed it; he's been gone almost ten minutes."

"Damn!" The sniper slammed the phone closed, grabbed the binoculars, and began scanning the neighborhood.

No one fitting his target's description was anywhere within a hundred meters of the door where he had been told the target would appear. The target was supposed to head for the Race/Vine subway station; the sniper scanned quickly in that direction.

And there, descending the steps, he spotted a man and a woman, walking together and talking.

Nobody had mentioned anything about a woman, and it would be a long, difficult shot; he hesitated, and then it was too late.

"Damn!" he said again, as he reached for the phone.

The contact man, whom the sniper did not know by the name Smith, took the news calmly.

"You didn't fire?" he asked, after he'd heard the sniper's report.

"No."

"Good. Then he still doesn't know that anyone's taking an interest in him. Pack it in, cover your tracks, and report in—full pay, and half the usual bonus if your story checks."

Smith hung up the phone, thought for a moment, and then called Quinones to ask what had happened, and who the woman with Beech was.

"Where are we going?" Mirim asked, as they stood on the empty subway platform.

"Um ... well, I thought I'd go back to my apartment, I guess," Casper replied uncertainly. He was scanning the station, not looking at her.

"You guess?"

"Well, I don't know—is there somewhere you'd rather I went?"

Mirim stared at him. A few minutes ago Casper had been a commanding, self-confident orator; now he was a wimp who couldn't even look her in the eye. "You don't know?"

"No. Hey, I just lost my job, I'm a little thrown, you know? Where *else* should I go?" He shook his head. "And my mind's been playing tricks on me."

"What kind of tricks?" Mirim asked, puzzled.

"Like that speech I gave. I mean, what was I doing standing on my desk? That was crazy!"

Mirim stared at him.

"I thought you were great," she said.

"But it's *crazy*," he said. "It's not me. It cost me my job."

"I thought you were going to lose your job anyway," Mirim said. "You *said* you were."

"Well, yeah, I was," Casper admitted, a bit puzzled. "Maybe, anyway. No one had actually *said* I was

fired yet, but I wasn't doing my work."

"So you were going to be fired."

"I think so."

"So what harm does it do to tell them what you think?" Mirim challenged him.

"None, I guess," Casper admitted. "Unless they blacklist me and keep me from getting another job."

"You think you have a chance of ever getting another job in the same field?" Mirim asked.

Casper thought for a moment, then said, "No. Not really."

"So what harm did it do?"

Casper had no answer for that. He was busy studying the pillars and tracks.

"What are you *looking* at?" Mirim asked, puzzled.

"Oh," Casper said, "Well, see there, I was checking whether you could set up a crossfire over the end of the tunnel, but I don't think the niche in the far wall is deep enough..."

"A crossfire?" Mirim stared at him. "Casper, what are you talking about?"

He turned and stared back at her with a haunted expression. "I don't *know*, Mirim," he said. "I don't have any idea, and it scares the heck out of me."

Mirim hesitated, about to say something, but just then they heard the screeching of steel wheels as the train neared the station, and she decided it could wait. For awhile there she had thought that Casper was at last coming out of his shell, but now he seemed to be retreating again, and she didn't want to force anything, not yet. Something strange was happening to him, presumably brought on by that stupid imprint.

She wondered if he would be willing to see a doctor.

She wondered if he could *afford* to see a doctor.

There was no point in berating Quinones; the important part was where Beech was now. Smith didn't need to think very hard about that; the obvious place for Beech to go was home.

That he had the Anspack woman along didn't change that; he might take her home with him, he might drop her off at her own home first, he might stay at her place awhile, maybe even until morning, but sooner or later, unless he had somehow been alerted, he would go back to his own apartment.

If *he had* been alerted ... well, even with the Spartacus File, Beech was a beginner. The file wouldn't be running properly yet. He would make mistakes. Even if he had somehow realized that people were pursuing him, Beech might go home.

Or he might go to Anspack's place; Smith would want to cover that possibility, too.

He picked up the phone.

Ten minutes later he hung up, reasonably satisfied. There wasn't time to set up anything fancy, or even to get to the apartment before Beech did, so it wouldn't be as neat and tidy as he might have liked. Still, the job would get done.

When they emerged from the subway the sky had clouded over, threatening thunder and rain, and the two of them hurried up the block, against wind that was suddenly cold. Casper almost reached out a sheltering arm for Mirim, then thought better of it.

"Here we are," he said a moment later, pointing.

"You live *here*?" Mirim asked, looking up at the building's gloomy facade.

"Sure," Casper said. He shrugged. "It's not so bad."

Mirim shuddered.

"You didn't have to come," Casper said. That sounded more hostile than he had meant it to, though; to soften it, he added, "But I'm glad you did. Would you like to come up for a bite to eat?"

Mirim shrugged. "Sure, why not?" She followed Casper past an overflowing trash dumpster up to the door.

"Careful on the steps," Casper said. He unlocked the door and ushered Mirim through ahead of him; when they were both inside the dim hallway, behind thick panes of dirty glass, he flicked the light switch a couple of times, but the only illumination came from outside.

"Oh, hell," he said. "The damned lights are out *again*. You'd better take my hand—the stairs can be tricky." He offered his hand, and she took it, neither delicately nor grabbing, but just holding. They started up the steps.

"What do you mean, the lights are out *again*?" Mirim demanded. "Can't you do anything about it?"

"Afraid not. Look out, that one's broken. No, I can't do anything about the lights *or* the stairs, because my lease—everyone's lease who lives here—has a no-liability clause. We can't sue, all we can do is withhold rent, and at what we pay, the owners don't much care."

"Hmph. That's a hell of a thing. Have you got a tenant's union?"

Casper laughed. "Not in *this* building. The people who live here tend to keep to themselves. There's no clause in our leases to keep us from suing each other, after all. We have to pay for our low rent somehow. Here's my floor."

They left the stairway, and Casper unlocked his apartment door while Mirim waited uneasily in the hall.

Once they were inside he carefully located Mirim next to the door, where she would be safer, before locking it.

He tried to keep his own windows reasonably clean, so the apartment wasn't as dim as the halls, but since his only view was of the building next door to the north the place had a certain gloom about it. He flicked the light switch, but nothing happened.

"Power's out for the whole building, same as usual," he said. "Sorry if the place is a little untidy," he added apologetically.

"I can't see well enough to notice."

Casper smiled. "Wait right there, and I'll get some light."

He stumbled into the kitchen, and returned a moment later with a candle in each hand. He set them both on the dinner table, saying over his shoulder, "I've got wine, milk, and diet cola."

"Wine would be nice."

"It's just cheap California white," he warned.

"That's fine."

"I'll be right back. The stereo is over there. It's on the UPS, and the backup battery should be good for a couple of hours if we don't use the computer for anything else, so feel free to put on some music. Your choice."

When Casper returned with the glasses of wine, he found Mirim sitting on the couch, the stereo playing softly. The music was Beethoven. He handed Mirim her glass and sat down beside her.

There was an embarrassed silence as they sipped their wine. Casper put his glass on the end table.

"I'm not entirely sure why you came back here with me," Casper said at last. "I mean, I'm very glad you *did*, and it was good of you to warn me about Quinones, but you didn't have to come with me. You've probably just thrown away your job, and it's not like it's easy to find work these days."

"Well, you'd thrown away *yours*," Mirim pointed out, "and you gave some very convincing reasons why the rest of us should, too."

"I did?" Casper asked. Mirim thought she heard a concatenation of unhappiness, confusion, and pride in those two simple words.

"Yes, you did," she said. "I was impressed."

"But why?"

Mirim started to speak, and Casper cut her off. "I don't mean why were you impressed, I mean why did *Ido* that? It's ... it's not like me."

"Oh, I don't know," Mirim said. "I always thought you had it in you somewhere."

He stared at her, his hand on his wine glass, not moving. "You did?"

Mirim nodded.

"But..."

Casper was interrupted by a knock on the door. Startled, he turned.

"Who could it be at this time of day?" he asked. "I'd be at work, ordinarily."

"Maybe whoever it is tried there and they told him you'd gone home," Mirim suggested.

"But who..." Casper got to his feet, puzzled. Then he looked at Mirim, understanding dawning. "A process server," he said. "Who else could it be?"

"Data Tracers couldn't have one here *that* fast," Mirim objected.

The knock sounded again.

"You're right," Casper said. "I don't know *who* it is." He stepped toward the door, then froze.

Part of him, the part he thought of as himself, the normal old Casper Beech, wanted to go ahead and open the door, put an end to the mystery, get it over with—but something else, something unfamiliar, something strange, held him back.

He rationalized; this was not a good neighborhood, and he wouldn't ordinarily be home now. It might be a burglar looking for vacant apartments.

It was probably a salesman or a Jehovah's Witness or something, but just in case ... ?

"Who's there?" he called, and without knowing why, or even that he was doing it, Casper stepped to one side, behind the door, out of the line of fire.

And the door burst in, the doorframe shattering as the latch and lock were kicked in; splinters flew, and then the stuttering roar of automatic gunfire began—only to be cut off short as Casper kicked the door back, hard.

Mirim yelled and dove for cover under the coffee table.

The gun roared again. Bullets tore through the thin wood of the door, stitching toward Casper—but Casper had already dropped below them, and as the window shattered noisily, as plaster puffed from the walls, he rolled away from the corner, reaching for a weapon.

The letter opener was too far away, the knives in the kitchen drawer out of the question; he snatched up an eight-inch splinter torn from the broken doorframe, and lay still.

The gunfire stopped; Mirim lay motionless beneath the table, hands clasped protectively over her head. Casper lay on the floor, on his belly, muscles tensed, splinter in his hand.

The ruined door opened, and Casper sprang; his empty fist took the stranger in the belly, and as the man started to double over the splinter rammed through his left eye and into the brain.

He dropped instantly, and Casper fell on top of him, grabbing for the weapon the downed man had held and scanning the corridor.

He didn't have far to look; the second man was close behind, pistol ready. His first shot went high, as Casper dropped below it; the second took his own companion in the back as Casper rolled aside.

He fired no third shot; by then Casper had the first attacker's Uzi and was muttering, "Acquire target and squeeze..."

The pistol-wielder had not bothered to take cover; instead, he took a stream of bullets in the chest as Casper emptied his weapon.

Casper ran, crouched low, into the hall; he slammed one foot onto the second man's neck to make sure he was down to stay, then switched the Uzi to his other hand and snatched up the pistol while he made a quick turn, 360 degrees, checking for further attacks. He pointed the pistol down the stairs, but found he was aiming at empty air.

"Mirim," he called, not looking back, "are you okay?"

"I think so," she said unsteadily.

"Then get out here. Now."

"But there's ... in the doorway..."

"Step over it," Casper commanded. "Move! We have to get out of here *right now!*"

"But..."

"No arguments! Before any more come!"

That did it; Mirim came, and together they hurried down the stairs, not running, Casper told her you can trip if you run, people hear you coming; they moved quickly down the stairs and down the hall, Casper in front with the pistol held ready.

Chapter Eight

"They've almost certainly got a car waiting out front," Casper said, "and if they know what they're doing there's another in back. We go out the side."

"But there isn't..." Mirim began, looking along the narrow ground-floor hallway.

"We make one," Casper said, as he made a sudden whirling movement, bringing his foot around incredibly fast, kicking at an apartment door just below the doorknob.

Wood cracked, and the door burst open.

"How..." Mirim began.

"If they could do it to mine, I can do it to someone else's," Casper explained, as he pulled her through a dingy living room.

The window was nailed shut, but Casper didn't worry about that; he used the butt of his newly-appropriated pistol to shatter the glass, then kicked out the screen. A moment later he had

lowered Mirim to the alley below and jumped down after her.

"That way," he said, pointing to the back of the building. "If they *do* have someone there, chances are he'll be expecting us less, and the alley's less exposed than the street."

Mirim started to run: Casper caught her and held her back. "Not yet," he said. "Just walk. Look as casual as you can. Look for other people; if we can get in a crowd somewhere we'll be safer."

At the back of the building Casper steered Mirim down an alleyway along the back of the next building over; she didn't dare look at the parking lot at all, but he took a seemingly-casual glance.

The dark blue late-model car with the man behind the wheel was blatantly obvious to him. It was also clear that the man was watching the back door, and hadn't even noticed the man and woman slipping away down the side.

"Amateurs," Casper muttered.

Mirim glanced at him, but kept walking without saying a word, and Casper flushed.

After all, *he* was an amateur—at best! A week before he hadn't even been that.

What the hell was going on? How had he learned all this stuff? Those videos didn't account for it—even the self-defense one hadn't covered the moves he had made, it didn't say anything about using guns, and he had acted without conscious thought, as if the result of long training.

And why had he downloaded those files in the first place?

And what was that he'd said about acquiring a target and squeezing?

He looked down at the gun in his hand. It felt *right* there, comfortable and familiar—but he'd never used a handgun in his life. He knew at a glance, though, that this was a Browning Hi-Power, a good, solid weapon, perhaps a bit old-fashioned, but still very effective.

To use it, or any handgun, you focused on the front sight, not the target. You squeezed the trigger, you didn't pull it or jerk it.

That hadn't been in the video. How did he *know* that? It was almost as if he'd been imprinted with the knowledge ... ?

"Damn," he muttered to himself. Mirim glanced at him.

They'd reached the end of the alley; he turned, heading for the subway station.

"Where are we going?" Mirim asked, and Casper could hear a slight tremor in her voice—which was understandable, under the circumstances. A moment earlier he'd have been amazed at his own coolness under fire, but now he'd figured it out. Why hadn't he seen it sooner?

Only one explanation made sense.

"NeuroTalents," he told her.

"What?"

"NeuroTalents," he said. "They screwed up somehow—it's the only explanation."

"Only explanation of *what* ?"

"Of how I could do all that stuff," he said. "Of how I know how to use this." He hefted the pistol, then realized that he shouldn't be showing it in broad daylight, and tucked it into the waistband of his pants, under his shirt.

Mirim still looked puzzled, and he explained, "They must have screwed up my imprinting, when I went in to learn the new software," he said. "I didn't learn it—I couldn't do a thing with it at work this morning. But I knew what to do when that man attacked us. And I knew what to do when some gangbangers tried to mug me last night."

"*What?* You were mugged? You didn't..."

"I wasn't mugged," Casper corrected her. "I said they *tried* . I stopped them, same as I stopped those men back at my apartment."

"Those men ... Yeah, Casper, *who were* they?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I haven't figured that part out yet. But I must have learned this stuff at NeuroTalents."

"NeuroTalents teaches people to fight? They have imprints for that?"

Casper shrugged. "They must," he said, as he led the way down the steps into the subway.

As they waited on the platform, Mirim asked, "So what are you going to do at NeuroTalents?"

"I'll tell them they screwed up and that I want it fixed..." Casper began. His voice trailed off as realization sank in. He looked at Mirim and blinked.

"You can't undo an imprinting," Mirim said. "It's like learning any other way—you can't *unlearn* something."

"But I..." Casper hesitated.

He had signed the waiver; he couldn't sue NeuroTalents. The most he could do would be to demand that they give him the *right* neural imprint, on top of whatever this was they'd done to him—and what good would that do? Was Data Tracers going to take him back after that little farewell speech he'd made?

Somehow, he doubted it.

And something else occurred to him. There were people coming after him, trying to kill him.

Data Tracers wouldn't have done that; they'd have destroyed him financially and socially if they decided to seek revenge, they might have had him arrested, had his bank account confiscated, his net accounts shut down, his apartment "searched" to destroy all his belongings, rumors spread—but they wouldn't

have sent gunmen to *shoot* him.

And they couldn't have acted so quickly, in any case.

The credit firm he was paying for his parents' debts wouldn't want him dead; he couldn't pay any more if he were dead. He didn't have enough of an estate to be worth confiscating. Even if they already knew he'd lost his job, they'd want him to find another, they wouldn't kill him.

So someone else had sent those men. Not Data Tracers, and not Citizens' Legal Credit.

And no one had ever had any reason to kill poor, inoffensive Casper Beech—until now.

The only thing different about him now, other than his lost job, was the imprint, so that had to be why they were after him. They must have caught the mistake at NeuroTalents.

So would *NeuroTalents* send gunmen after him?

Maybe they would—it didn't seem likely, but maybe they would. And in that case, he sure didn't want to walk into NeuroTalents' offices and give them a sitting target.

Would they try to kill him just to cover up their mistake? That seemed pretty extreme. Consortium members were generally assumed to have disposed of troublemakers on occasion, but only as a last resort.

Maybe there was something else.

Maybe there was something about the imprint that made him dangerous—something more than the fact that it proved they'd screwed up.

He grimaced. Well, yes, there was something dangerous, he thought. He'd just killed a man with a *splinter*, for Christ's sake! That was pretty goddamn dangerous, to have someone running around who could do that.

He'd killed a man with a splinter—he felt suddenly ill at the thought. It hadn't bothered him at the time, or when he wasn't thinking about it, but now he remembered the feel of it, the fluids spilling from the ruptured eye ... ?

He leaned against a pillar, waiting for the nausea to pass; Mirim glanced at him uneasily.

Just what the hell had they imprinted him with?

What did they have an imprint like that for in the first place? NeuroTalents' business was imprinting people with job skills—what kind of job called for the sort of fighting ability he'd learned?

He'd heard stories about corporate assassins, killers kept on the regular payroll, but he'd never really believed them—he'd assumed that any corporate killings were done by freelancers. But even if there *were* corporate assassins, would it be worth creating an entire imprint to manufacture them?

How could there be *enough* corporate assassins to make imprinting economically feasible? There'd be bloodbaths in every research lab or corporate penthouse in the country if that was going on.

That just didn't make sense. So that wasn't what he was. That was something of a relief.

But then, what *was* he? A soldier?

The army used imprinting for part of their training, certainly, but by all accounts that was for things like driving tanks, not unarmed combat. And they did their own, they didn't contract it out to NeuroTalents.

But maybe someone else in the government had hired NeuroTalents. Maybe one of those organizations in the Department of Homeland Security, the ones the public wasn't supposed to hear about, had decided to use NeuroTalents to train their people.

That made sense. All too much sense.

It would do as a working assumption, then—he'd been imprinted with the training to be a spy, a secret agent. And maybe his brain hadn't been ready for it—maybe that was why he'd had such a bad reaction to the imprint. He wasn't *meant* to be able to kill people.

But on the other hand, he was certainly good at it now. Wouldn't those two men have had the same sort of imprinting?

Maybe he'd gotten something special. Maybe that was why whoever was responsible was after him.

Spies, assassins—it all sounded like something out of an old video.

"So where are we going?" Mirim asked, as the sound of an approaching train reached them.

"Your place," Casper replied.

Mirim nodded.

By the time they actually boarded the subway car, however, Casper was having second thoughts. If the government was trying to kill him—and of *course* it was the government; who else but the Party would have the arrogance to set assassins loose on the streets of Philadelphia?—then they'd probably already done their research. They'd probably know he was dating Cecelia. They might know that Mirim had left the Data Tracers offices with him.

And Mirim and Cecelia shared that apartment.

If they had any brains at all, the people who were after him would be watching the apartment. They might be holding Cecelia hostage, as bait for him.

He shook his head. No, he thought, Cecelia wouldn't be home at this time of day, she'd be at her office. He glanced at his watch—she'd be going to lunch soon, he judged.

Maybe they could arrange a rendezvous; somehow, he didn't think *anyone* should be going into that apartment.

Instead, he got off at City Hall, pulling Mirim after him.

"Where are we going?" she asked for the third time.

"We're going to meet Cecelia," Casper told her. "Your apartment's probably being watched."

The man called Smith was not happy with what he heard when one of the back-up men checked in.

The agent who'd been waiting out front had eventually realized that something was wrong, that the pick-up wasn't going as planned; if Beech had been there he should have been taken care of quickly, and if he wasn't, either Lambert or Finch should have come out and said so, so the man in the car would know it was a stake-out.

He'd heard gunfire and breaking glass, he was pretty sure, and that should have been the end of it, but he waited and waited and Lambert and Finch did not emerge.

So he'd gone in, and he'd found Finch with bullet holes in his chest and Lambert with a chunk of wood rammed through his eye, and he'd gone back out, quickly, with his pistol ready, to warn Eberhart out back, and then he'd returned to his car and called in.

Smith was not happy at all.

This should have been easy. Beech shouldn't be ready for them yet—the file should still be fragmented, working in fits and starts. Lambert and Finch should have polished him off in seconds.

Maybe it hadn't been Beech at all, maybe Lambert and Finch had stumbled into a drug deal or some other illicit activity and been mistaken for cops—the neighborhood was bad enough, certainly.

But in that case, where the hell was Beech?

He wasn't at his apartment. He wasn't at the woman's apartment. He wasn't at Data Tracers. Where else would he go? Smith accessed the file on Beech and skimmed through it.

He saw three more possibilities.

First, Beech might have figured out what had happened and gone to NeuroTalents to complain.

Second, he might have headed to his girlfriend's law firm—either to see her, or to discuss filing suit against NeuroTalents or Data Tracers.

Third, he might have decided to take shelter with friends or relatives—only his records didn't show any living relatives, and the only friend mentioned was Cecelia Grand.

Those would all want attention. It meant calling in more manpower, but that was better than letting Beech stay alive and loose with the Spartacus File gradually integrating itself in his brain.

And that brought up the question of just how good, how dangerous, Beech already was. It would take a neurophysicist and an imprint programmer with a complete scan of Beech's brain to predict that with any accuracy; the theory was that he would need weeks or months to absorb everything, but Polnovick had begun his rampage within twenty-four hours. The theory might well be wrong.

Beech might be a rank beginner who got lucky, or he might already be the equivalent of an experienced rebel leader, or he might be anywhere in between, and Smith didn't know which it was. Could Beech spot Covert agents reliably, or had Lambert and Finch just been sloppy? Was Beech wary now, alerted by the attempt on his life? Would it be possible to get near him?

A sniper didn't need to be near him, of course, but the sniper that morning hadn't managed to dispose of Beech. Had that been merely coincidence, or had Beech somehow already been alerted?

Or was the Spartacus File simply making him very, very cautious?

If Beech *was* on the lookout, for whatever reason, how could Smith get at him? Smith kept half his mind on that question as he issued orders to cover Grand's office.

Chapter Nine

Mirim followed along, watching in puzzlement as Casper zigged and zagged through the city streets. He paused now and then to stare up at certain buildings or vehicles, though Mirim could never see anything special about them.

They went past the entrance to Cecelia's law firm four times without going in.

At last Casper stopped, a block away from Cecelia's office, and ushered Mirim into a coffee shop.

"I'm pretty sure they're here, but they're still setting up," he said, leading her toward an ancient landline pay phone at the back. "They won't have had time to monitor all the phones—I hope not, anyway. They'll have your cell covered, and of course mine, not that it works, but they probably don't have Celia's phones yet, so I want you to call her, arrange to meet somewhere for lunch."

Mirim nodded, and started to pull her calling card from her purse. Casper's hand on her wrist stopped her.

"Use cash," he said.

She glanced at him, then fished out a dollar coin instead. As she punched in Cecelia's office number and waited for an answer, Mirim looked uneasily at Casper.

This was all so strange and horrible. She had always liked Casper, thought he was sort of cute—she'd often thought that if he'd had any backbone and hadn't been dating her roommate, she'd have been seriously interested in him.

She hadn't known then that he lived in a slum, or that he was capable of killing two armed men in a matter of seconds.

Of course, maybe he *hadn't* been capable of it—but didn't they say that imprinting couldn't teach you anything you wouldn't have been able to learn? It was just *faster*—if you weren't able to handle something, imprinting wouldn't change that.

Could an ordinary man learn to fight like that? Or was Casper something special?

That speech he'd given at Data Tracers had been wonderful, and he was still charming, but he'd been so *ruthless*. And all this cloak-and-dagger rigmarole—was he being paranoid?

But they really *were* after him, whoever they were.

What was going *on*? Casper said he didn't know, either, but he still seemed to know what to do—could an imprinting do that?

Then Cecelia's voice said, “Grand speaking,” and Mirim concentrated on sounding normal, as if she were still at her office, as if she hadn't seen two men killed about an hour before, as if Casper weren't standing behind her with a loaded handgun in his pants.

It would have to be lawyers, Smith thought. With most people he could have bullied the manager into letting them monitor the landline phones in a matter of minutes, just as he'd bullied that oaf Quinones at Data Tracers. The cells had all been tagged already, not just Grand's but everyone in the office, but Beech might expect that—or he might just use a landline anyway. Smith needed access to the office phones, and the easiest way to get it was courtesy of someone who already had it.

Usually that just took a flashed set of credentials or a few words of warning, but lawyers were harder to intimidate—so even while he was negotiating with Mr. Arnold of Jackson-Arnold-Perez, Smith had his men tapping into the building's central systems.

And a good thing, too, he thought, as one of his assistants signalled to him.

"Just a moment, Mr. Arnold," he said. He flicked off the microphone—just covering the mouthpiece wasn't certain enough.

"The Grand woman is on the phone right now ... no, she just hung up," the assistant said. "She's meeting Anspack, we think for lunch; we didn't get the location."

"Follow her," Smith snapped. "Anspack's probably still with Beech." Then he turned the microphone back on. "I'm sorry, Mr. Arnold—something came up here. If you insist on a court order, we'll get one. I'll get back to you. Thank you for your time, Mr. Arnold."

He hung up and pocketed the phone.

A court order—ha! Arnold was stuck in the last century somewhere.

He turned to his assistant again.

"Make sure whoever's going after Beech knows he's dangerous—use whatever it takes to take him down. This is a national security matter. Collateral damage is acceptable."

"Yes, sir." The assistant began relaying orders.

"They'll follow her," Casper said. "We'll have to lose them somehow."

Mirim blinked at him, startled.

"You really think they're going to be that thorough?"

"They were watching her office—I spotted two cars on stakeout, one man on the sidewalk, and a man on the rooftop across from Cecelia's window," Casper replied. "If they're watching her, they'll follow her."

Mirim stared at him, and Casper thought he saw fear in her expression.

He smiled warmly. "Don't worry," he said, "we'll be fine. Maybe I'm just imagining it—but after what happened at my place, don't you think we'd better be extra-careful?"

The fear faded to uncertainty—and it occurred to Casper that he'd never been able to read Mirim's face so easily before.

Had the imprint taught him *that*, too?

What sort of an imprint could that be? The fighting, the weapons, spotting traps, outthinking opponents, that all fit together—but reading faces?

And what about that speech at the office?

It didn't all fit with the idea of an assassin very well; he was fairly certain now that whatever he had been programmed with wasn't just assassination. Face-reading might suit a spy, someone who had to be able to tell truth from lies and know who to trust—but how did his speech fit with that?

"How do we lose them?" Mirim asked. "If they're really there, I mean."

Casper shrugged—and realized that he didn't know; he wasn't just dodging the question to save time. He had no idea at all how one could escape pursuit.

He had known a moment before, and he'd lost it.

What *the hell* kind of imprint was this? How could he forget something he'd known just seconds earlier? *That* wasn't how it was supposed to work! Once something was imprinted it was supposed to *be* there whenever it was needed—Casper had read enough on the nets and spoken to enough people who had been imprinted to know that.

Once they had Cecelia away from those bastards, the next step would be to track down just what it was that he'd had stuffed into his head—what it was for, what it did, everything. Once he knew what it was, maybe he could figure out how to deal with it.

Maybe the knowledge would come back when he needed it—he sure hoped it would.

"Come on," he said.

Mirim had told Cecelia to meet her at a restaurant and bar on Rittenhouse Square, but Casper had no intention of actually entering the place—he'd be too confined there, too easy to trap. Instead, moving easily through the lunchtime crowds, dragging Mirim behind him, he spotted Cecelia on Walnut Street and waved to her.

She waved back, and a moment later the three of them were moving side-by-side down the sidewalk, Casper uncomfortably aware of the two men following Cecelia.

"Casper!" Cecelia began, "I didn't know..."

"Shh," he told her. He looked around for a way to escape. So far the two men hadn't opened fire, presumably because of the bystanders, or perhaps because they weren't yet certain of his identity—or

maybe they just weren't close enough. He was fairly sure they'd move soon.

He would have, in their position.

"This way," he said suddenly, turning north on the west side of 19th.

Startled, the two women obeyed.

He then turned again, onto Moravian—and here he didn't have any crowds to help; Moravian wasn't much more than an alley.

"Run!" he said, reaching out with both hands and swatting both women forward.

Mirim ran—she'd been there at his apartment, she was already on edge.

Cecelia, though, stopped dead and turned to face him, hands on her hips. "Casper, what the hell..."

"Run, damn it!" he shouted. "I'll explain in a moment!" And he ran himself, after Mirim. "Turn left!" he called.

He glanced back. The two men had pushed right past Cecelia, leaving her standing there, looking confused and angry; one man had a pistol in his hand.

Mirim wheeled left onto 20th Street, Casper close behind.

Another short block brought them back onto Walnut, where at Casper's signal Mirim turned left again.

Pedestrians turned and stared as the two of them charged through the crowd, half a block ahead of their pursuers.

Casper was considering options as he ran. Something in his brain was working again; he was running through possible courses of action, rather than simply fleeing.

He could call for help, but these people didn't know him yet, they wouldn't want to get involved, and the natural tendency would be to side with the pursuers rather than the fugitive.

He could make a serious effort to lose the two men—but there might be others he hadn't spotted, lurking in the crowd as back-up. And besides, he couldn't see any way to bring Mirim and Cecelia with him safely if he were to try any serious dodging; they weren't ready, wouldn't read signals in time.

But there was a third alternative.

He turned north again on 19th, Mirim close on his heels, and a moment later they were back on Moravian, having circled the block. Cecelia was still there, halfway down to 20th; Mirim ran toward her, shouting, "Run, Cecelia!"

Casper didn't; Casper stopped dead the moment he'd rounded the corner and threw himself back against the brick wall. He pulled the Browning Hi-Power from his pants.

And as each of the two men rounded the corner, chasing Mirim, Casper snapped off two quick shots.

"Double tap," he said, as he fired at the first man's chest; the recoil kicked the pistol upward slightly, and Casper fired again without pulling it down. That put a bullet through the side of the man's head. Then he dragged the gun back down into line in time to do the exact same thing to the second pursuer.

Blood and brain sprayed across the pavement and the side of an illegally-parked car. Both men dropped in mid-stride, one after the other. Cecelia screamed.

So did another woman, on 19th Street, who had seen the two men fall.

Casper ignored the screams; he ran, grabbed the two women by the arm in passing, one on either side, and dragged them to 20th Street, where he turned right this time.

Mirim ran with him; Cecelia didn't resist, but didn't help much at first.

"You want to stay with those two?" Casper whispered to her.

After that, she ran.

They dodged through the streets of Center City for several minutes—running at first, then trotting, then walking.

"Catch your breath," Casper told the women. "After the next corner we want to look natural, to blend in."

Mirim nodded; Cecelia didn't, but Casper didn't worry about it.

The next corner put them on Market Street, and Casper began looking for somewhere to sit down, somewhere they could eat the lunch they had promised Cecelia.

He was, he realized, really hungry. He'd worked up an appetite.

"We have a problem," Smith's assistant said.

"Why?" Smith asked.

"It's Dominguez and Groves."

"What about them?"

"They're dead," the assistant said. "Beech blew their brains out."

"Did they get Beech?"

The assistant shook his head. "No. And their back-up lost him."

"*Damn!*" Smith smacked his fist against the wall. "What the hell happened?"

The assistant relayed the back-up's report—how Dominguez and Groves had seen Beech and Anspack meet Grand, how they'd followed the three of them for a block and then Anspack and Beech had started running, how they'd all gone around the block and Beech had ambushed them.

The back-up had seen most of it, and had tried to pick up the pursuit herself, but she'd guessed wrong somewhere about which way her quarry turned and lost them. She hadn't had a chance to get off a shot.

"*Dammit!*" Smith said. "Why didn't Dominguez or Groves just shoot Beech when they had the chance?"

"Crowds," the assistant said. "At least, that's what the back-up thinks."

"I said collateral damage was acceptable!" Smith glared. "For Christ's sake ... next time, if there is one, tell whoever we send to go ahead and shoot on sight. And give 'em something heavier—shotguns or full auto, something with real firepower. Something that'll take Beech down no matter how good he is."

He wondered just how good that was. Beech seemed to be absorbing the Spartacus File pretty goddamn fast.

"Yes, sir," the assistant said. "Uh ... the city police are on the scene of the shooting; should we contact them?"

"No, of..." Smith stopped and reconsidered. "Yes," he said. "Give them Beech's description and basic history. Tell them we think he's a terrorist. Tell them Dominguez and Groves were FBI, tell 'em *we're* FBI—let 'em think we're going to be really pissed if anyone else gets Beech, you know, the whole 'Untouchables' bit. That should motivate them. These city contractors *like* pissing off the FBI."

"Yes, sir." The assistant reached for the phone.

Chapter Ten

"The government's after me," Casper told Cecelia. "Those two were feds."

The three of them were seated at the counter of a small coffee shop on the north side of Market Street; bright sunlight gleamed from chrome and Formica on all sides, and half a dozen screens were showing various news, weather, and sports reports.

It was hard to imagine that ten minutes earlier they'd been fleeing for their lives; Casper's words sounded bizarre and paranoid to Cecelia.

She put down her sandwich and stared at him. She hadn't yet taken the first bite. "Why?" she demanded.

"I'm not sure," he said. "Something to do with the imprinting I got, I think—someone screwed it up somehow." He saw her expression, and continued, "I don't know *why*, but they're definitely after me, and they're trying to kill me, not arrest me."

"How do you know?"

"Because they shot first, without asking me to surrender or saying who they were."

Cecelia glanced at Mirim, who nodded confirmation. "They just opened fire, back at his apartment—never said a word."

"Those same two men?"

"No, of course not," Mirim said. "Casper killed them."

"But you were at his apartment *before* he ... what were you doing at Casper's apartment?" Cecelia eyed her roommate suspiciously.

"We walked off the job together this morning," Mirim said, a bit nervously.

"But ... oh, never mind. So these two men he just shot came to his apartment?"

"No, *two others* . Casper killed them, too."

Cecelia blinked. "He's killed *four* men?"

Mirim swallowed, and nodded.

Cecelia looked at Casper, who tried very hard to look blank; he didn't know what else to do.

He supposed it must be a shock for her, to hear that her harmless, timid lover had committed not one, but four murders in a single morning—or four killings, anyway, as they were all self-defense.

It couldn't be as much of a shock for her to hear that as it was for him to have lived through it, though; she at least had the option of not believing it.

"None of them identified himself?" Cecelia asked, turning back to Casper.

"Nope," he said. "Shoot first, ask questions later."

"Then how do you know they're feds?"

"Who the hell else could it be?" Casper said, suddenly angry. "Those bastards are always trying to run everyone's lives..." He was almost growling.

"Casper," Cecelia said, and he stopped. She stared at him and picked up her sandwich again. She took a bite, chewed, then said, "You never seemed to have a problem with the government telling you what to do before."

Casper blinked at her, and tried to think.

Was that true?

It seemed as if it must be, really—after all, he'd put up with everything all these years, put up with the taxes and orders and rules and security checks, whereas now the mere thought of anyone telling him that he had to do something, or mustn't do something, was enough to make him tremble with rage.

The imprint again; it had to be.

What the *hell* had NeuroTalents done to him? And why?

"You don't know why they're trying to kill you?" Cecelia asked. "Do you think it's a case of mistaken

identity?"

Casper shook his head. "I don't think that's it," he said. "They know I'm Casper Beech, or they wouldn't have hit the right apartment or staked out your office. As for why—I don't *know*, Celia, but I have a theory."

"Let's hear it."

Casper recognized her tone and grimaced; she'd slipped into lawyer mode. Hardly surprising, under the circumstances.

"I went to NeuroTalents for that imprinting a few days ago, remember?"

Cecelia nodded.

"Well, I got the wrong one. I've been programmed with some kind of combat imprint—or maybe it's meant for spies or assassins, I don't know, but that's how I was able to take out four of them."

"I saw how you ... how you killed those two," Cecelia said. "You caught them by surprise, ambushed them."

"But how'd I know to do that?"

"People can do amazing things under stress," Cecelia said. "You see a lot of it in my line of work."

"And what about the others?" He shook his head. "Besides, I've been having all kinds of weird experiences—I chased off a bunch of muggers the other night, and I'm constantly finding myself watching for booby-traps or planning raids. And there was the speech at the office. No, I got the wrong imprint—and the government must have found out, and wanted to cover up."

"Seems to me they'd be more likely to want to *recruit* you than to kill you," Cecelia remarked.

Casper blinked in surprise.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said.

"Maybe they didn't either," Mirim replied.

"Oh, right," Cecelia said. "You've got someone programmed with some sort of super-soldier neural imprint that you've had made up to your own specifications, and it never occurs to you to see if you can use him for whatever you wanted the imprint for in the first place?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Casper repeated. "It *would* be the sensible thing to do, wouldn't it?"

"Then why haven't they tried?" Mirim asked.

"Maybe they know it wouldn't work," Casper said slowly. "Maybe it's inherent in the imprint that it wouldn't work." He thought about his speech at Data Tracers that morning, about his automatic negative reaction to mention of the government much of the time. He thought about the Party and the Consortium and he realized he hated them both, where before he'd always considered them something of a necessary evil, the unpleasant cure for the terrorist wars and economic crisis of his childhood years.

Now he wanted to destroy them both, whatever the cost.

Maybe, he thought, he'd been programmed to be some sort of saboteur, a dangerous and involuntary rebel. Maybe the imprint had been meant to create moles, people who would attack their own countries from within.

That was just the sort of lousy trick that the government would pull.

Or was the imprint making him think that?

"So what are you going to do?" Cecelia asked, breaking his train of thought. "Could you turn yourself in, tell them you *want* to be recruited?"

"No," Casper said immediately. "They must know what's in my head better than I do—they'd assume it was a trick, that I was going to turn on them." He smiled wolfishly. "They'd be right, too."

"Imprints aren't supposed to control your actions!" Mirim protested.

"This is no ordinary imprint," Casper said. "I'm sure of that."

"What the hell *is* it, then?"

"I wish I knew!"

"Okay," Cecelia said, "You don't turn yourself in—though as an officer of the court I am required to advise you to surrender. But speaking hypothetically, let's say you don't—what *do* you do?"

"Well, I can't just ignore it," Casper said, "though that's exactly what half of me would like to do—probably the half that's not imprint. I can't ignore it, because they'll kill me if I do."

"They haven't managed it so far," Cecelia pointed out.

Casper snorted. "If they're serious about it, they will eventually." He glanced at the coffee shop windows, suddenly uncomfortably aware that he'd been in this same place rather longer than was entirely wise, and that he was visible from the street.

"So what's left?" Mirim asked.

"Run," Cecelia said. "That's obvious."

"Run?" Casper said. "Maybe."

"Well, what else?"

"Fight back," Casper said, and he felt a warm surge of satisfaction at the idea.

"Fight against the entire United States government?" Mirim asked.

"Why not?" Casper asked. "They're just people."

"They're *thousands* of people, with guns and tanks and bombs and organization, Casper," Cecelia pointed out. "Effectively, you'd be up against the whole damn country."

"So I'd recruit my *own* people, get my *own* guns."

"How?"

Casper shrugged.

A second before it had seemed natural and obvious, and he still thought it could be done, but right now he didn't know how. The imprint was playing its tricks again.

"That might be fine in the long term," Mirim said, "but for *right now*, the idea is just to stay alive—how do you plan to do that?"

"You'll need to run," Cecelia said. "I can try for a court order to stop the attacks—even with the emergency decrees in effect, I think I can plead that you're entitled to due process as long as you aren't actually taking part in subversive or terrorist activities."

Casper shook his head. "No, Celia," he said, "you're missing something here."

"What?"

"You're coming with me."

Cecelia blinked at him.

"Don't you see?" he said, the words coming in a rush. "If you go home they'll know you were with me, they'll take you in for questioning, they'll keep you locked up while they pry out every word I've said to you, they might just decide to lose you completely. If they *do* let you out, it'll just be as bait for me—you'll never have another moment's privacy, they'll be spying on you every second of the day. And you, Mirim, they'll do the same to you—you know they will, when you think about it you'll know it's true! *Listen* to me, *think* about it—even if you *could* go back, become good little drones again, do you *want* to? Is that any life to live? Is that a government that deserves your allegiance? What right does the government have to kill anyone who causes trouble? What right do they have to order everyone around? Who gave the Party and the Consortium and the whole stinking power structure the right to run our lives this way, to grind us down? Who said they could suspend someone's civil rights indefinitely just by labeling him a security risk? Who said they could exempt the Consortium from anti-trust and environmental laws and all the rest, and leave them in place for everyone else? *Think* about it—they sent me to have my brain, my very identity, tampered with, so that I could serve the Consortium better, so it could keep the Party strong. *They* screwed up and put in the wrong instructions, so now they're going to kill *me* for it. No apologies, not even an offer of a quick, painless injection—they do that much for serial killers, for God's sake, but for *me*, it's a spray of bullets through my apartment door, it's hunting me down on the city streets..."

He had risen to his feet while speaking; now he threw his arms out theatrically.

"*How can you continue to serve them?*" he shouted.

For a moment the two women stared up at him, and Casper stared back, meeting Cecelia's gaze. From the corner of his eye he saw the counterman watching him suspiciously, but the man wasn't taking action

to quell the disturbance.

Not yet, anyway.

"He's right," Mirim said.

"He's right about them locking us up, anyway," Cecelia agreed. She looked up at Casper.

"All right," she said, "so all three of us run, and we might as well do it together. Where do we run to?"

Casper looked at both women. He dropped his arms to his sides and seemed to shrink.

"I wish I knew," he said.

Chapter Eleven

The first step was obvious—and for that matter, so was the second. If they were going to run, the first thing they needed was transportation, and the second was money.

Where to go after they had transportation and money wasn't so simple, but as Casper led the two women into the parking garage he'd chosen he made a suggestion. Neither of them had any comment on it, at least at first.

"Maybe we should take a train," Mirim said nervously, as Casper looked over the silent rows of vehicles on the second level of the parking structure.

Casper shook his head. "Too easy to search," he said. "And a train goes in a straight line, you can't turn off and get lost on the side roads. If they decide to search the trains for me, and I'm on one, I'm dead." He looked over a brown Toyota, then moved on.

"They can stop cars and search those, too."

"Some of them, yeah, but do you have any idea how many roads there are out of Philadelphia?" He zeroed in on an old blue Honda four-door and looked it over for any sign of a security system. There was no thumbprint scanner on the car's computer, no warning lights or labels beyond the usual required safety notices. He noticed the clutter of old maps and empty fast-food wrappers on the back seat—exactly what he was looking for, signs of a disorganized owner.

"I don't like this," Mirim said, her arms folded across her chest. She looked about nervously as Casper ducked down, got on his back, and peered under the Honda.

Cecelia watched Casper with interest. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm checking to see if there are any wires that don't look like they belong," Casper said. "I figure that if there's an added security system, there'll be wires."

"Some of them are subtler than that," Cecelia said. "I had a few clients who tried this sort of thing when I did my year as a public defender."

"It's a *Honda*, Celia, not a Ferrari or something," Casper said as he got to his feet.

"You'd be surprised."

"So be ready to run," he said, as he made a sudden whirling movement and kicked out the driver's side window. The safety glass buckled, and dropped inside in a single large sheet—the glass was shattered into bits about the size of teeth, but the fragments were still held together by the layer of plastic.

"Jesus, Casper!" Mirim said. She looked about, waiting for an alarm to sound, for cops to jump out of nowhere with guns drawn.

No sirens wailed, no horns beeped; the only sound was the normal buzz of traffic outside. Casper ignored her as he reached in, tossed the ruined window away, and opened the door. He slid into the driver's seat, leaned across and fished through the glove compartment, checked the storage compartments and sun visors—and found the spare key in the ashtray. The clutter in the back seat had made him optimistic that such a stash existed.

A few seconds later the engine roared to life.

"Get in," he said, as he used the power-lock button to unlock the other doors.

The two women hastened to obey; Cecelia took the front passenger seat while Mirim ducked into the back, shoving the trash aside.

Casper backed the car carefully out of the space, then asked, "Either of you have any idea where the nearest ATM is? And have you got your cards? They may have stopped mine already."

Both women began digging through their purses as Casper headed down the ramp. Cecelia found her card first, Mirim a moment later.

"I didn't know you knew how to steal a car," Cecelia remarked, as Casper pulled out of the parking structure onto the street.

"Neither did I," said Casper, as he scanned the traffic. It wouldn't do to get into a fender-bender or get stopped by the cops. The broken window was going to be risky enough in that regard without doing anything else to attract attention, like speeding or any sort of hot driving. "I was guessing—it seemed like something this stupid imprinting ought to include, and sure enough, once I started looking, I knew what to look for."

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea," Mirim muttered from the back seat.

"What, stealing the car?" Casper shrugged, then ducked his head to get a better look at the traffic light. "Maybe it wasn't. I mean, taking it from the middle of a commuter garage, I figure no one will notice it's gone until 5:00 or later, and we'll have ditched it by then. And except for the window we aren't going to hurt it. If you want, we can leave a couple of hundred bucks for the gas and the repairs. I mean, once we've got some more money."

"I didn't mean that," Mirim said. "I meant going to Leonid's place."

That had been Casper's suggestion; this was the first feedback he'd gotten on it.

"Oh, that." Casper turned the corner. "Well, no one had *a better* idea. If you think of one while we're getting money, you know, while we're at the ATMs, let me know, okay? But I didn't know what else to suggest. They'll be watching all my friends and relatives, they're watching your apartment, and Cecelia's office, and probably Data Tracers—where *else* could we go?"

"But if they're being *that* thorough, they must know I'm with you," Mirim protested.

Casper hesitated. "Well, yeah," he admitted, "but if *you* were after a man and a woman who were running away together, would *you* expect them to hide out with her *boyfriend*?" Cecelia threw him a suspicious glance. Casper saw it from the corner of one eye, but ignored it. If he once started trying to allay Cecelia's suspicions about something going on between himself and Mirim, he'd never be able to stop. Best to just ignore the obvious, as if he were so innocent that he didn't even realize she had doubts.

A few days ago he wouldn't have thought that way; he'd have been telling Cecelia how there wasn't anything between himself and Mirim and saying it so badly that he'd be stuffing his foot further into his mouth with every word.

Now, even though he felt pretty much like himself at the moment, he knew better.

Had he figured it out for himself, or was the imprint telling him this? What the *hell* kind of imprint would include advice on keeping a girlfriend from being jealous, on top of everything else?

"Why not?" Mirim answered. "After all, we picked up your girlfriend—what's the difference?"

Casper didn't have a ready reply to that; he was sure there *was* a difference, but he couldn't put it into words. The imprint didn't offer any help on this one. "They probably think I took you hostage or something like that," he said at last.

"Why would they?" Mirim asked.

"I don't know. I just think ... I mean ... Look, we'll get the money first, and when we get to Leonid's place I'll check for a stake-out—you know I can do that, right? You'll trust me on that? I managed okay back at Celia's office, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but back there you were..." She stopped in mid-sentence, not sure how to say what she meant—or at least, not sure how to say it without offending Casper.

Back then, he had been calm, controlled, efficient, in charge—the imprinting had been telling him what to do, she supposed. Now he was being, at least intermittently, timid and confused and whiny and unsure—his old self, in other words. He'd been the new Casper when he kicked out the window and started the car, but his voice now was back to his former personality.

It was hard to explain just what the difference was, but she could sense it instantly. Sometimes Casper was on, was the new assertive Casper, and sometimes he was off, was the old, timid Casper.

She had heard stories about how movie stars could turn something on—without it they were ordinary people, but when it was on they were *stars*, they drew stares, they were always the center of attention. Charisma, star quality—she wasn't sure what to call it.

She'd never really believed the stories—until now. She'd never met a movie star, but she'd seen Casper turn on, turn into this irresistible force, this *presence* she couldn't resist. He'd done it with his speech at

Data Tracers, he'd done it when he killed those two men at his apartment, again when they had arrived outside Cecelia's office, when he'd killed the two men in the street, and in the coffee shop when he'd convinced them to join him.

But right now it was off, and he wasn't a leader of men, he was just Casper Beech, liability analyst. It was hard to take him seriously, hard to trust him with anything important. He was a nice guy, fun to talk to, but no more than that.

Could he turn it back on, whatever it was, when he needed it? *Could* he spot people watching Leonid's apartment?

Well, they'd find out soon enough.

She just hoped they'd survive it.

"So after he took out Groves and Dominguez, he spotted their back-up? Spotted the tail?" Smith said.

"Maybe," his assistant said. "We don't know if he spotted her or was just getting loose on general principles. She didn't *think* he'd made her."

"He probably had, though. This son of a bitch is good. He's spotted and dealt with everything we've done—dodged it if he could, killed if he couldn't dodge."

"Yes, sir," his assistant said.

"So we have to assume he'll spot any of our people, no matter what we do," Smith said.

"Yes, sir."

"So he won't approach anyone we have covered."

The assistant hesitated. He wasn't any too sure of anything about what this Casper Beech would or wouldn't do.

"Yes, sir," he said at last.

"But he has to go *somewhere*. He's got the women with him—he's not going to just sleep in the street, not with all three of them. And he can't get a hotel room without using a credit card, and we've flagged all their cards."

"He's getting cash from ATM machines," the assistant pointed out. "We can't cover all of them, and we can't reach them in time when his card registers."

"Freeze his accounts—haven't we done that?"

"Uh ... no. You just said to flag them, not to freeze them."

"Well, do it, idiot! And the women's accounts, too. How much have they already gotten?"

"Uh ... about two grand. His own account's cleaned out; they've been working on Ms. Grand's."

"Well, freeze what's left. And have you ever tried to get a hotel to accept cash? No respectable one will take it any more. Besides, put out a notice, in case they try—if any hotel has a customer pay cash, we want to be informed."

"Yes, sir."

"So we're covering Beech's friends and relatives?"

"Of course."

"And Anspack's?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Grand's?"

"Yes, sir."

"You said Anspack's got a friend who works in security?"

The assistant glanced at his computer screen. "Yes, sir," he said. "Leonid Chernukhin, senior operative at Spartan Guardian Services."

"He's covered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Pull 'em off, right now—and get him on the phone for me."

"Sir?"

"I said to phone this Leonid Whatsisname. If Beech can spot all our people, we'll use someone else. And if he won't touch anyone we have covered, we'll leave someone open."

"Yes, sir," the assistant said.

Leonid hung up the phone and gazed out the window as contemplatively as he was capable of.

So the feds wanted a hit. He could handle that.

He'd never done a hit before. He'd killed a couple of guys once who chose the wrong place to try to rob, and he'd put some others in the hospital, but he'd never deliberately set out to kill anyone before, let alone someone he knew.

He didn't know Beech well, but he'd met him the other night—and that made it easier, actually, because Leonid didn't like Beech much. Beech was a snotty little wimp, thought he was smart. He'd be no loss to the world.

And the son of a bitch had been screwing Mirim, if the fed's hints meant anything; that made it personal—and a lot more fun, too.

Beech had been imprinted with some sort of combat file, the man said—but Leonid grinned.

Beech was a wimp. Combat imprint or not, he was still a wimp.

This was going to be *fun* .

"Anyone there?" Cecelia asked testily.

Casper hesitated.

"I don't think so," he said.

He'd driven the stolen car around the block twice now, and hadn't seen anyone suspicious—but it didn't look right, somehow, and he wasn't sure whether the stupid unpredictable imprint was working properly.

But he couldn't see anyone, and where else were they going to go? No respectable hotel would take them unless they used their charge cards, and even if the cards had still been good—which they weren't, as they knew from the last ATM they'd hit—they'd have been like waving a red flag for the government to see.

Besides, Cecelia was suspicious that something was going on between him and Mirim, he knew she was suspicious despite his innocent act, and if Mirim's lover was around maybe she'd realize there wasn't.

Not that Casper was sure he'd mind if there *was* something going on.

He pulled the car into the lot and turned off the ignition. "Come on," he said.

No one shot at them as they left the car and entered the building; no one followed them, or came anywhere near them. Some kids were playing a game a block or so down the sidewalk, and a woman was walking a dog, but that was all. It was almost 4:00; rush hour had started back in Center City and would be reaching this neighborhood soon, but right now everything was quiet.

Casper still didn't like it.

Mirim led the way and rang the bell, Casper and Cecelia hanging back. Casper could hear a TV going in one of the other apartments.

The door opened, and Casper tensed, but it was only Leonid, in jeans and tank top.

"Hi," he said. "What's up?"

His tone didn't sound right to Casper—and what was he doing home at this hour, anyway?

Well, security people didn't all work the day shift, Casper told himself, and he was probably just being paranoid.

"May we come in?" Mirim asked.

"Um ... sure," Leonid said, stepping aside.

Mirim turned and beckoned to the others, and the three of them trooped into Leonid's apartment.

"What's going on?" Leonid asked, as he closed the door behind them. "Why aren't you guys at the office?" He looked from one to the other—but something made Casper think he was acting.

"Someone's trying to kill Casper," Mirim said.

Leonid glanced quickly at Casper, then back at Mirim. "Who?" he asked.

That wasn't right, Casper thought; he should have said "What?" rather than "Who?"

"We don't know," Mirim said.

Casper didn't contradict her, but he watched Leonid's expression closely. He thought he saw Leonid's lips twitch slightly, as if he were thinking, "Yeah, sure you don't."

Paranoia, he told himself. Yes, someone was after him, but that didn't mean *everyone* was.

But something was clicking away in his head. Leonid worked in security, he was known to be acquainted with Mirim, the feds knew Mirim was with Casper.

"Tell me about it," Leonid said.

"Two men broke down his apartment door," Mirim said. "He managed to get away out a window, and came back to Center City to talk to Celia and me, and when we were on our way to lunch two more men came after us with guns."

Leonid turned to Casper. "Men with guns?"

Casper nodded.

"You don't know who they were?"

Casper shook his head. "Not for sure," he said. "I think it has something to do with the imprint I got from NeuroTalents last week, though. For Data Tracers."

"Shit. Any chance they followed you here?"

Casper shook his head.

"No," he said.

"You seem pretty definite about that."

Casper shrugged. "I'm sure," he said.

"So why'd you come here?"

"They were watching Celia's apartment and office."

"So you came to me for help?"

"Well, if there's anything you can do..." Mirim said.

Leonid considered.

Mirim thought he was thinking over Casper's situation, but what he was actually thinking about was whether he should take out Mirim, too, and say it was an accident. The bitch was lying—the Covert contact had said she was at Beech's apartment, not in Center City with her roommate. She was lying because she'd been fucking Beech. And she hadn't mentioned that Beech actually managed to kill two of his pursuers—Covert had told him that.

If she was lying for Beech like this, she was never going to be any good to him, to Leonid, again. And she'd be a witness, a witness with a grudge.

The other woman would be a witness, too, but that was no big deal—she was a lawyer, Covert could get her to stay quiet. Lawyers could be bought or intimidated.

Besides, she looked nervous. She'd probably be glad to be rid of Beech, to not be mixed up with him any more.

The first bullet for Beech, then, but the second for Mirim.

"You know, I have access to a lot of information on criminals," he said. "Part of my work, y'know—I'm on the closed law enforcement nets, got access to all the secure sites. Maybe I could find out something about this. You three wait here."

He turned, and ambled down the passageway into the bedroom, and the instant he was sure he was out of sight he headed directly to the drawer where he kept his .357.

In the living room Casper watched Leonid go, and then, without consciously thinking about it, moved swiftly across the room and took up a position beside the entrance to the little corridor, his back to the wall. He drew the Browning and checked the magazine.

Nine rounds left.

He rammed the clip back into place, chambered a round ... ?

"Casper, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Celia asked. She had her hands on her hips, and was glaring at him.

He held a finger to his lips. Then he pointed toward the front window.

Cecelia blinked, and turned to see what he was pointing at.

"I don't..." she began.

He said, "Shhh!" and pointed again, more urgently.

As Leonid came down the passage, his revolver in the hand behind his back, he noticed both women staring toward the far end of the room.

That must be where Beech was, down by the window.

He stepped out into the living room and started to bring the pistol around ... ?

And Casper stepped up right beside him, the Browning ready in his hand, catching Leonid totally off-guard. Casper pointed the weapon at Leonid's chest.

"Drop the gun," Casper said.

Leonid could see that the safety was off on Beech's 9mm, that Casper's hand was steady, his finger tightening on the trigger.

Beech was smaller than he was, a nebbish, a nothing—but he had the gun in his hand pointed at Leonid's heart, and Covert said he'd had a military imprint of some kind. He knew how to use a gun, knew how to fight, knew how to kill.

And when Leonid saw the look in Beech's eyes, any doubt he'd had that Beech would shoot vanished.

Maybe Beech wasn't quite such a wimp after all.

"Shit," Leonid said. He tossed his .357 away and raised his hands.

Chapter Twelve

Leonid glanced at the women—and Casper, he noticed, didn't; Beech's gaze never wavered.

Mirim and Cecelia were staring, shocked.

"Casper, what the hell..." Cecelia began, but Mirim shushed her.

Leonid took his cue from that.

"So this is a scam?" he said. "You planning to clean me out?"

"Just defending myself," Casper replied, and his voice was calm, confident, commanding. "You came out with a gun, you work in security, this place is the only place we might have gone that's not under surveillance—I think that it's a set-up. I think they *should* have been watching here, and they weren't because they *wanted* me here. I think that you got a call telling you that I'm some kind of dangerous fugitive."

"Hey, you *said* you were a fugitive!" Leonid protested. "I shouldn't try to protect myself?"

"Maybe I'm being a little over-cautious," Casper conceded. "So explain why you came out with a gun."

"Well, I thought maybe you were holding the girls hostage," Leonid bluffed. "I was going to get the drop on you, and ask them what was *really* going on, why the feds are after you."

Casper smiled, a smile that Leonid really didn't like at all. "Who said it was the feds?" he countered.

Leonid's mouth opened, then closed.

Cecelia's expression changed from angry confusion to outrage, and her gaze shifted from Casper to Leonid. Mirim took a step back, looking wary.

"You said it was," Leonid said. "You told me the government was after you."

"No, I didn't," Casper replied. "I was very careful about that. I did my best to make it sound like either organized crime or corporate espionage. You said yourself you were going to check on criminals."

"Yeah, but..." Leonid stopped in mid-sentence. What more could he say? He was caught.

"So the feds *did* call?" Casper asked. "Did they tell you why they want me dead?"

"Not really," Leonid admitted. "Something about you being a terrorist."

"You believe that?"

"No."

"But you were going to kill me anyway?"

Leonid shrugged. "The feds asked me to. I'm going to argue with them?"

"Who was it called? FBI?"

Leonid shook his head.

Beech waited, but Leonid didn't answer further.

"You probably know I don't want to kill you," Casper said. "Not only do I not want to kill anybody, you can still be useful to me, and you know it. I wouldn't mind shooting you in the leg, though, and do you really want me to do that? I'd try to break the bone if I did, and that could be messy."

"Covert Operations Group," Leonid said.

Casper gestured at the women with the hand that wasn't holding the Browning.

"I never heard of them," Mirim said.

"I have," Cecelia said. "When they eliminated all those conflicting agencies at the beginning of the century, after they set up Homeland Security, they put all the above-ground ones in the FBI, and all the secret ones in Covert." She frowned. "But I thought they were like the old CIA, not supposed to operate in the U.S. in peacetime."

"They make exceptions," Leonid said.

"So that's who's after me?" Beech asked.

Leonid nodded.

"Why?"

"I don't know." He didn't bother to swear to it, or try to explain—he didn't think it would make any difference to Beech.

How could he have ever considered this guy a wimp? Beech hadn't made a mistake, hadn't wavered—and his eyes ... ?

Casper nodded.

"Let's see if we can find out," he said.

"You want me to call them?" Leonid asked.

"No. Too easy for you to warn them I'm here—hell, just calling might be enough to let them know. But you said you're on the law enforcement nets? Was that just an excuse to get your gun, or is it true?"

"It's true."

"Maybe we can do something with that."

"What the hell is taking so long?" Smith demanded. "Why hasn't Chernukhin called in to confirm the kill? We know Beech went in, right?"

"The lobby security camera shows him going in, yes, sir."

"So what the hell happened?"

"I don't know, sir."

Smith reached a decision. "Call Chernukhin," he said. "Find out what happened. If he doesn't answer, we'll know Beech killed him."

Mirim and Cecelia watched as Casper navigated the net on Leonid's computer. This was similar to the sort of work he'd done at Data Tracers, and he didn't need any imprint to tackle something as simple as a standard web search, even on a specialized closed network.

He'd had Leonid boot up the system, but not much more than that—it would be too easy to slip in some sort of signal. Once the browser was up and running, and Casper had satisfied himself that Leonid, like almost every user, had the system set up to remember all the necessary passwords, he had wrapped Leonid up in bedsheets, tied him with electrical cords, and shoved him in the bedroom closet.

Casper had grinned wryly at discovering that the log-ons were completely automatic. Everyone did that, of course—who wanted to carry around a list of passwords in his head? And ordinarily, no one else would be using one's own personal home computer—most people had all manner of private business on their systems, and never worried about what might happen if someone got access to them.

For someone who worked in security, though, it was sloppy and careless.

Convenient, though; Casper was able to search through the law nets for his own name, to track back any mentions he found, and to cross-reference them.

He had already done exactly that, and had moved on to other things, when a phone rang.

Casper glanced up from the screen.

Leonid thumped against the closet door, but the others paid no attention to the pounding as they looked at one another.

"I could answer it," Mirim said. "I've been here before, after all."

Casper considered that, then shook his head. "No," he said, "Leonid stepped out for awhile. Let his voicemail get it." He tapped a few keys. "And I'd say that's our cue to get the hell out of here, while we still can—if that's Covert calling to check up, no answer will mean trouble." He logged off, then popped out a disk and pocketed it. "Come on," he said.

"Where?" Cecelia asked. "I thought we came here because we didn't have anywhere else to go."

Casper tapped the pocket with the disk. "I've learned a few things," he said. "I think we can find somewhere better now."

Cecelia seemed inclined to argue, but Mirim took her by the arm.

"Come on," she said, "let's get out of here. Leonid's going to be really pissed when he gets free."

Cecelia glanced at the closet, then shrugged.

The phone rang again and again as Casper, Mirim, and Cecelia gathered up their belongings—and some of Leonid's—and departed.

Behind them, Leonid kicked viciously and pointlessly against the closet door.

"There's no answer," Smith's assistant said. "How do you want it handled?"

Smith growled.

"I want a fucking SWAT team, is what I want," he said. "I want them to go in there and get that son of a Beech bitch ... I mean, son of a bitch Beech. And I don't care who gets in the way—if they take out Anspack or Grand or Chernukhin or half a dozen innocent bystanders it's just fine with me!"

"Yes, sir." The assistant turned away.

"And when you've got that started," Smith called after him, "I want you to find me the asshole who *wrote* this goddamned Spartacus File in the first place, and get him in here! I want to know just what the hell is *in* it, in case this Beech gets away again!"

"Yes, sir."

"So where are we going?" Mirim asked.

She was riding shotgun in Leonid's antique Mustang—Casper had wanted to have something intact, with all its windows and the keys and remote, in case he got stopped for speeding. It wouldn't be safe for very long, of course—there'd be an APB on it as soon as Covert's people got Leonid out of the closet, if not

sooner, and it was a very distinctive vehicle.

But it was fast and handy and Casper hoped he wouldn't need it for long.

"New Jersey," Casper said, his eyes locked on the highway.

He had been very much in his high-intensity mode ever since disarming Leonid, and Mirim was getting tired of it. It was wearing, being around Casper when he was "on." Besides, since they were headed northeast on I-95 and the Delaware River was maybe a mile ahead, it was not exactly surprising information that they would be crossing it.

"Where in New Jersey?" she demanded. "Stopping in Jersey, or just passing through?"

"Stopping," Casper said.

"Casper, would you mind being a bit more informative?"

Casper glanced at her and smiled crookedly; his ferocious intensity vanished.

"Sorry," he said, in a voice that had neither the tight, hard command of the fighter, nor the rich tones of the orator, nor the uncertain quaver of the old Casper, but a warm confidence. "I haven't exactly been talkative, have I? I think I was afraid we might be separated, and if that happened and you were captured, the less you knew the better. But that isn't fair, is it?"

"No, it isn't," Mirim said, somewhat mollified.

"Well, it's like this," Casper explained. "This Covert Operations Group has posted warnings all over the nets that I'm a dangerous terrorist in possession of stolen software of theirs, which fits the old definition of a good lie, because it's pretty damn close to the truth—I can't deny being dangerous when I've killed four men in a single day, and *Ido* have Covert's software in my head, even if I didn't want it there. So every law enforcement agency in North America knows that Covert's labeled me as such, right?"

"I guess," Mirim said.

"If they read the nets, they know," Casper said. "And of course they read the nets."

"Okay, so?"

"So, who else would read the law nets?"

Cecelia, resting as well as she could in the cramped back seat, suddenly leaned forward.

"Casper..." she said warningly.

Mirim glanced at her, then back at Casper. "I don't get it," she said.

"Well, think about it, Mirim," he said. "Who else would want to know everything that's going on in the world of cops and robbers, besides the cops?"

"The robbers," Mirim replied automatically. "But I still don't ... oh, no."

Casper grinned. "Now you've got it," he said. "Every cop in the country thinks I'm a dangerous terrorist in possession of government secrets—and so does every terrorist organization with half a brain. And *they* won't want to kill me—they'll want to recruit me!"

Chapter Thirteen

"So just which terrorist organization are you trying to contact?" Mirim asked. "And just how do you plan to do it?"

"Well, I've got a list of possibilities on that disk I took from Leonid's place," Casper answered, as he studied the road signs and checked them against the car's map computer. "There's an underground group called People For Change that sounded promising—they're sort of semi-legitimate, not entirely a bunch of morons or terrorist loonies. They aren't believed to have blown anything up for three or four years now, but they're still active, sending out news releases and the like. And the lawyer who's represented their people whenever they get caught at something lives here in Princeton—somewhere. Not that I can find the place. I wish Leonid had had *amodern* computer in this car!"

"He didn't *want* to have *any* computer," Mirim said. "He only added it because his boss insisted; this car was pre-computer, originally."

"Figures," Casper said. Then he spotted the name he wanted. "Yes!" he said, turning the car.

Ten minutes later he pulled up in front of a large brick house and contemplated it for a moment.

The sun was just below the western horizon, the sky a deepening blue; the streetlights came on as Casper thought, and there were already lights on in the house.

"Celia," he said, "you're a lawyer—you talk to him. We'll wait here in the car."

Cecelia hesitated, then said, "Give me ten bucks, Cas—I may need to give him a token retainer on your behalf, to make what we say privileged communication."

Casper fished out a bill and handed it to her.

Cecelia accepted it, then climbed out of the car, squeezing awkwardly past Mirim.

"Good to be out of there," she said, stretching. "That back seat was never meant for human beings." Then she leaned back in and said, "You two behave yourselves, now."

"Sure thing," Casper replied.

"See that you do, or Mommy will spank."

"I'd like that," Casper said with a grin.

Cecelia gave a quick, unconvincing laugh, then closed the door and started toward the house.

Mirim snorted. "What does she think we're going to do out here?"

"I don't think it's here and now she's worried about," Casper replied. "And I can understand her feelings—you were with me all morning, and you sided with me against Leonid. That's suspicious enough to justify a friendly warning, isn't it?"

"No," Mirim said. "Leonid's a jerk, and I didn't really side with you against him anyway, did I? You had the guns; what was I supposed to do?"

"I had the automatic," Casper said, "but the revolver was lying there on the floor. You could have gotten it while I was using the computer and come up behind me, and ordered me to let Leonid out."

"Why would I do that?" Mirim asked. "I'm not a Hollywood hero, going around grabbing guns and so on. And besides, he'd have shot you!"

Casper shrugged. "You didn't do it," he said. "I don't think the reasons matter, as far as Celia is concerned; you were choosing me over Leonid, and even if you weren't interested in me, it was pretty clear after that that whatever there was between you and Leonid was over."

"Well..." Mirim couldn't really argue with that. "Well, I'd have to be a moron not to prefer almost anyone to Leonid—I don't know what I ever saw in him in the first place."

Casper grinned.

"Bob Schiano," the man in the rumpled plaid shirt said, holding out a hand.

Smith ignored the hand. "I'm using the name Smith," he said. "You wrote the Spartacus File?"

Schiano shoved his hand in his jeans pocket. "I put it together," he said, "but I didn't write the whole thing, or anywhere near it—it was a team project, and that's not counting all the previous art we used."

"Whatever," Smith said. "You know what's in it, right?"

"As much as anyone does," Schiano agreed. "Why? Is someone thinking about using it?"

"Someone *is* using it," Smith said.

"Wow," Schiano said, taking his hands out of his pockets. "Really? Where? I figured they'd call me in to trouble-shoot the installation."

"There was a screw-up," Smith said. He glanced at his assistant, and at the two operatives with computers and headsets who served as his link with the outside world. He hesitated, and Schiano misread that.

"They forgot to tell me? Lost my number, or something?"

"No." Smith sighed. "I mean the installation was a screw-up. We had the program on file at NeuroTalents, so that we could use it on foreign nationals who came in for imprinting as part of our regular aid programs, and the computer glitched."

Schiano frowned. "Glitched how?"

"It optimized an American with the file. A man named Casper Beech came in for a routine imprint, and a

disk-sector failure made the computer feed him the Spartacus File, instead."

Schiano stared at Smith, then looked around for somewhere to sit. He crossed the room and settled slowly onto a chair, then looked up at Smith again.

"Jesus," he said. "And he lived through it?"

"Oh, he lived, all right."

Schiano nodded thoughtfully. "So you want me to help patch him up?"

"No," Smith said. "We want you to tell us what the hell *todo* with him."

"What do you mean? I don't know anything about the medical end."

"I'm not *worried* about the medical end," Smith said, exasperated. "I'm trying to *catch* the son of a bitch!"

Schiano's mouth fell open. "You mean he's *loose* ? And the File's *working* ?"

"Yes, damn it!" Smith shouted.

"But ... oh, my God, we never found anyone who could *take* the Spartacus File—I didn't think there *was* anyone. I figured we'd tried to put too much into it, and we'd *never* find a brain that could handle it."

"Well, the NeuroTalents computer found someone—this man Beech. It didn't just choose the optimization at random, it picked the file that suited him best out of the entire list."

"An *American* ? " Schiano asked, incredulous.

"Yes, an American!"

"But ... excuse me, sir, but in order to be optimized with that file the way I designed it, the subject would have to have been oppressed almost his entire life—kicked around, abused, tormented, and he'd have to have *just taken* it. Spartacus was a rebel *slave* , after all—I structured it so that it would seem as if the subject had finally reached breaking point naturally, after years of mistreatment."

"So?"

Schiano stammered.

"Look, Bob," Smith said, "this may be the land of the free and the home of the brave, but there are losers in America, all the same, and this Beech must have been one of them."

"Yeah, but..."

He stopped. There wasn't any point in arguing any more about it; if it had happened, it had happened.

But Schiano wondered about it, all the same. The Spartacus File required a person with an incredible and totally unrealized potential, and he had always assumed that that meant a member of the lowest classes in an oppressive society, someone who had never been given any chance at all by virtue of being

born into the wrong family.

How could there have been an American who was able to accept it?

"So it's a long shot," Smith said. "Even if it is, it's one that's come in—this Beech is out there, and we think he's doing what the Spartacus File has programmed him to do, which is to try to overthrow the government, and we want him stopped."

"So shoot him," Schiano said—and even as the words left his lips, he wished he hadn't said them.

Shoot Spartacus, who only wanted freedom and equality?

Shoot a man who had never done anything wrong except to be the victim of a computer error, a man of amazing potential?

Worst of all, shoot the only living manifestation of Bob Schiano's masterpiece?

"We tried," Smith said. "Several times. He dodged a sniper, took out one hit team at his apartment and another on the street, and when we recruited an amateur Beech knew, so our guy wouldn't be spotted, Beech left the bastard tied up in a closet where our own SWAT team nearly blew the guy away."

"Oh," Schiano said. He blinked.

"After that last one, we lost him—he got out about five minutes before we went in after him, and at last report he was headed north on I-95 in an antique Mustang." Smith leaned over Schiano and pointed angrily. "*You* wrote that damn program," Smith said. "You tell us where the hell he's going!"

Cecelia had gone inside five minutes before, and Mirim was getting nervous.

"What if someone spots the car?" she asked. "Or what if he's called the police? Or what if Celia turns you in?"

"Celia won't do that," Casper said, "but maybe we should stretch our legs a bit."

Mirim wasn't so sure about her roommate's trustworthiness—despite her earlier protests, she knew Cecelia was feeling jealous that Mirim and Casper were spending so much time together, and in that condition a brief malign impulse might get out of hand. Mirim had seen Cecelia get out of hand. She didn't think Casper had; a non-resident boyfriend didn't get the same treatment a roommate did.

She didn't say anything, though; she just climbed out of the car.

Casper got out on the other side, and the two of them stood, looking about at the gathering twilight. They could hear the hum of distant traffic, and the chirping of crickets.

"Peaceful here," Casper remarked.

"Yes," Mirim agreed.

The street curved, and there were mature trees everywhere, so they couldn't see very far; perhaps half a dozen large homes were in sight, each with a few lights on.

"Nice neighborhood," Casper said.

Mirim made a noise of agreement.

"Shall we walk a little, see how the plutocrats live?" Casper asked.

Mirim nodded.

Together, they strolled down the sidewalk, admiring the houses. The predominant style was English Tudor; the trees were mostly oak.

"How'd you ever get a name like Mirim, anyway?" Casper asked, as he looked up at the trees.

Mirim glanced at him, startled by the question. It was one she was asked frequently, of course, but Casper had never brought the subject up before.

And there was something odd about the way he was looking at the trees, as if he were checking for snipers.

He probably was.

"It was supposed to be Miriam," she explained, "but it was typoed on the birth registration, and by the time anyone caught it it had gone into the Social Security files as Mirim. It was easier to change what I was called than to convince the government to change anything."

Casper grimaced.

"Typical," he said angrily. "We're supposed to have government of the people, by the people, and for the people here, and you have to change your name to suit the damn government. The government should change to suit *you*, not the other way around!" He turned around.

They were almost out of sight of the Mustang, and they *were* out of sight of the lawyer's house.

"Come on," he said, "we better get back."

As they drew near the house they saw the front door open, and Cecelia stepped out. Casper picked up the pace, and Mirim hurried after him.

Cecelia spotted them.

"Oh, *there* you are!" she said. "Come on, I've got a rendezvous set up."

She headed for the car, and stopped at the door. She looked from Mirim to Casper and back.

"This time, *you* ride in the back," she told Mirim.

Schiano looked over his designer's notes one last time—Smith had arranged for him to retrieve them from government storage, to aid in the pursuit of Beech, and Schiano had happily accepted without mentioning the highly illegal back-up he had always kept on his PDA at home. He then flipped to the report Smith had given him on Beech's actions so far.

"That poor son of a bitch," he said.

"Why?" Smith demanded. He didn't bother asking who Schiano was talking about.

"Because he's gotta be incredibly confused," Schiano replied.

"Why?"

Schiano sighed. "Look," he said, "the Spartacus File was designed to be used against anti-American governments, right?"

"So?"

"So it's got values and ideals built into it, something for our Spartacus to be preaching, something for him to replace the anti-American government with if he succeeds. And since we didn't know exactly *which* governments we might want to turn a Spartacus loose on, only that they'd be anti-American, the basis for all those values and ideals is right here around us—the good ol' U.S. of A." He waved an arm, taking in the entire room. "Our Mr. Beech is now programmed to rebel against any and all authority, and to attempt to overthrow the government—but at the same time, he's programmed to admire the U.S. and to consider the Constitution the most perfect document ever created. So if he *did* overthrow the government, what would he replace it with? Exactly the same thing!" He shook his head. "That'd be enough to drive a guy nuts, I'd think."

Smith stared at him silently for a moment, then said, "Beech doesn't seem to be having any problem with the idea so far."

"How do you know?" Schiano asked. "I'll bet he is."

"So maybe he is," Smith said. "Just tell us how to find him."

Schiano sighed. "Okay," he said, "it's simple enough. It's in the options path right here." He turned the screen back to his notes, scrolled quickly, and pointed. "He knows you're after him, right? And that you were on to him before he was able to assemble an organization?"

Smith nodded.

"And you've tried to assassinate him?"

"Yes."

"Well, then he'll go underground, disappear as completely as he can—there's no point in watching his family or friends; he won't have any contact at all with his old life until he's got a secure position to recruit from."

"We know he's disappeared," Smith said. "Where has he disappeared *to*?"

"Well, he's got multiple options there," Schiano answered, looking at the flowchart, "but first choice is to contact any existing rebel groups."

"Rebel groups?" Smith asked. "Jesus, Schiano, this is Pennsylvania, not some damn banana republic—we don't have rebels here."

Schiano hesitated, then shrugged. "Okay," he said. "Second choice is to take shelter in the underclass and start assembling his own organization, working through organized crime and charitable organizations."

"Where?"

"In the biggest city he can get to, of course," Schiano said. "The best place to hide is in a crowd, and it's in the big cities that you find the underclass, and organized crime, and organized charity. In most countries that would be the capital, so Washington would have been a possibility, but you said he was headed north, so he must be going to New York."

"Unless he doubled back, to throw us off," Smith said.

"Unless he doubled back," Schiano agreed. "Which he might have; I deliberately left that random, to make him less predictable. Remember, when I wrote this I was assuming he'd be on *our* side—I wanted him to succeed."

"So he's in either New York or Washington," Smith said.

"Probably," Schiano said. "Remember, though, he's not a computer, and this is an optimization program, not a set of fixed instructions—he's still got free will."

"Fuck free will," Smith said. He turned and stamped away.

As he walked, he marveled to himself at the blind naivete of that stupid programmer. Didn't he realize the difference between ideals and reality? The Constitution had been increasingly irrelevant for at least a century, and downright dead ever since the Crisis; if Beech really believed in the American dream, he'd find plenty to rebel against.

Behind him, at his workstation, Bob Schiano stared after the departing spymaster.

Smith was an idiot. Didn't he realize that "rebel groups" didn't necessarily mean a bunch of yahoos with guns running around in the mountains or jungles? The U.S. was *full* of rebel groups; they were all over the web. Terrorism wasn't as bad as a few years back, but there were still terrorists, and weren't those rebels? The fundies and militia groups had been reduced in the campaigns of the early '20s, but did Smith really think they were *extinct*? And there were groups that hadn't resorted to violence but were just as rebellious in other ways. Some of them were labelled "subversive organizations," others were "lunatic fringe," a few were "cults" or even recognized churches, while others didn't fit any handy label, but to the Spartacus File they'd *dall* qualify as rebel groups.

And that wasn't even counting all the little whacko political parties that the Party hadn't bothered to outlaw. The Spartacus File would see any party that had never been in power or at least held a seat in Congress—which was to say, just about any party except the Democratic-Republicans and the Greens—as either a present rebel group or a potential one.

Of course, Schiano could have pointed out Smith's error—but why should he? He didn't have anything against this Casper Beech. And Smith was an asshole.

Besides, Schiano thought, he wanted to see just what the Spartacus File could actually do.

Chapter Fourteen

The van pulled up beside them, and a flashlight shone in Casper's face; he blinked, but resisted the temptation to shield his eyes.

The light moved on to Cecelia, then to Mirim, then went out.

"I don't believe I'm really doing this," Mirim muttered from the back seat. "I mean, why am I sitting here in a deserted parking lot in the middle of New Jersey meeting a bunch of crackpot revolutionaries?"

"Because the government is trying to kill me to cover up their own mistake," Casper said, "and you've got the guts and the morals to join me in trying to stop them."

"Christ, Cas, you sound like a video hero," Cecelia replied.

The van door slammed; a thin young man in black, wearing a black ski mask, had climbed out. He came over to the Mustang; Casper rolled down the window.

"You're Beech?" the man in black asked. He did not bend down to bring his face closer; that, Casper knew, would make him too easy to grab.

"Yes," Casper said.

"Which one's the lawyer?"

Casper jerked a thumb at Cecelia. "Ms. Grand," he said.

"And the other? The phone call wasn't real clear."

"Her name's Mirim Anspack," Casper said. "She's just a friend who got caught in the crossfire."

The man in black considered that.

"I'll vouch for her," Beech said. "If that's worth anything."

"It isn't," the man in black said. He looked around at the empty parking lot—a church lot on a Tuesday night. The van and the Mustang were the only vehicles in sight.

"Get out of the car," he said.

Casper obeyed promptly. Cecelia and Mirim were slower, but eventually all three were standing.

"You armed?"

Casper nodded.

The man in black held out a hand, and Casper handed over the Browning 9mm—the .357 was in the glove compartment.

"I'd like it back later," Casper said.

The man didn't answer. "What about the car?" he asked.

"Hotter than hell, I'm afraid," Casper replied. "I took it off a man who tried to kill us this afternoon. I'd suggest running it up to New York and ditching it somewhere in the city."

"Leave the keys," the man said.

"They're in the ignition."

"Get in the van." He opened the back door of the vehicle.

"Casper, are you sure about this?" Mirim asked.

"Get in the van," Casper said.

Reluctantly, Mirim got in the van.

Casper was fairly certain that at least half the subsequent twenty-minute drive was just misdirection and doubling back, but he didn't try to keep track. He had no intention of escaping from these people.

He'd been doing some thinking on the way here. He couldn't just hide out until the heat blew over, not after killing four feds; the heat wasn't going to blow over, ever. And he couldn't lose himself forever and create a new identity—his fingerprints and voiceprint and retinal patterns were on file, and sooner or later he'd be spotted somehow, his voice recognized on a random phone check or his style spotted on the nets.

Not to mention that he'd have to open new online accounts, and a standard background check might nail him.

So he didn't intend to hide; he intended to take the offensive, and he couldn't do that alone. These people he was meeting weren't just a temporary refuge; they were his hope for the future.

He intended to recruit them.

Bob Schiano gulped his personal caffeine-sugar mix and studied the screen.

Smith wanted him to locate Beech so that Covert could kill him, and Schiano was indeed doing his best to locate Beech, but he wasn't at all sure about this killing stuff.

It wasn't that anything in Beech's file from before the optimization made him sound especially appealing; he'd been a corporate nonentity, working at a dead-end job for an obscure member of the Consortium, with nothing of particular interest in his background. He was an orphan who had inherited his parents' massive debts—they'd lived just long enough to be covered by the revised bankruptcy laws and Enhanced Creditor Recovery Act, so that half Beech's after-tax income went toward paying the interest on their decades-old medical and legal bills. His work performance evaluations were inconsistent—his superiors consistently rated him as "marginal," while the actual productivity figures were well above average, and Schiano knew that that meant he was a loser, a scapegoat, someone his bosses felt free to dump on.

There were no files on his personal life—no one had cared about him enough to start one, he'd always

managed to stay out of any government aid programs that would have called for evaluation of his mental or social state, and he'd never had the money for any sort of private therapy. Schiano noticed, though, that Beech had never married and had no acknowledged offspring, and had never been named in any divorce action or custodial suit. Apparently he wasn't much of a success with women, either—though he hadn't struck out completely, since he did have this lawyer, Cecelia Grand, he was seeing.

Grand had a much juicier file—lawyers got a lot more attention than liability analysts—but Schiano doubted any of it mattered. Beech wouldn't be taking Grand's advice; he'd be doing what he, in his optimized state, thought best, and he'd be taking along whoever he wanted.

Beech didn't own a car—he had once, but lost it in an insurance scam.

In fact, Beech had been dragged into court an average of once every sixteen months for his entire adult life on one petty complaint or another, and had always either lost or settled out of court, though Schiano could see no evidence that he'd ever actually been at fault.

The man was a complete and classic loser, beaten down by fortune and society, with no known talents beyond some minor skill with computers and, according to interviews with his co-workers, a decent sense of humor.

But then had come the imprint session and the subsequent optimization. For a few days nothing had changed—he'd called in sick, but that was about it.

And then Tuesday he had killed four trained assassins and escaped a government dragnet, taking along two women; he had used another assassin's own computer to get onto the net.

That last was something Smith didn't seem to have paid any attention to, but Schiano did. Beech hadn't just tied up Leonid Chernukhin and fled—or easier still, shot him and fled. Instead Beech had spent precious time on the computer, even though, from Chernukhin's account, Beech knew that Covert was after him.

He must have been after something important to him, and Schiano could guess what it was. He'd told Smith that Beech's first choice would be contacting an existing rebel organization, and Smith had dismissed the idea, but Schiano had gone through the access log for Chernukhin's machine—getting through Leonid's cheap firewall had been absurdly easy.

He couldn't tell *exactly* what Beech had and hadn't read, since he'd had the sense to dump the cache and erase the user log, but it certainly looked as if he'd gone through the latest information on subversives and terrorist groups.

And after that he'd headed north out of Philadelphia.

Schiano guessed that he did, indeed, plan to contact some rebel organization, somewhere in New York or New Jersey—and take it over.

That was very interesting indeed.

Schiano had never intended the File for use in any country as big and complex as the United States, and he was fascinated watching it in action.

Smith wanted Beech killed before he could do anything—but Schiano, who had compiled the Spartacus

File, wanted to see how far Beech could get, and what, if anything, he'd do about the apparent conflict in his programming between pro-Americanism and the need to overthrow the government.

Schiano was beginning to suspect it wasn't that much of a conflict, actually. After all, sending assassins after him hardly reflected the highest ideals of American society, or any great respect for Constitutional rights.

Not that he'd ever say anything like that to Smith. If Smith had any ideals, Schiano doubted they resembled anything in the Constitution. The entire Covert Operations Group didn't much resemble anything in the Constitution.

And Schiano already had a sneaking admiration for anyone who could elude Covert this long. Beech might have been a loser, but he also had the potential to be a new Spartacus.

Of course, Spartacus wound up crucified.

Schiano took another gulp of mix and wondered whether Beech knew what had happened to him.

And whether someone should tell him.

"So you're Casper Beech," the redheaded man said.

"Sure am," Casper agreed.

"The word on the net is that you stole some fancy government files. Are you trying to sell them? Because if that's it, why did you come to us, rather than the Iranians or the Germans? They've got a lot more money."

"You believe what the government says on the nets?" Casper asked.

The redheaded man smiled. "No," he said. "So suppose you tell me why they're really after you—if they are, and this isn't all a sting of some kind."

"Suppose you tell me first who all you people are, and how I'm supposed to be sure this isn't all a government trap," Casper replied.

The redhead glanced at his companions—two women and three men, seated around a battered kitchen table. One of them had been the man in the ski mask who picked up Casper, Mirim, and Cecelia; another had driven the van, and one of the women had been aboard, as well.

"We are the executive committee of People for Change," the redhead said. "We are dedicated to the overthrow of the corrupt rule of corporate America and its political lackeys, and the destruction of the military-industrial complex."

"I didn't ask for a speech," Casper snapped. "How am I to know I can trust you?"

The redheaded man frowned at him for a second; then the woman who had not been in the van interjected, "You aren't. We can't test your statements, you can't test ours, so either we can agree not to trust each other and we can take you out and dump you somewhere, or we can get on with it."

Casper grinned. "Fair enough," he said. "Just wanted to make sure we understood each other."

The redheaded man threw the woman an angry glance.

"Fact is," Casper said, "I didn't deliberately steal anything from the government. I just went in for a neural imprinting, and they screwed up and gave me the wrong one—some kind of secret government imprint."

"*What* kind of secret government imprint?" the redhead demanded.

"I don't know yet," Casper said, shrugging. "All I know is that it's important enough that they tried to kill me, and the imprint was good enough that they couldn't do it. I survived at least three attempts in a single day."

The members of the executive committee glanced at one another.

"I don't know," said the man who had driven the van. "Sounds pretty unlikely."

Casper shrugged. "If I were lying, wouldn't I have come up with something more convincing?"

"Oh, Christ," muttered a bearded man. "Not *that* old argument again—that we have to trust anything that sounds stupid because the feds know better!"

"Good point," Casper said. "Yeah, I'm sure the feds can be stupid, or sometimes they can be smart enough to *look* stupid. I withdraw my question; instead, I'll just say that I know I'm telling the truth, but I don't have any simple way of proving it to you."

"So suppose it's true," the redheaded man said. "You got this top secret imprint, and the government decided to kill you, because you can't erase an imprint any other way, and you managed to survive three tries at killing you. Okay, fine. But what are you doing *here* ? What do you want from us?"

"I want to stay alive," Casper replied. "I want a place to hide, for now. And I'm not interested in betraying my country to the Iranians or the Germans or anyone else; I wanted to find Americans who would be willing to protect me from the feds."

"And what's in it for us?"

Casper smiled. "I could get idealistic and argue that my enemy's enemy is my friend, and all foes of the oppressive machinery of the oligarchy should join in common cause, but you know that's bullshit. Instead, I'll just point out that the government must think whatever they put in my head is dangerous to them, or they wouldn't be so eager to destroy it—and if they're right, and it *is* dangerous to them, then you people want it on your side."

"And suppose," the bearded man said, "that this is all a trick, that what they *actually* imprinted you with is instructions to betray us, that the attempts to kill you were faked, and that you honestly don't know this, but it's true, and at the right time you'll turn on us."

Casper smiled. "Could be," he said, "but I didn't just escape from those feds—I killed four of them. And the word's on the net that I'm to be shot on sight. Isn't that a bit drastic, just to get at you folks?"

They didn't like that one; Casper could see it in their expressions; the bearded man in particular looked annoyed. Casper had thrown their own ineffectuality and insignificance in their faces. They'd like to

believe that yes, they *were* important enough that it would be worth the lives of four G-men to infiltrate their organization.

They had to recognize the truth, though.

"We'll want to check you out, verify as much of your story as we can," the redhead said.

Casper shrugged. "Of course," he said. "I'm in no hurry; as long as I'm safe for the moment, whatever you want is fine."

The redheaded man considered, then gestured. "Tasha will show you to your room," he said. "We'll let you know."

The shorter, plumper woman, who had guarded them in the van, led the way out of the crowded kitchen and up the stairs of the old house, and Casper followed cheerfully.

Tasha, they called her. A revolutionary named Tasha ought to be tall and thin and seductive, with straight black hair and a beret; this woman was about five-one and fat, wearing jeans and a baggy black sweatshirt and with frizzy blonde hair that could use washing.

Casper liked that. This Tasha was real, not just a Hollywood stereotype. People For Change was real. They were real Americans, fighting against the corrupt power structure.

Maybe they didn't look like much, but according to the reports on them they had taken credit for blowing up a precinct station in New York four years ago, saying the police had been torturing suspects there, and they had killed a cop in the process. They apparently weren't as ineffectual as they appeared.

They weren't exactly friendly yet, but they hadn't just shot him, either. They hadn't even questioned Mirim or Cecelia—he wondered how long it would be before they noticed that little oversight.

It was a perfectly satisfactory start.

He wished he had a better idea just what he was starting; the thing in his head hadn't told him that yet.

But he could guess.

Chapter Fifteen

"I can't believe this," Smith said. "We've been searching the streets for a week, and we haven't found a trace of Beech!"

Schiano shrugged. "New York's a big city," he said.

"Not *that* big," Smith retorted. "You sure about what you told me?"

"Sure I'm sure," Schiano said. "First choice in his situation is to link up with rebels; second choice is to go to ground among the poor and make connections with the organizations poor people deal with—charities and organized crime."

"You're sure?"

"I wrote it, didn't I?"

"So they tell me. You don't seem terribly eager to prove it by helping us stop this son of a bitch, though."

"I'm not in any hurry," Schiano said with a shrug. "Not so long as you're paying me a thousand bucks an hour."

"You might want to earn some of that!"

"I've tried."

Smith glared at Schiano.

Schiano looked back calmly.

He wasn't bothered by Smith's anger; Smith was an asshole. Schiano kept telling him that first choice was to join with some group trying to do what Beech was programmed to do, that is, to overthrow the government, and Smith kept missing it.

He had, at one point, asked whether Beech would sell out to some foreign power, and Schiano had told him no, which was quite true—that option was specifically avoided in the Spartacus File because it would lead to too many potential complications if the optimized agent went looking for outside allies. Covert had wanted their Spartacus to run an entirely home-grown operation, so no one could complain about international meddling.

But Smith still hadn't hit on the idea of terrorists or subversive organizations. It was really quite an amazing blind spot. To Smith, Schiano had long since realized, those weren't rebels—those were nuts. Dangerous criminal nuts. Rebels were something else, something the U.S. didn't have.

Schiano had to struggle sometimes to keep from giggling at Smith's absurdity.

"Okay," Smith said, "so we haven't been able to find Beech directly; we've just wound up with a bunch of dead derelicts and complaints from human rights groups. You say he'll try to link up with organized crime?"

Schiano considered that.

Technically, a lot of the subversive organizations qualified as organized crime; certainly, any that had ever used terrorism did, and plotting to overthrow the government was conspiracy to commit treason, wasn't it?

"Yeah," Schiano said. "He's probably already contacted someone."

"Who?"

"I don't know," Schiano said. "What do I know about organized crime? I'm just a computer jock."

That was the closest to an outright lie that Schiano had come yet in his dealings with Smith, because while he didn't actually *know*, for the last day or two he'd begun to suspect just who Beech had joined

up with. There were messages on the net—messages asking readers if they were unhappy with the way the country was run.

That was hardly anything new, but the wording of these particular messages sounded eerily familiar to Schiano.

If Smith phrased his questions properly, Schiano would have to admit that he was pretty sure Casper Beech had linked up with a group of suspected terrorists called People For Change.

But so far, Smith hadn't phrased his questions correctly.

And Schiano *was* unhappy with the way the country was run—especially the piece of it Smith was running.

Giving up a thousand dollars an hour to join a bunch of crazy revolutionaries was a bit more than he was ready to do—but he was thinking about it.

"I don't understand what you're doing," the redheaded man—Colby, the other members of PFC usually called him, though he also seemed to answer to "Rob" or "Perkins"—said as he leaned over Casper's shoulder and looked at the computer screen. He was tall enough that he had to stoop slightly to see the display.

"Several things," Casper said, still tapping keys.

"Name one," Colby said, straightening up.

"Well, first off," Casper said, hitting ENTER and leaning back, "I'm trying to raise the general level of discontent. While it's true that you don't need to have the backing of the majority in order to win a revolution, you *do* have to know that the general population isn't going to come out in support of the old regime. There are going to be hardships and displacements in any change of government, and you want to make sure that the people don't consider them an intolerable price to pay, or you get a counter-revolution."

Colby considered that.

"I thought you just wanted to stay alive," he said.

"That's right," Casper said. "And the best way to do that is to make sure the government that's trying to kill me hasn't got the power to do so."

"So you seriously plan to overthrow the Party?"

"Yeah, I guess I do."

"That woman you brought with you says she can keep you alive by making you *acause celebre*."

"Celia?" Casper blinked. "She's probably right."

"Then why bother with the rest of this?"

Casper suddenly looked blank.

"I don't know," he admitted. He looked back at the computer screen in puzzlement.

"You said you had several reasons for this stuff."

"Yeah," Casper said, still puzzled. "I'm trying to gauge the depth of existing resentment, and to make indirect contacts with any organizations that can be recruited to help us."

"All in service to the revolution?"

"I guess so."

"I think you're wasting your time."

Casper looked up. "Oh?"

Colby nodded. "I've studied Mao and Lenin and the rest—maybe you think they were wrong about how to run a government once they'd succeeded, we don't have to agree on that, I don't necessarily agree with them myself, but you'll admit they understood how to stage a revolution, won't you?"

"I suppose so," Casper said—not so much because he agreed, since he had not actually read Mao and Lenin, as to see where Colby was leading.

"Well, they agree, and anyone can see, that the peasants—the common people, they don't need to literally be peasants—will obey whoever is in power; as Mao put it, the masses need not be educated in the new thought until after the revolution. If you seize the centers of power, the existing power structure will yield."

"Uh huh. Sure. Seize the centers of power. And how are you planning to do that?"

Colby frowned. "We do need a solid cadre, ready to die for the cause, before we can take control of the communications and command centers. But you don't recruit true revolutionaries by posting frivolous complaints about government abuse; everyone *knows* the government is corrupt."

"Oh, I see—and you've been able to recruit these loyal troops we need? Like Ed, the guy the rest of you watch nervously because he blew up that cop four years ago? Or wasn't I supposed to notice that?"

Colby stared angrily at him.

"Look," Casper explained, "you're right that I'm not going to suddenly convert anyone; I'm mostly just planting seeds that may or may not yield something later. But I'm *also* providing encouragement for anyone who's *already* on our side to join us."

Colby considered that, then changed the subject.

"And if you succeed," he said, "you plan to replace the corrupt so-called Party with true representatives of the people, and redistribute the stolen wealth of the capitalists to the workers?"

Casper stared up at him.

"Jesus," he said, "what rock did *you* crawl out from under? No, I'm not going to do anything like that! I

want a proper, democratically-elected government, and a free-market economy—I'm an *American*, for heaven's sake!"

"Isn't that what we have *now*?" Colby asked sardonically.

Casper blinked.

Colby waited for a reply, but Casper could not come up with anything to say, and at last Colby snorted in disgust and turned away.

Casper watched him go.

And finally, the words came to him, too late to be spoken aloud.

No, they didn't have a democratically-elected government, they had a one-party state. Even in the primaries, when there *were* primaries, the only choices the voters were offered had been selected for them from the class of professional politicians by other professional politicians. And they didn't have a free market economy because the Consortium and the other government-granted monopolies had, with the help of the Party politicians, taken over the marketplace and rearranged it to suit themselves.

But was that enough to justify a revolution? The politicians *had* been elected; even if people weren't happy with them, they'd voted for them. The two old parties had been merged into the Party to deal with the Crisis, and the Party had done what it promised. The Crisis was over, but the people still voted for the Party; the Greens held a few West Coast seats in Congress, but not enough to matter, while the Libertarians and Socialist Workers and the rest couldn't get more than one or two percent of the vote.

And that meant that those people were hardly likely to march in the streets in protest, let alone take up arms and assault the power stations and communications centers.

Casper frowned.

There was something wrong here. There was something in his thinking that didn't match the real world.

If it was *his* thinking, at all.

He'd never really hated the Party before; he'd considered it a sort of necessary, or at least inevitable, evil. A divided, two-party government had been inefficient and wasteful, unsuited to the complex modern world, and had brought on the Crisis, when the American economy virtually collapsed—that's what the propaganda always said, and most of the American people believed it. George Washington's warning against political parties was a favorite theme in Party literature, and the countries of eastern Europe, with their dozens of parties and unstable coalition governments, were held up as bad examples—better by far, the Party said, to have one organization providing the candidates. And everyone agreed that the little parties, with their extremist views, were all just eccentrics and crazies, relics of an earlier era. No one wanted them in power. The Greens were useful as a prod, but nobody wanted a Green government.

Casper had always gone along without really thinking about it. He'd been too busy with his own problems to care about politics.

But now he was thinking about it. He thought about it constantly. He was obsessed with politics, with strategies and tactics, with theories of government and constitutional rights, all of it stuff that had never concerned him before.

This wasn't anything a spy would need, let alone an assassin—but it wasn't, Casper realized, his own thinking at all.

Just what had NeuroTalents put in his head?

Chapter Sixteen

"If you look at history," Casper said, "you'll see that a revolution can only succeed if the military either supports it or remains neutral. The final Soviet coup failed because the military came out for Yeltsin; Napoleon succeeded where Robespierre failed because he had the army behind him."

"You think you can subvert the military, then?" Colby asked. He, Casper, and Ed, the bearded member of PFC, were seated around the kitchen table, talking.

Casper considered that question for a long moment, then admitted, "Probably not. Not as it's presently constituted."

"Then how can you expect to win?" Ed demanded. "Maybe now you're beginning to see why we've used terrorism—there isn't much hope in historical models, but we have to do *something*."

"But it won't work," Casper insisted. "Terrorists can't overthrow a government. The only times terrorism has been at all successful have been in driving out an occupying army, by making it too expensive to stay; that's not the situation here. An occupying army has somewhere else to go home to; the Democratic-Republican Party doesn't."

"We know it doesn't work," Colby said, glaring at Ed. "That's why we stopped. But what other choice do we have?"

"You have to take the long view," Casper replied. "Build up discontent, use non-violent civil disobedience, force the government to crack down—that makes the people in power appear as oppressors."

"*They* are oppressors."

"Of course, but you have to make them look the part."

"Which is what you're doing," Ed said. "Well, I don't have your patience." He stood up.

Casper watched as Ed walked away, then turned to Colby, who shrugged and sat silently in his chair.

Casper was thinking over what he had just said to Ed, and trying to match it against reality—the reality of the history of the United States.

Since 1865, no revolutionary group in the U.S. had ever gotten very far. There had never been a serious coup attempt in all the hundred and fifty years since. Every assassination had resulted in a peaceful transfer of power to the designated successor. Even the most disputed elections hadn't led to violence.

Casper wanted to think that no revolutionary in all that time had had his own abilities, and that the

government had never before been so corrupt and unpopular, but he had to admit to himself that he was probably being optimistic about that. Hell, before his imprinting he hadn't had *any* knowledge of subversion or rebellion, and the stuff in his head now couldn't be any better than the abilities of the people who wrote the file, none of whom had actually overthrown the U.S. government.

And the government had been corrupt or unpopular during Reconstruction, under Hoover, in the Vietnam era—there had been revolutionary movements and mass demonstrations sometimes, but nothing had ever come close to actually overthrowing the system.

Revolutions and counter-revolutions in the U.S. had come about at the ballot box or in the courts, not in the streets. Cecelia had been telling him that, telling him that the way to defy the power structure was to become part of it, but he had been resisting.

He had wanted to find some way to bring the whole thing down from the outside, but looking at it, he didn't think it could be done. Seizing power stations wouldn't do anything but piss people off.

The communications network *couldn't* be seized—there was far, far too much of it. Two thousand TV networks, transmitting by satellite; the internet supplying information through a system designed to withstand anything up to and including a nuclear war; the multiply-redundant cellular phone systems; thousands of radio stations ... ?

And that wasn't even considering such alternative, semi-obsolete forms as faxes and newspapers.

Taking over the military ... well, first off, Casper doubted it could be done; the military was so thoroughly integrated with the civilian population and power structure that he couldn't see any way to detach it. But even if he did, he didn't think a military coup would work. There were three million people in the military—and three hundred million guns in civilian hands. The army would not necessarily bring the National Guard with it, and almost certainly wouldn't carry the police.

And it wouldn't carry the media, or the people.

Besides, the idea was to set up a better, more democratic government, a multi-party government, not a military dictatorship.

Atemporary military government might not be a disaster; it had certainly worked in other countries. Casper could use it to root out the most corrupt elements of the government, then stage new elections. But the military-backed candidates would lose in the elections, and the military might refuse to step aside.

It might be worth a try if nothing else worked, but it didn't look like a very appealing course of action.

And if you looked at history ... ?

Maybe, Casper thought, leaning on the kitchen table, he was going about this wrong. He wanted to get the Party out of power, and replace it with people of his own choosing. He'd been looking at revolution as the way to do that—but maybe that wasn't the only way, or even the best way.

He wanted to get his own people into power. The government said he was a terrorist. Well, where had one-time terrorists wound up in power?

Soviet Russia. Nazi Germany. Israel. The Taliban's Afghanistan. Palestine.

Those were not very cheering comparisons.

But it was worth noting that only half of the examples that had sprung immediately to mind—and he knew there were others he hadn't thought about—involved terrorists successfully leading a violent revolution and seizing power by force. Hitler had maneuvered his way to power through the 1932 election, and the Israeli terrorists had been elected.

Having been a terrorist apparently didn't make one unelectable.

Of course, this might not apply in America—but elections were definitely the way to transfer power here. A political party had a much better shot at overthrowing the government than a revolutionary cell did.

So where could he get a political party? He looked around at Colby, who was still silently watching him, and at the dingy little kitchen.

People For Change consisted, so far as he could determine, of about twenty people, of whom half a dozen, not counting himself, Mirim, and Cecelia, lived right here. There were another hundred or so people who supported PFC at least to the point of knowing about it without turning anyone in for that last string of bombings in New York four years ago. Not even Ed, the unrepentant cop-killer who made everyone nervous, had been ratted out.

That wasn't much to start with in founding a political movement, but it was better than nothing.

He had an organization, at least a minimal one. He had a charismatic leader, in himself—for a moment he marveled at his own arrogance in describing himself that way, but he dismissed that; thanks to whatever the government had put in his head, he *was* a charismatic leader, or at least could become one. He knew it.

What else did he need?

Money. He needed money to buy access to the networks, more access than an ordinary citizen could get—nobody actually *watched* the public-access stuff where the loonies raved, and political discussions on the net just degenerated into endless arguments that sensible people filtered out. To attract mass attention, you needed to be in the mass media. That was how the whole system had gone bad in the first place—only millionaires could afford to run for office, and millionaires weren't going to screw around with the corporate structures that had made them rich, other than to make themselves even richer.

If he could talk to people with money, he knew he could raise the funds he'd need—but how could he do that? Not through public-access channels or the public nets, that was certain. Maybe if he could get onto talk shows? But how could he do that while he was still a fugitive?

And he would also need a front organization that people could donate to—it didn't have to be elaborate, a box number and a bank account should just about cover it. He'd need an employee, someone who wasn't wanted by the feds, to sign all the papers—but PFC ought to be able to provide that.

He wondered how much of this he was figuring out on his own, and how much had been programmed into him. He had no way of telling.

But did it really matter? However it got there, it was there, and he might as well get on with it. He needed to build up a political organization; that was more important than a military one in the U.S. There

was something in him that was very, very unhappy with that idea, but that he was fairly sure was part of the programming he'd received.

To build a political organization he needed access to people—but it didn't have to be live, did it?

"So," he asked Colby, "is there a vidcam around here?"

"A vidcam? You mean a webcam?" Colby glanced over his shoulder.

"I was hoping for something a little better, but a webcam would do."

"I don't know. Probably."

Annoyed, Casper got to his feet and marched into the next room; Colby watched him go without comment.

The unattended computer in the next room had no webcam attached, so far as Casper could see, but as long as he was there he logged into the local network to see whether one might show up. None did, but as long as he was online he took a moment to check his e-mail log, the replies to the messages he'd posted on the nets under various pseudonyms.

Most of it, judging by the subject lines, looked like the usual junk—people agreeing with him, people arguing with him, people trying to sell him things.

One entry on the list caught his eye, though.

"32: From: R.S.CHI Subject: C'PR BCH"

Casper recognized his own name in the subject line immediately—but he also saw that the government watchdog programs wouldn't. A human being might, but the volume of e-mail traffic was far too great for the government to use human watchdogs.

So unless it was some bizarre coincidence, not only was someone calling him by his real name, but whoever it was didn't want the FBI to know about it.

Casper sat down and clicked on item #32.

After the usual headers, he read, "Dear Mr. B.: If I'm mistaken about your identity, I apologize, but I assume it's you. If you really are who I think you are—friendly ghost tree—I think you'll be very interested in the attached file, SPXPTA.DOC—it provides the basic working specs for an optimization program that was accidentally run at NeuroTalents' Philadelphia facility not too long ago, as well as some other relevant information."

Casper was very interested indeed. "Friendly ghost tree"—he'd heard of Casper the Friendly Ghost when he was a kid, though he'd never seen the movies or any of the old cartoons, and he certainly knew what a beech tree was. There couldn't be much doubt that this R.S. Chi had identified him correctly. He opened the file.

It was gibberish. Casper stared at it for a moment, then realized that it was encrypted—and as was obvious at a glance, it wasn't the standard legal encryption.

That was *really* interesting.

It was also frustrating. How was he supposed to read it?

He went back to the message to look for clues. The document name was the first thing that caught his eye—what the hell did SPXPTA mean?

Well, he didn't know about all of it, but PXP was an illegal encryption program, Pretty eXtreme Privacy, that had been around for years. People For Change used it sometimes; so did about a million other people. The FBI would occasionally pick a user at random and come down on him, but the volume of traffic was too great for serious policing, especially since most of the messages they caught and decrypted were things like, "Bet we're ticking off the feds with this one!" FBI complaints against such users tended to get thrown out of court—the users were usually the kids of Party members or Consortium executives.

The FBI could break PXP encryption if they had to, but there was too much of it on the nets for them to get all of it, and it would keep the automatic watchdogs from spotting key words and calling the file to a human being's attention.

One of the key words they watched for was PXP, of course—to slow its spread. Nesting it in the name of the file like that might keep it from being spotted.

So the file was encrypted with PXP. Fine. Except now Casper needed the two keys, which would each be a long string of more or less random characters. *What* strings of characters?

Well, there was the obvious one, the only other thing the mysterious R.S. Chi had sent him. Casper brought up PXP, and listed the first key as: "Dear Mr. B.: If I'm mistaken about your identity, I apologize, but I assume it's you. If you really are who I think you are—friendly ghost tree—I think you'll be very interested in the attached file, SPXPTA.DOC—it provides the basic working specs for an optimization program that was accidentally run at Neuro Talents' Philadelphia facility not too long ago, as well as some other relevant information."

That was presumably the private key; now he needed the public one. He had an idea how to find that; he googled on newsgroup posts by "R.S. Chi."

768 articles were listed; he picked one at random and opened it, and sure enough, the signature file at the bottom included a public PXP key. He plugged it in and clicked on "Display."

The decrypted file immediately began to scroll across the screen in plain English. Casper leaned forward and watched. When it was completed he read it through carefully, then read it again.

When he had finished he sat back in his chair and stared at the screen.

If Casper's guess was right, "R.S. Chi" was really someone named Robert J. Schiano, whose name turned up all through the notes in the file. And this Schiano was proud enough of his handiwork that he'd wanted Casper to see some of it clearly—because Casper Beech was intimately involved in it, whether he liked it or not.

At least, Casper thought, he now had a name for the thing in his head, and a pretty good idea of what it was supposed to do.

The thing in his head was the Spartacus File. And he, Casper Beech, was supposed to be the new

Spartacus, the slave who would lead an army of slaves in a rebellion against the oppressive republic that had enslaved them.

Spartacus, the gladiator. Spartacus, the rebel. Spartacus, the great general.

Casper Beech smiled as he thought that over. It wasn't anything he would ever have asked to be, it wasn't anything he had ever imagined becoming, but here it was, thrust upon him whether he wanted it or not.

And he had to admit to himself that he rather liked the idea.

Chapter Seventeen

Rose didn't like her assignment. She didn't like it at all.

Casper wished Colby had asked Tasha or Ed or one of the others to help him instead, but they weren't around or weren't willing, and Rose had been agreeable right up until Casper had explained where he wanted her to go.

Now, though, she wasn't happy.

"When Colby said I should help you out, I thought you just wanted me to, like, put things in the bank, or sign checks, or stuff like that," Rose said. "Nobody said anything about talking to reporters."

"You don't have to talk to any reporters," Casper assured her. "You just drop this disk off at the station, with the note. You don't have to talk to anyone. In fact, the fewer people you talk to there, the better."

"Well, how do you know they'll put it on the news, then?" she demanded.

Casper just smiled. "Don't worry," he said. "If they don't we'll try again."

Rose wasn't crazy about that idea, either, but she didn't want to be unreasonable. She picked up the little pouch with obvious distaste, and left.

Casper and Cecelia watched her go.

"Just what are you trying to accomplish, Casper?" Cecelia asked.

"I'm trying to take over the country," Casper said, quite sincerely. Cecelia snorted derisively.

"I thought you just wanted to stay alive," she said.

Casper shrugged. "They programmed me to overthrow the present regime and set up an American-style democratic government—*areal* one, not the oligarchy we have now. I'm trying to oblige them."

"You do anything like that, and they *will* kill you," Cecelia retorted.

"They're going to kill me anyway, if I let them."

"They've lost track of you, haven't they? Why can't you just stay underground?"

"Because first off, they're going to keep looking; and second, they *programmed* me not to. I didn't just get an ordinary imprint, where I can use it or not as I please; I got optimized, and the optimization's got compulsions built into it. I'm *compelled* to rebel against the present government, and authority in general."

"Then don't you have to rebel against your programming, too?"

Casper smiled. "I am," he said. "They programmed me to stage a violent revolution—armies, battles, death and destruction. I'm not going to do it that way, because it won't work here."

"But you're still trying to take over the country?"

Casper nodded.

"You're nuts."

"Maybe," Casper agreed. "Or maybe I'm as sane as anybody. Sure, I'm following the programming from the Spartacus File, but why is that any crazier than following the patchwork programming we all build up from our parents, and our genes, and our schools and friends and jobs?"

"Because it's going to get you *killed* ."

"Not if I can help it."

"And what makes you think you *can* ?" she demanded angrily, her hands on her hips. "Casper, you say they've programmed you to be the new Spartacus—has anyone pointed out to you that Spartacus *died* ? The Romans crucified him! He died on a cross on the Appian Way—I looked it up. So are *you* planning to wind up nailed to a cross somewhere on the Jersey Turnpike?"

Casper blinked at her, surprised and pleased by her anger. He took it to mean that she still cared for him; he'd begun to wonder. Since his optimization he and Cecelia had been drifting apart; they shared a bedroom upstairs, courtesy of Colby's housing arrangements, but they hadn't done much but sleep in it. Cecelia didn't seem to like the new, more assertive Casper Beech as well as she'd liked the wimpy original.

"More likely a bullet-riddled corpse in the Schuylkill River," he said. "And no, that's not what I want—but Celia, it's too late to stop now. They're *already* determined to kill me."

"Are you *sure* ?" she asked, and he thought her eyes looked moist. "Are you sure that's not their damn program, telling you that, making you *assume* they're after you, when they aren't?"

"They did try to kill me," he said. "They started it. They came after me before I'd done anything, before I had any idea what they'd put in my head. Why would they stop?"

"I'll *make* them stop," she said. "I can do that, Cas—I'm a lawyer, and a damn good one. It's a matter of political economics, a P.R. problem and a legal problem. If we make it too expensive for them politically, they won't kill you. You don't have to take over the fucking *country* , Cas! If you do that they *will* kill you."

He stared at her thoughtfully.

"You know," he said, "I think we may have come up with the same answer to two different questions. The first step in my campaign is to make it too politically expensive to kill me. After all, dead men don't win elections. They may vote in them in Chicago, but they don't win them."

She stared back. "Is *that* what you meant when you said that video is the first step in taking over the country?"

He nodded. "It's the next step in my campaign to stay alive," he said.

"But it's just a bunch of ordinary loony-fringe rhetoric, half socialism and half libertarianism."

Casper grimaced. He didn't think his speech was "loony fringe rhetoric"; he'd thought it was fairly reasonable populist stuff. Boring, but reasonable.

That wasn't the point, though. "That's just cover," he said.

"What are you talking about? You put some sort of coded message in there?"

He shook his head. "No. Look, you know there's no way they're ever going to put that whole video on the news, right? Maybe on C-SPAN 4 or something, but not on the news, not even on CNN."

"Of course not," Cecelia agreed. "They'll maybe pull a soundbite or two."

"Exactly. And I wrote that speech so there's only one soundbite worth pulling. Maybe one or two of the networks will miss it, but sooner or later it'll go out."

Cecelia gaped in astonishment. "You mean you made the speech boring *on purpose*?"

"Sure."

"So what's the soundbite?"

"You didn't catch it?" For the first time since making the vid, Casper looked worried.

Cecelia looked embarrassed. "The speech was *boring*, Cas; I didn't watch it all the way through."

"It's only ten minutes."

"I lasted about two, okay?"

Casper shook his head in amazement.

"Okay, okay," Cecelia said. "What's the soundbite?"

"You'll hear it on the news, I hope," he said.

She had to be satisfied with that.

Bob Schiano looked up suddenly when the newscaster mentioned "wanted terrorist Casper Beech."

What had they been saying? He hadn't been listening. Had Covert finally nailed Beech, despite Schiano's lack of help? Despite, in fact, his active assistance to Beech in the form of the file he'd e-mailed?

Or had Beech struck somewhere, and begun his revolution?

And there was Beech's face on the screen, and by the quality of the picture it was a home project, not anything there at the studio.

"The government says I'm an escaped terrorist," Beech said, and his voice and manner carried intensity and conviction as he spoke, even with the poor reproduction. He hadn't looked anywhere near *soalive* in the old interview files Schiano had seen. "I say they lie," Beech continued, "and I say that I'd surrender if I thought I'd live through it."

Then it was cut short.

Schiano stared at the screen. "What the hell was *that* about?" he wondered aloud. That wasn't anything he'd programmed, so far as he could see. Oh, the attitude was from the charisma subroutines that he'd incorporated, the stuff from Behavioral Sciences and Psychwar, and it was good to see that it seemed to be working, since Schiano himself didn't understand how any of that functioned; the delivery was great, but the words were wrong. Saying the government lied was fine, but Beech should be looking for recruits at this point; he shouldn't be talking about surrender, he should be talking about inevitable victory.

What was he doing?

"*Goddamn* it!" Smith said. He turned to his aide. "Get a dozen men down to that station *now* —I want that disk. I want to know everything there is to know about how it got there. And I want to know what idiot put it on the air without clearing it—either that, or who cleared it!"

"Yes, sir."

"And get Schiano up here! I thought Beech was supposed to be recruiting the bums and winos we've been rousting, not making video speeches!"

"You think that'll do it?" Cecelia said. "Just that? I didn't see anything like that in the file you showed us."

She was seated at one end of an old couch, Mirim at the other, with Casper in the middle holding the remote control.

"No, of course not," Casper said, hitting the MUTE button. "It's just a start, something to get people interested in my case. The next step is a rally."

"*Awhat?*" She turned to stare at him. "Casper, are you crazy? You can't go out in public yet! The next step is *alawsuit*."

Casper shook his head. Just like a lawyer—if all you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail, so lawyers always wanted to use the courts. "No, Celia," he said. "If we try to do it that way, I'll be shot resisting arrest, or trying to escape, or maybe I'll just have an unfortunate auto accident. They *have* to kill me, just the way Rome *had* to kill Spartacus. The idea that a slave could rebel and live was too dangerous for Rome to ever let Spartacus live; he had to win or die. It's not quite the same for me; they're big enough they could let a mere rebel live. But I'm not just a rebel, I'm the rebel leader *they made*, and they can't let me live. I have to win or die. And I'm not going to *win* with a lawsuit!"

"Why*not*? " Cecelia insisted. "If we get a court order..."

"Celia, it *won't matter* . They aren't going to play by the rules. They don't want me in jail, they want me *dead* ."

Cecelia subsided unhappily and slumped back on the couch; then, abruptly, she stood up.

"Do it your way, Casper," she said. "You think you know it all now, you believe everything that programmer put in your head and you won't listen to me, and you've got Mirim there acting like your damned cheering section, oh you big strong male, she's always liked 'em tough and stupid, like Leonid, so she'll go along with you without stopping to think. Well, *I'm* not ruled by my hormones, *or* by some Covert Operations programmer grinding out software that's never supposed to get used in the first place, so he doesn't care how good it is! *I'm* not going to throw away everything I know and do what this miracle file says! I read your 'Sparta-doc' file and what that Schiano said you could do, and I don't believe it. They can't imprint that much. You suit yourself, Casper Beech, but it won't work. It's insane, holding a rally and trying to take over the country! It can't be done, but you *can* make a deal to save your own sorry ass, if you'll let me set it up. And when you realize that, if you're still alive, when you realize you've been an idiot, if you ask me nicely, then *maybe* I'll do my best to save you."

She stamped away.

Mirim and Casper watched her go. Casper frowned.

"I think I'll be sleeping on the couch tonight," he said. Then he turned to Mirim and said, "and if you were thinking of inviting me into *your* bed, thanks, but not yet. Let her cool down first."

Mirim's mouth opened, then closed. She stared at him for a moment before she found her voice.

"And what if I wasn't thinking of inviting you?" she said.

Casper smiled wryly. "Well, then I've misjudged the situation and by bringing it out in the open now I may have just saved everybody some later embarrassment."

Mirim smiled back at him. "You didn't misjudge," she admitted.

"Well, good. Thank you. But I'll still sleep on the couch for at least two or three nights. We're going to need Celia's help later, after the rally."

"After the rally?" Mirim asked. "You really plan to hold a rally?"

"Sure do."

"How the hell are you going to do that? Isn't that just *asking* for a sniper to take you down?"

Casper smiled at her again, a big surprised smile this time. "Of course it is," he said. "That's the point. We have to taunt them, make them act stupidly, and make them do it in front of an audience."

"But Cas..."

"The real trick here," he said, interrupting her, "is to live through it."

Chapter Eighteen

Smith waved the print-out at Schiano. "Is he really *this* crazy?"

Schiano shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I didn't think he was crazy at all, but this isn't anything I put into the program."

"So you don't know if it's a trick?"

"It isn't anything I programmed," Schiano repeated.

He didn't need to read the print-out; he'd seen the messages himself. They were all over the nets. Posters were all over New York and Philadelphia as well, pasted on walls, utility poles, trashcans, everywhere. Schiano figured that everyone who had ever been involved with PFC at all must have been called in to help put them up.

Smith was probably trying to track down the printer responsible, but that wasn't likely to work. Schiano doubted a print shop had been involved at all. Anyone could have run off a few thousand posters on his home printer easily enough, and if that was what they'd done then even if Covert was able to identify the make of printer, that wouldn't tell anyone anything useful. It was probably some model that was common as dirt.

"Are you going to let him hold the rally?" Schiano asked.

"You tell me," Smith said. "You're supposed to be the expert on this guy—what's happening here? Is this some kind of diversion? Or is he really going to show up at this thing and give us a clear shot at him?"

"I don't know," Schiano repeated.

"Suppose we clear the streets, cordon off that block, don't let anyone in—then what?"

"Oh, he won't show *then*," Schiano said confidently. "He's not *stupid*."

"But if we let a crowd form?"

Schiano shrugged. "Maybe he'll show," he said. "I just don't know."

"Damn," Smith said. "You aren't a hell of a lot of good, are you?"

"Hey," Schiano protested, "this isn't my job! I'm an imprint programmer, not a goddamned counterspy. I didn't know I was ever going to have to *stop* my Spartacus!"

"Yeah, well..." Smith flung the print-out aside. "Let's just hope your Spartacus is doing something stupid here." He turned and marched angrily away.

Schiano watched him go, then picked up the print-out. As he had expected, it was one of the notices from the nets.

"Rally!" it said. "If you saw me on the news, here's your chance to find out what it's all about."

It went on for a few lines, and then it gave time and place. Down at the bottom it was signed, "Casper Beech, People For Change."

What the hell was Beech up to?

Should he warn Beech that Covert knew about the rally?

He shook his head. No, he told himself, that would be putting his own neck in a noose; he didn't dare try to contact Beech again. Even sending that one message had been incredibly risky. He'd routed it through dummy accounts and six layers of anonymous remailers, done everything he could to keep it from tripping any alarms, but anything in a non-government encryption could be snagged, and any encryption could be broken if someone good wanted to work at it. And he hadn't dared do anything subtle, for fear Beech wouldn't be able to read it himself.

And Beech was too smart for this rally to be as stupid as it looked. Beech had to know he'd be exposing himself to Covert's snipers if he showed up. He must have some sort of plan in mind.

Schiano wished he knew what it was.

Casper leaned against the oily brick and looked at his watch for the hundredth time, more grateful than ever for the illuminated display.

7:58. Almost time. He reached down and picked up the first sheet of heavy, rigid plastic, then looked up. Tiny circles of light showed through the airholes in the manhole cover. That was reassuring; it meant no one had covered it over.

It had been a long, unpleasant wait down here, with his kevlar jacket and his plastic shields, but it was almost over, and the government hadn't found him.

He leaned the plastic shield against the ladder rungs, then looked down at his vest. Time to put in the ceramic inserts; he'd left them out until now to save weight, but he'd need them in place before he emerged from the manhole.

As he tucked the ceramic plates into the vest pockets he wondered if hiding down here had really been necessary. Then he smiled at his own foolishness; *of course* it had been necessary. Once those posters had gone up and the messages had gone out over the net, there was no way the feds would ever have let him just walk up to the appointed corner of Washington Square.

They'd let *other* people come, so as to lure him out, but if he'd shown his face above ground he'd have been dead meat, he knew it.

Just then the manhole cover shifted, with a heavy grating sound; grit sifted down onto his hair. Casper looked up as he smoothed down the last Velcro fastener on his vest; he stepped back further into the shadows and waited, just in case the feds had caught on.

"Cas? Are you okay?"

It was Mirim's voice.

"I'm fine," he said. "Get it open and clear."

"I'm trying," she replied. "Listen, there are police all over the place—we had one guy tell us we didn't have a permit, but they haven't really tried to get rid of us."

The manhole cover slid aside, and light poured in; Casper blinked as his eyes adjusted.

"I expected that," he said. "What about the rooftops? See anything?"

"We aren't sure." Casper could see Mirim now, as a shadow blocking part of the light. He could see others around the manhole, as well.

"Is the sound system set up?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Here." He handed up the first of the bulletproof plastic panels. Someone grabbed it and lifted it away, and Casper handed up the next, and the next.

When he finally climbed the ladder out of the manhole he emerged into a booth of clear plastic shielding, each panel held by a trusted member of PFC. Each of them wore a helmet and heavy vest—lined, Casper knew, with kevlar and with ceramic shock absorbers like his own.

Together, the little clump of revolutionaries moved across the street to the sidewalk and up onto the platform set up there for Casper's use. Once he was on the platform someone handed him a microphone, passing it between two of the plastic panels.

Then the people holding the panels all sank down, sitting on the platform, ducked down low, and Casper looked out at the crowd.

The street was packed—as he had hoped. Most of them were just curiosity seekers, of course, but there might be several potential recruits, all the same.

Police were scattered around, as well. That was to be expected. There were also reporters, and a dozen or more videocameras. That was excellent. Casper wanted this as public as possible.

And somewhere out there, he was sure, there were assassins in the pay of the Covert Operations Group.

"Hello, New York!" Casper called into the microphone. "My fellow Americans, thanks for coming!"

A cheer went up.

"I'm Casper Beech, a member of People For Change, and I have a few things I want to tell you tonight—a few things about People For Change, a few things about our present government, and a few things about *you* !"

Another cheer. Casper heard it, but didn't pay much attention. He was listening for other things, and scanning the surrounding buildings.

"Our government has told you that I'm a terrorist, and that People For Change is an organization of

terrorists, and I've come here tonight to tell you not to listen to their lies! People For Change is a peaceful political organization—we want change, all right, but we're Americans, and we believe in democracy, and in the Constitution that made this country great. We want to bring about change through the ballot box, not through terror or crime in the streets!

"*And that's* what scares the Republicrats!"

And the shot came.

The timing couldn't have been better if Casper had scripted it himself.

The shot itself wasn't loud. Casper wasn't even sure he'd really heard it. Its effect, though, was unmistakable. The bulletproof plastic to his right shattered spectacularly, and shards sprayed around him.

He immediately dropped and rolled, pushing aside some of his supporters. The others dropped their own shields and dove from the platform. People were screaming.

Casper still had the microphone as he clambered back down to the sidewalk.

"*That's* what scares them!" Casper shouted. "People, they've been fixing the elections for decades! Who oversees the elections? The Republicrats! Why haven't any of the other parties ever gotten a foothold, no matter how unhappy the voters were? Why has the Dem-Rep Party dominated this country for..."

He'd gotten that far when someone tripped over a wire and disconnected him; there was a burst of white noise, and the sound system went dead.

And then an automatic weapon somewhere opened fire. There were more screams.

The rally collapsed into chaos, and the police started moving in, moving toward Casper; he saw them coming, and shouted, "Look! They can't let me speak the truth! They've sent the police to stop me before I can tell you any more!"

"Stop them!" someone else shouted, and a moment later a wave of angry citizens overwhelmed the police.

Casper didn't even look back. "Head for the subway," he said.

Police ran past them, paying them no attention as they rushed to deal with the riot the rally had become.

Moments later, Casper, Colby, Ed, and Mirim dropped, exhausted, onto adjoining seats on an uptown train. For a few seconds they sat silently, catching their breath; then Mirim sat up abruptly.

"I thought that plastic shielding was bulletproof!" she said angrily.

"They must have used armor-piercing shells," Casper said wearily. "I thought they might. That was why I got to talk as long as I did—they had to change their ammunition." He turned to Colby. "Where'd you tell Rose to meet us?"

"Canal Street."

"We'll need to switch trains, then—we're headed the other direction."

"Cas, you could have been killed!" Mirim said.

Casper shrugged. "I figured the plastic would divert the first shot, and I didn't intend to hang around for a second one—but yeah, we're in this for keeps, Mirim."

"*Why?*"

"Because they're going to keep on looking for me, Mirim, and they're going to keep going until they kill me, because they consider me a threat."

"Because they think you're going to try to take over the country."

"That's right."

"Well, why don't you just get *out* of the country, then? Then you wouldn't be a threat any more! Colby could arrange it—couldn't you, Colby?"

"Maybe," Colby said noncommittally. "Ed might know more than I do on this one."

Ed grunted.

"But remember Trotsky," Casper said. "Stalin's men got him in Mexico, halfway around the world. I'd still be a threat. Besides, Mirim, I'm an American—I don't *want* to leave, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life in hiding, with the Covert Operations Group looking for me. So I'm taking some risks to avoid it."

Mirim stared at him. "You're 'taking some risks'," she said.

"That's right."

"Casper, you spent thirty-six hours down a manhole waiting, so that you could stick your head up and get shot at?"

He shrugged.

"I can understand the thirty-six hours—back at Data Tracers you were always good at enduring crap, and that apartment you lived in, well, I guess you could put up with anything. But deliberately letting them *shoot* at you—I can't believe you *did* that!"

Casper looked at her with interest.

"You think the file's responsible?" he asked. He had to admit, thinking about it, that it did seem unlike anything he had ever done before his optimization.

"*Of course* it is! Casper, it's going to get you *killed* !"

"It hasn't yet—hell, it's saved my life."

"But the *risks* you're taking—sooner or later, the odds are going to catch up with you."

Casper gazed at Mirim for a moment, then glanced at Colby and Ed.

Ed shrugged. "You don't meet a lot of old revolutionaries," he said. He clearly wasn't bothered by this observation.

Casper leaned back, his head against the window behind him, staring at the off-white metal ceiling as the car swayed.

"Spartacus died," he said, to no one in particular. He frowned, and chewed on his lower lip. "I don't want to die," he added a moment later, as the train began to slow for the next stop.

"Well, if you keep up like this, you're *going* to," Mirim said angrily, reaching for the pole to pull herself upright.

Colby leaned across the space where she had been and said, "So you made your speech and they took a shot at you—now what?"

"Now we've got our Boston Massacre, our Kent State," Casper said, standing. "There's still a way they could get out of it—but I don't think they'll do it in time."

Mirim stared at him. "You mean you took that risk, and whatever you were doing might not *work* ?"

"Oh, I think it will," Casper said, pushing her toward the open door, as Ed and Colby hurriedly rose and followed. "The only way they can get out of it is if they turn in the shooter and say he's one of us, that we set the whole thing up. Then it'll be our word against theirs, and they'll be able to manufacture all the evidence they need. If they don't do that, and quickly, we'll be able to make the truth stick—that the feds shot at me. That'll get us a lot of sympathy, and a lot of attention, and when we put out a call for volunteers we should get them. Then we turn PFC into a genuine political party, and we make sure that they can't rig the elections against us the way they have against everyone else."

"And then what?" Colby said, as the four of them emerged onto the platform. "You get elected president next year?"

Casper shook his head. "Not hardly," he said. "We won't be able to take the presidency for at least twelve years, at the very best—probably twenty, maybe as long as forty-four. But if it's that long, it'll be because they've cleaned up their act, and that's what I really want."

"You intend to be elected president?" Mirim asked.

"Probably *not me* ," Casper said. "Too much political baggage. I did kill those men back in Philadelphia. But someone from PFC. And I'll be rehabilitated along the way."

"If you don't get killed first."

"If I don't get killed first," Casper agreed.

Chapter Nineteen

The news coverage was perfect. Casper watched intently as the networks played the images over and

over—his face, looking strong and wild and noble as he spoke; the plastic shield shattering; the screaming crowd; the slow pan across the wreckage and the ambulance crews covering the bodies before hauling them away.

"Seven dead," Mirim said, horrified.

"Were any of them ours?" Colby asked.

Tasha frowned. "We don't know," she said. "We still have three people missing."

"They're stonewalling," Casper said, his eyes still locked on the video. "They're dead. They can't stonewall this and get away with it. They're just denying everything."

"What?" Mirim asked.

"They're mishandling it," Casper said. "Don't you see? The government, I mean—the Party. They haven't even denied that it was a fed who shot at me! They've let the networks transmit their coverage, they've let my speech—what there was of it—go out. It's been so long since they've faced a real challenge that they've forgotten how to spin the facts."

"You're right," Cecelia said thoughtfully. "We can tie 'em in knots now—wrongful death suits, civil rights violations, everything."

"We can put out a call on the nets for volunteers and donations," Casper said. "When the money starts coming in we can hire spokesmen, turn PFC into a real political party. We'll put candidates up in every little election we can find—once we're in office a few dozen places people will take us seriously. Run a populist, anti-status quo platform, long on rhetoric and short on specifics. The Republicrats have never bothered rigging the small elections—they never had to. And then we can demand oversight on the bigger ones."

"People were *killed* out there, and you're talking about elections?" Mirim burst out.

Colby, Ed, Casper, and Cecelia all turned to stare at her.

"Of course," Casper said calmly. "That's what this is all about."

"I thought it was about keeping you alive, Cas!"

"That, too."

"And what makes *you* any more important than those seven people who died?"

For a moment, there was an uncomfortable silence. The TV babbled quietly in the background.

Casper didn't think Mirim was in the mood to hear the truth—that Casper thought he was the most important person on Earth because he was the one who could fix the country, get it back on track, make the lives of millions of Americans better, and the lives of millions more people in the dozens of countries the U.S. dominated. She didn't want to hear that.

"Nothing," he said at last. "Not in absolute terms. But Mirim, I'm more important *to me*, and I thought I was important to you, that you cared about me. And with this thing the feds put in my head, maybe I'm

more important to the country. If we can get the oligarchs out of power and re-establish a government that's answerable to ordinary people, and not just to corporations and lawyers, there will be fewer of these stupid deaths in the future. It'll be a better life for everyone."

"It'll be more of the same, Cas, it'll just be *you* and the PFC in charge instead of the Party, instead of the people running things now. And there'll probably be hundreds of deaths along the way, won't there?"

"I hope not." Casper got up from the couch and knelt before Mirim, holding her hand. "Listen," he said, "I think I'm doing the right thing—but maybe I'm not. I can't tell any more what's me, and what's the Spartacus File. At first I knew, at least sometimes—it was the File that got me out of Philadelphia alive, I knew that—but the lines have all blurred. You read the notes Schiano sent; you know he said that the optimization had to fit the recipient's brain perfectly, that I couldn't have taken the Spartacus File if I wasn't suited for it, and I guess he was right, because it's blended right in. I thought it was just telling me how to do what I wanted to do, but maybe it's done more. Maybe it's changing my idea of what's right and what's wrong. Maybe there's no real difference any more between Casper Beech and the Spartacus File—that idea scares me, but maybe it's true. I can't tell. You and Cecelia are my only external connection to the original Casper Beech now, and I can't trust the internal links. So you tell me—am I just doing what I'd always thought should be done, but I didn't have the nerve or the knowledge to do it? Or am I doing something I would have known was wrong, before?"

Mirim stared at him, at the familiar face of her co-worker that had become something more. There was a gleam in his eyes and a strength in his jaw that had never been there in their years at Data Tracers; she had always thought he had a certain charm, but now that had become an irresistible charisma, like a spark fanned into a roaring blaze.

How could she tell him he was wrong?

And *was* he wrong? She didn't know what the old Casper's political convictions had been—if he'd had any. He had griped about the government, like anyone else, but he'd never gone into specifics of what should be done about it. He had never wished anyone ill—and as far as she could tell, he *still* didn't wish anyone ill, except perhaps the people who ran the government, and even them, she thought, he just wanted out of power, he didn't want them harmed.

After all, the Spartacus File was supposed to enable him to lead a violent revolution, a guerrilla war—she'd seen Schiano's notes talking calmly about massacres and riots, and here Casper was transforming that into a relatively peaceful political reform movement. He was *trying* to reshape the Spartacus File to fit his own beliefs.

But people were dead, all the same. Only seven so far, but who knew how many more there might be if Casper went on with his plans?

"Cas," she said, "if you were to succeed tomorrow, if you were suddenly appointed dictator of North America, what would you do? How would you be any different from any other power-hungry politician?"

"I'm not power-hungry," he said. "I'd do my best to restore the Constitution as originally written. I'd kick out the bureaucrats who really run everything, the staff people, the paper-pushers, the lobbyists, everyone tied to the Consortium, and then I'd hold elections. I haven't worked out the details yet..."

"And you never would," Mirim interrupted. "Reformers have taken office before with great plans, and it's always just been more of the same."

"I'd try very hard not to be," Casper said.

"And you think you could be different."

"Yes, I do," Casper said earnestly.

"And you think it's important enough that you have your chance to reform the government that it's worth people dying?"

"I think that if we had a new government of the kind I want that there wouldn't be any more Covert Operations Group killing people, that there wouldn't be any Consortium immune to half the laws, that there wouldn't be any corporate cops who can get away with killing troublemakers, so yes, I do think it's worth risking a few deaths."

"It's worth people dying so you can be president?"

Casper shook his head. "I don't want to be president," he said. "I just want a new government."

"So you say."

"I mean it!" He stared into her eyes. "Listen, Mirim," he said, "I'm not doing this out of personal ambition, I swear it. If it'll make you give me your support, I'll make you a promise—I won't ever be president. Or dictator, or whatever. When our reforms succeed, when PFC takes power, it'll be with someone else in charge. I'm *not* doing this to put myself in charge."

"You're serious?"

"Absolutely."

And he was.

The Spartacus File required him to overthrow the present government and replace it with a more democratic one; it never specified that he, personally, had to have any role in the new one.

In fact, the idea of actually having to run a country as big and complicated as the U.S. was terrifying. He didn't want to do anything of the kind. They'd find a figurehead somewhere. Maybe Colby—he would clean up better than Ed. *Much* better than Ed—in fact, Ed could be a problem in the long run, a problem that might need to be eliminated.

Or maybe instead of Colby or any of the other long-time PFC people they could use Cecelia, or even Mirim herself.

Of course, Casper might still be running things behind the scenes. He wouldn't be president, he'd be chief of staff, or just an advisor with no official title. And it wouldn't be permanent.

Just until everything was settled.

Chapter Twenty

No one gave any names, and while many Americans would have thought the tall man's face was familiar

they wouldn't have been able to say who he was.

Smith knew, though. As part of his job he had to be able to instantly identify any high government official, just in case he happened to see one somewhere he shouldn't, and he knew who he was facing. He straightened a little further.

This was the White House Chief of Staff—the current administration's hatchet man.

The two men stared at each other, Smith stiff and nervous, the other relaxed but angry.

"So," the tall man said at last, "you're the asshole who started a riot in New York."

"Sir," Smith protested, "I don't feel that's a fair description."

"You don't."

"No, sir."

"You're the one who ordered a bunch of hit men to shoot someone who was giving a speech in Washington Square, right? Right out there in front of the crowd, like something from a goddamned Hollywood movie?"

"I..." Smith caught himself. "Yes, sir," he said.

"And you didn't think that would start a riot?"

"I ... Perhaps I hadn't thought out the consequences," Smith admitted.

"And why hadn't you?"

"Sir, I considered it essential that we dispose of Casper Beech as soon as possible. I was too concerned with that to worry about collateral damage."

"Collateral damage," the other man said. "An anti-government riot in the middle of New York—you call that collateral damage?"

"Yes, sir."

"I seem to recall that collateral damage is a euphemism for what we used to call 'overkill.'"

"Ah, well ... I don't know, sir."

"You ought to. If you're going to use a term like that, you ought to know just what the hell you're saying. And if you're going to do something like shoot people in front of a crowd in the middle of New York, you ought to know what the hell you're doing."

"I was trying to prevent a catastrophe, sir!"

"By killing this Casper Beech."

"Yes, sir."

"And did you kill him?"

"No, sir."

The chief of staff stared at Smith for a long moment, then asked, "Did you ever read Macchiavelli?"

Smith blinked. "No, sir."

"You should. Anyone in government should. If you had, you might've remembered that he said, 'if you strike at a king, you must kill him.' Well, you've struck at this son of a bitch, and you haven't killed him, and you're in deep shit."

Smith swallowed, then said, "I gathered that, sir."

"That all you've got to say?"

"No, sir." Smith swallowed again. This was his chance to present a defense, and he didn't want to blow it; he hadn't been sure he was even going to get one, and he was pretty damn sure he wouldn't get another. "Sir," he said, "Casper Beech has been programmed with the Spartacus File. That's considered the most dangerous of all our imprint weapons; we put *everything* into it, everything we knew how to do. A man who's been optimized with the Spartacus File is driven to overthrow the government of his homeland—it's an irresistible compulsion, and nothing short of death will stop it."

"There are probably *thousands* of people in this country who are obsessed with overthrowing the government, Mr. Smith," the chief of staff said drily.

"Yes, but the Spartacus File also gives him the knowledge and skills necessary *to do* it. He had to be stopped, by any means available."

The chief of staff sighed, and seated himself on the edge of the desk. "So you've been trying to kill him."

"Yes, sir—of course. That's the *only* way to stop him."

"And you didn't worry about who or what might get caught in the overkill."

"No, sir. You can't make an omelet, and all that."

"Smith, you're an idiot. You and your guns and bombs and computers ... look, if we *seriously* had wanted to take out this Beech, if you'd brought this up to my level to begin with, we could have done it. We could have fucking nuked New York if we thought it was important enough. If you *really* don't care about the overkill you can take out anybody, any time you want. If this Beech ever gets to be *that* much of a menace, we can goddamn well *do* that. But we haven't. You know why?"

He waited for a reply, but Smith simply looked blank.

"Because we *do* care about the overkill, goddammit!" He slammed his fist on the desk. "A lot of good it does to take out one revolutionary if the political damage creates a hundred more! So this Beech is dangerous, he's a goddamn Spartacus who's going to turn the whole goddamn underclass into a slave army, he's going to turn every city in the country into a war zone if we let him, until someday he and a bunch of ghetto punks come riding into Washington on a hijacked Greyhound and string us all up on the

Mall and declare the People's Libertarian Republic or some such crap—that's what you're worried about?"

"Ah ... yes, sir."

"Fine. Let's say he gets every single American who's living below the poverty line to sign up in his army and pick up a gun. You know what he's got, then, out of three hundred million Americans?"

"No, sir."

"He's got a hundred million troops—most of 'em women and children. They've probably got handguns and homemade explosives at most and they aren't trained for shit. And you know what we've got?"

Smith didn't bother to answer.

"We've got two hundred million loyal Americans, including the whole goddamn army, and against a bunch of kids with rifles we've got 3,000 nuclear warheads. We put *one* of those warheads on Beech's headquarters, and his army falls apart overnight. They don't come marching down the Mall. We don't negotiate with them. We don't need to. We just blow 'em away."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't look convinced, Smith—and I think I know why. Because if it comes to dropping a nuke on Americans, we're in rough shape. Damn right we are. But Smith, that's *worst case*. That's if we do *nothing* until this Beech has his whole army up and running. *Best* would have been if someone at NeuroTalents had been paying attention, and when Beech got that brain flash and was lying there out cold from the zap, this helpful person had quietly cut his throat. That didn't happen, and you've been trying to *make* it happen ever since."

"Yes, sir, that's it exactly!" Smith said, perking up. "We need..."

"You need to shut up and listen. Smith, it's *too late* for that. Timing is everything in politics, and this is politics. It was too late once Beech went underground and linked up with the PFC and started putting his propaganda out on the nets. You can't just cut his throat now."

Smith fought down the urge to demand, "Why not?" Instead he said, "Yes, sir."

"You've been looking at this wrong. Our goal isn't to kill Beech. That's not a *goal*, it's just a means to an end. You have to look at what we *really want*. It's not that we want Beech dead; it's that we don't want him screwing up the country."

"But..."

"But killing him would be one easy way to make sure he doesn't screw up the country. Right. No argument. But you haven't managed to kill him, have you?"

"No, sir."

"And he's on guard now, he's got helpers, he's got a whole goddamn organization, he's got some public support."

"Sir, if we could just shut down..."

"Shut down the media. Right. Do you know how long we've wanted to do that? Since Nixon, for God's sake! This isn't Serbia, Smith; we can't do it. If we tried, we'd have pirate stations on the air in hours, we'd have illegal satellite uplinks bitching to every other country on Earth, we'd have the nets screaming bloody murder. Americans didn't care when one by one we gutted all the Constitutional checks and balances that are supposed to keep the government in line, because they always knew they had an ace in the hole, the biggest goddamn brake in the whole system—the media, with its muckrakers and investigators. If we screw over someone too much he can go on one of the talk shows or rat to the tabloid news shows and make life hell for whoever's responsible—or at least he thinks he can. So we live with it, we don't go after the media, and we've got our deals, our unwritten laws, and we can pretty much do as we please when the media aren't looking, but *wecan't* shut it down, or suppress anything that happens out in public. That *riot* of yours was in the middle of fucking *New York* —we can't suppress that."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, if you'd had any brains, or anyone in your department knew shit about PR, we wouldn't have had any problem, because we could have said the snipers weren't ours, and then we could have investigated and said that Beech staged the whole thing, and he'd look like an asshole and we could track him down at our leisure and blow him and his buddies to hell with an explosion we'd put down as them setting off a bomb they were building. But *you* didn't do that. You didn't deny anything. You didn't tell the cops to keep their mouths shut, and they'd been told not to interfere with the feds on the rooftops."

"That hasn't been widely reported, sir. We could still deny it, say that was all rumors..."

The chief of staff shook his head. "No, we couldn't, asshole. You don't understand how PR works, do you? It's all timing. I told you, *all timing* . If we deny it *now* , everyone will scream cover-up, and we'll have another goddamn scandal dragging on for years even if Casper Beech walks in here in ten minutes and blows his own brains out. We should have had a spokesman there covering our ass *on the scene* —once the story's out on CNN and Fox and all over the net it's too late."

Smith wanted to protest, but the other man was right—he *didn't* know anything about PR. That wasn't part of his job description. Covert was *covert* ; they never admitted or denied anything.

"You beginning to see the situation, Smith?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, what we want is to make sure that this Beech doesn't start a revolution. We want to dump the blame for the riot. Right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the direct approach hasn't worked with Beech—and you can be proud of that, if you want, because *that's exactly what you programmed him for* , asshole. He's *supposed* to be able to handle any kind of direct attack, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"So why the hell did you *use* them? Chrissake, man..."

Smith swallowed uneasily.

The chief of staff took a moment to collect himself. "So we need to find another approach," he continued eventually.

"Like what?"

The chief of staff smiled. "Why, it's obvious. You heard his speech, saw the vids?"

"Yes, sir."

"He says he's not a revolutionary," the tall man pointed out. "He says he wants peaceful political reform."

"That's just propaganda, sir," Smith said. "It's in the Spartacus File. It's all just talk, for public consumption. He's still programmed for violent revolution."

"Of course," the other agreed, nodding. "But what if we take it literally? What if we invite him to Washington for talks?"

"What?"

"What if we apologize, say it was all a misunderstanding, and invite him down here to meet the president?"

"Sir, he'd *assassinate* the president!"

"Okay, then, to meet *somebody*, some geek from State maybe. It doesn't matter who he talks to. The point is, we get him out of the underground, out where we can see him, keep an eye on him."

Smith blinked. "And then we can get him with his defenses down and kill him?"

"Oh, God," the chief of staff said, leaning back and staring at the ceiling in disgust. Then he leaned forward again and hammered the desk with his fist. "*No*, asshole! We don't kill him. We co-opt him. How the hell is he going to recruit an army if he's here talking to the Under-Secretary for Urban Affairs? Hell, we could even appoint *him* Under-Secretary for Urban Affairs if we have to! We make him *think* we're taking his reform talk seriously, and tie him up in red tape until everyone just *forgets* him, until he's just one more former radical giving speeches no one listens to!"

"But ... he won't do it. He's *compelled*."

"That's fine, too. Then we can point and say, 'Look, we tried,' and we can send the SWAT teams after him and blow him away right out in public and people will *cheer* for us instead of starting riots! And we'll take our time about it and do it *right*, with bombs or serious firepower, no more half-baked crap with snipers using armor-piercing shells ... Jesus, Smith, where'd you come up with that, anyway?"

"It seemed ... we wanted to be ready for everything, and we thought he might wear a vest..."

"Right." He grimaced in disgust. "You thought."

For a moment the two men were silent; then Smith asked, "So you'll issue a pardon for him, then? And

after that Covert's out of it?"

The chief of staff shook his head. "Not exactly," he said. "We need to dump the blame for the riot. We need a scapegoat if we're going to pull this off and have the public on our side when we ask Beech to surface."

Smith felt a sudden cold dread.

The chief of staff smiled.

"You got it, Smith. Seems there's a small covert unit gone rogue, went after this Beech character without authorization, but of course we've caught them now. We'll have a nice show trial, you and maybe three or four others will be convicted and given twenty years, and then we'll quietly lose you on the way to prison, and next thing you know you'll be in the Witness Protection Program somewhere."

"But ... my work ... my career..."

"So you'll have a two-year vacation. It'll be about that long before this blows over. A sabbatical, Smith—you can do some studying, brush up on your practical politics. Maybe when you come back you'll have a better handle on the way the real world works."

Smith shuddered.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Cas! C'mere, quick!" Mirim shouted.

Casper was out of his seat at the kitchen table before he even realized he'd heard Mirim's voice—the Spartacus File, as he'd discovered right from the first, had its own reflexes, faster than his own natural ones.

"Scuse me," he said to Cecelia and Ed, as he hurried into the living room.

Mirim was watching *Headline News*; a government spokesman was on the screen, half a dozen microphones shoved into his face.

"...responsible for this regrettable incident are under arrest," the spokesman was saying.

"What's happening?" Casper asked, as he settled onto the couch.

"I repeat," the spokesman said, "their actions were completely unauthorized, and a thorough investigation is under way."

"The sniper at the rally," Mirim said. "They're saying he was part of a rogue cell within the national security structure, acting illegally."

Casper threw her a quick glance, then locked his attention on the screen.

"Sir!" a reporter called, "does this mean that Casper Beech, the speaker at that rally, is in fact *not* a

terrorist?"

"We can't say that definitely at this time," the spokesman replied, "but it appears that in fact, there is no evidence that Mr. Beech had broken any laws at the time these renegades issued their order for his apprehension. Mr. Beech has not been indicted, and the government has dropped all charges against him. We do have some questions we'd like to ask him in connection with prosecuting those responsible for this outrage, and the City of New York apparently has some problems with his failure to obtain a permit for his rally..." He paused, grinning, for the reporters to laugh appreciatively. "...but if he was sincere in saying that his organization, People For Change, is dedicated to peaceful political reform, we trust he'll come forward and share his insights with us. Together, I'm sure we can prevent any further abuses of this sort."

Cecelia had followed Casper from the kitchen, without rushing; now she stood in the doorway, listening to the speech.

"Pretty good," she said, leaning against the doorframe. "Notice how he left everything open. If they decide you're trouble, Cas, they can still hit you with failure to get that permit, and wrongful death suits by the relatives of the four feds in Philly, and a lot of other shit."

"Yeah," Casper agreed, "it's a nice recovery. I hadn't thought of this. If I surface, they can keep an eye on me and tie me up six ways to Sunday, and stage an accident if they decide it's necessary. But if I stay underground, I'll be discredited—they'll be able to ask everyone why I'm still hiding if I'm not a terrorist."

"So what do you do?" Mirim asked.

"For now," Casper replied, "I stall." He reached into his pocket and extracted his wallet, then pulled out a bill. "Here, Celia," he said, "take this as a retainer, would you?"

Cecelia didn't move. "Why?" she asked.

"Because *you're* going to surface, of course, and start negotiating my surrender."

"I am?"

"Sure. Weren't you saying that keeping me alive was just a matter of the right P.R. and legal shenanigans? Well, here's your chance to prove it."

"You're going to give up? The Spartacus File hasn't got some clever way to twist this around again?"

Casper shrugged. "Hey, Celia, they've *got* me—the File doesn't cover anything like this. Schiano and his people couldn't think of everything, and besides, this is really outside what Schiano had planned on. He was figuring on guerrillas and battles, not political duels. The Party's got the real political pros here, and they're finally using them. I'd hoped they wouldn't catch on in time, but they have. They've outmaneuvered me by giving up those Covert guys and saying they were acting alone, out of control. I don't have a power base to argue that from. If I stay underground now, it'll *prove* I'm a terrorist, as far as the public is concerned, so I've got to surface pretty soon—but I'm not about to just walk into the local cop shop. I could have an accident, or commit suicide. So I want you to stall until I'm sure I'll be safe."

Casper noticed that Mirim was staring at him doubtfully.

Cecelia, too, clearly wasn't quite ready to accept this sudden acquiescence.

"I thought the Spartacus File was compelling you to rebel," she said.

"It is," Casper said, "but it doesn't have to be violent. Schiano *assumed* it would be violent, but it doesn't *have* to be; as long as I'm fighting the government, I'm okay. I can fight them in the courts, by proxy—or at the ballot box. I'm not about to go back to working as a liability analyst; I'm in the political reform business now."

"You don't still think they'll kill you?"

"I don't know—that's one thing I want you to find out for me."

"You don't think they'll kill *me*?"

Casper shook his head. "Not until they've got *me*," he said. "You'll be their best link, and they'll know it. You just tell them that you were kidnapped, make whatever connections you need to keep yourself safe—that's another reason I want to stall, to give *you* time." He pressed the bill toward her.

Reluctantly, she took it.

Casper smiled at her.

He knew why she was reluctant—he was doing exactly what she had wanted him to do all along, but he wasn't whining about it, wasn't putting up a struggle, and she didn't trust that. She thought there had to be a catch.

She was right, of course—there *was* a catch.

That was the next step in his plan.

The fact that his identity was known right from the first, and that he was too heavily outgunned to set up a guerrilla force in the wilderness somewhere, had made most of the preferred options in the Spartacus File impossible—Schiano hadn't compiled it with the U.S. in mind. Casper's promise to Mirim not to openly take power himself limited his choices still further. The government's disavowal of any ill intentions toward him narrowed it down even more.

He couldn't stay underground without ruining his position, and if he tried to operate in the open he could never succeed—they'd find a way to kill him if he started to get close. He had to find a third way.

And of course, the Spartacus File provided one. Schiano and the hundred other programmers who had worked on the File hadn't been able to think of every possible contingency, but they'd included every general case they could think of, and provided guidelines for choosing which model to follow.

It was pretty clear what to do in this situation. When presented with two unacceptable options, find a third choice even if it looks even worse on the surface. And here there was definitely such a choice, one that looked *really* bad at first:

Martyrdom.

Not suicide, of course—he had no intention of killing himself, and if he let himself be killed, who would lead the revolution? Who would guide People For Change into power? And he didn't want to die.

Spartacus had died for his revolt, and the revolt had died with him. Casper didn't want that, didn't want either part of it—he wanted to live, and he wanted his revolution to continue and grow. Martyrdom was a matter of public perception, not reality; all he had to do was *appear* to die, at the hands of a treacherous government.

He was pretty sure he could pull it off.

He hadn't yet worked out the details, though, and until he did, he wasn't about to let Cecelia in on his plans.

"Go on," he told Cecelia, "go turn yourself in, or whatever."

She stared at him a moment longer, then nodded.

"Okay," she said. "I'll turn myself in to ... let's see ... CNN, I guess. Or maybe ABC would be better."

He smiled wryly. "Not the cops?"

"Don't be an idiot, Casper. Hasn't that thing in your head taught you *anything* ? They aren't going to shoot me live on TV; in private, though, who knows?"

Casper nodded. She was exactly right.

He wondered—if Cecelia had gone for one of Covert's optimizations, would *she* have gotten the Spartacus File? She seemed to have half the tactical knowledge already. Certainly, she had more of what it took to fight a revolution than he had had before his visit to NeuroTalents.

"Colby," Cecelia called up the stairs, "could Rose or Tasha or someone drop me somewhere? And I need to make a shielded phone call." She turned and headed back for the kitchen.

Casper watched her go, then settled onto the couch beside Mirim.

The news was still running, but had moved on to the financial report. Casper watched it, not really paying attention.

Mirim stared at him.

"Are you really giving up, Cas?" she asked at last.

He looked at her, startled, then smiled at her, a big, warm smile.

"Nope," he said. "Come on, let's get the vidcam; as soon as Celia's gone I want to record some more speeches. And I need to check the nets, see if we've got some volunteers. After that we'll talk to Colby and the others about setting up maildrops and bank accounts for contributions."

"So you're still going to try this political stuff?"

"Absolutely!" He stood up and reached down for her hand. "Come on," he said. "We've got a campaign to launch."

Bob Schiano stared at the screen in amazement. A dozen security men were shielding Cecelia Grand from the mob as she was led up the courthouse steps.

"Ms. Grand, a lawyer representing alleged terrorist Casper Beech, announced that she had come to negotiate Beech's surrender," the off-screen reporter announced.

"But he can't," Schiano said. "He *can't* surrender. The file won't let him." He smacked a fist onto the table in front of him. "I won't let him!"

The scene cut to Cecelia addressing the press.

"Mr. Beech is understandably wary," she said. "Government agents openly tried to kill him on the streets of Philadelphia and again in New York, and while the administration may now say that those agents were acting without authorization, Mr. Beech feels that he needs greater assurance of his own safety before turning himself in."

Schiano leaned back in his chair, staring at the screen.

Beech *couldn't* surrender. And especially not now, when he'd scored a victory and forced the government to disavow their attacks on him! Smith and his chief aide and two triggermen were packed away somewhere, being prepared as scapegoats; Schiano had been briefly concerned that they might even sacrifice *him*, but in the end they hadn't done anything that desperate. Good imprint programmers were hard to find.

He was, however, out of work for the moment, while they looked for somewhere else to put him. That meant he could stay home and watch the news.

He hadn't expected *this*, though.

Was the Spartacus File breaking down?

Or ... He relaxed somewhat as the thought struck him.

Or was Beech up to something?

That had to be it. Beech wasn't going to surrender at all.

Schiano tried to remember more of what had gone into the File. He'd overseen the whole thing, but of course it had been far too much for one person to do single-handed; if he'd been able to write the whole Spartacus File by himself, he'd have *been* the new Spartacus.

Then he had it. He knew what was coming.

He wondered how Beech would set it up.

"I'm here representing Casper Beech and People For Change," Cecelia told the interviewer.

"And are you a member of People For Change, yourself?" he asked her.

"People For Change is a legitimate political organization, seeking recognition..." she began.

"Yes, Ms. Grand," the interviewer interrupted, "but are *you* a member of People For Change?"

For a moment, Cecelia hesitated. On a living room couch somewhere in New Jersey, Casper Beech looked up from his laptop and waited.

Cecelia had surfaced two days before, with much fanfare. The government had apologized to her, the media had feted her, and everyone had listened to her tale of desperate flight from crazed renegade feds. There had been various denunciations of the "rogue" operation, and several editorial comments about the need for a political reform movement like People For Change.

But until now, no one had asked her much about her own politics.

No one—not even Casper.

And Casper needed to know. He had plans for Cecelia and for PFC.

"Yes," she said at last. "Yes, I am."

Casper thrust a fist in the air and said, "Yes!"

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Tell them I want to surrender at the U.N., in front of the international community," Casper said into the phone.

"Do you?" Cecelia asked.

Casper smiled. "It's a possibility," he said.

"The U.N. should be okay," Cecelia said thoughtfully.

"See how it would work, then, and I'll get back to you. I should have that speech ready for you soon, too." He shut off the phone and stuck it in his pocket.

"I thought..." Mirim said.

"What?" He looked up at her, startled.

"Didn't you just ask Rose to book you on the train to Kennedy Spaceport? I thought maybe you were heading out to somewhere on the Fringe."

"Where I might get a more sympathetic hearing?" Casper shook his head. "It wouldn't be the Fringers themselves who'd be listening to me out there, it would be the authorities, and they're heavily into suppressing rebellion."

"But then why did ... isn't that what you told Rose?"

"Don't worry about what I told Rose," Casper said. "You just be ready to go."

"Casper, *I* don't want to go out to the Fringe! Space travel scares me."

He looked up at her with interest. "Have you ever done any space traveling?"

"No, and I'm not going to!"

He held up his hands. "Okay, okay, that's no problem! You don't have to. I promise."

"You're going without me?"

"Look, Mirim, just trust me, okay? It'll all be fine, just wait and see."

She looked down at him uncertainly.

"*I promise*," he said.

She turned away.

He watched her go, then picked up his laptop and booted it up. He had things to do. There were a lot of arrangements to make.

It was a good thing that PFC had at least one or two serious terrorists as members; he was going to need some of Ed's skills, and other specialists, as well. He'd need a bomb, and for some reason he hadn't been getting much help from the Spartacus File with the specifications on that. Maybe part of the imprint hadn't taken properly, or maybe one of Schiano's programmers had been faking it.

He'd need some specialized equipment—equipment Ed probably couldn't provide, but he might know someone who could. Fortunately, the equipment didn't actually need to *work*.

And he wanted some way to remove a person without anyone knowing it; poison, perhaps, or an engineered bug of some sort ... ?

"Sir," the aide said.

The Chief of Staff looked up. "Yes?"

"It's about Casper Beech," he said.

"What about him?"

"It seems we have conflicting reports about him, sir. That lawyer of his says Beech is going to turn himself in at the U.N., but the word on the net is that he intends to head out to the Fringe."

The Chief of Staff sat up straight and looked the aide in the eye.

"The Fringe?"

"Yes, sir. Probably to the L5 colony."

"And once he gets there, is he planning to surrender, or to join the rebels?" He had talked with Smith and Schiano; he remembered that Beech was supposed to join a rebel group. They'd assumed that PFC

was that group, but maybe Beech had decided it was time to try starting over somewhere else.

"We don't know, sir." The aide hesitated. "He *says* he plans to surrender, but the people who worked on the Spartacus File say that he *can't*. And if you like ... well, before we took over the situation, Covert had issued orders to destroy any ship Beech boarded, rather than risk letting him loose off-planet. We haven't actually countermanded those orders yet, and we can blame that on a bureaucratic foul-up if we have to."

"Countermand them," the chief said immediately. "We want him alive, if at all possible. If he gets off-planet ... hell, it ought to be that much easier to spot him and corner him out there. Everything's so much smaller. And if he *does* get killed, we can blame it on the radicals, we don't have to take the heat ourselves." He gazed thoughtfully at the wall. "I wonder ... do you suppose he'll surrender out there? Maybe he thinks the radicals will back him up, or that we won't dare harm him for fear of open revolt."

"The programmers say he *can't* surrender, sir."

The chief nodded.

"If he's off-planet, he's less of a threat to us, alive or dead—we can always destroy the whole damn colony and blame the radicals."

"Yes, sir."

"You sure about this, Casper?" Ed asked again, holding up his ticket and freight receipt.

"Absolutely," Casper replied. "We've got to hurt them, force them to negotiate."

Ed nodded. "Damn straight. I've gotta give you credit, man—I didn't think you had the balls for something like this. You *talk* a good line sometimes, but I wasn't sure you had what it takes to be a real revolutionary, any more than the rest of these wusses. For four years they haven't dared do squat, and then you show up with this super-imprint in your head, and I think we'll finally get somewhere, then *you* start talking about peaceful change. If you'd stuck with that public surrender crap, I might've been tempted to put a knife in your back myself—the only thing the fat cats understand is violence, and that might have stirred some up. It's good to see you understand that you can't make an omelet without cracking some eggs."

Casper looked at Ed, the man who had deliberately waited until a cop was leaning over the planted bomb in the New York precinct before detonating it four years before, the man behind virtually every act of violence PFC had committed before Colby had taken charge and moved the group away from overt terrorism.

Ed was a loose cannon, someone who couldn't be rehabilitated because he didn't *want* to be rehabilitated, someone who would always be in the way of any attempt to turn PFC into an effective political force.

Casper clapped him on the back. "Whatever it costs, Ed. I know that now, same as you do."

Ed winced; the slap had stung. But then, everyone at PFC knew that Casper had a tendency to misjudge his own strength. "I thought you were serious about all that 'peaceful means' and 'win at the ballot box' crap," he said.

Casper just smiled. He twisted a ring on his finger; Ed noticed that. Casper was definitely changing, Ed thought; he hadn't worn any jewelry before, so far as Ed could remember.

"You can't go that way, man," Ed said. "You have to compromise too much if you play by their rules. You can't play politics that way and keep your ideals."

"I know," Casper said. "Listen, good luck, Ed—and thanks for doing this."

"You, too," Ed said. Then he turned and boarded the Florida train.

Casper watched him go.

He felt a surge of guilt over what he had just done—over both parts of it. He knew that before his optimization he would never have done such a thing, never even have *considered* it.

Now he couldn't help it.

At least, he told himself, this should be the last of it, the end of the violence. He would never do it again.

And it was better than the guerrilla war that the Spartacus File kept urging him to lead.

Cecelia Grand looked at her watch. She frowned. She'd heard the rumors about a flight to the Fringe, and intended to give Casper a piece of her mind. The U.N. would be much better for a surrender, and he damn well *better* intend to surrender! If he couldn't control that damned software in his head ... ?

Well, he had plenty of good ideas, and she liked the whole idea of getting into politics, but she wasn't going to let some damn piece of spy fiction run *her* life.

Her phone beeped; she snatched it up and opened it.

"Grand," she said.

"Celia?"

It was Mirim's voice, not Casper's.

"Yes? Where's Casper?"

"He told me to apologize, said he couldn't help it."

"Couldn't help *what* ?"

"He's heading for the Fringe."

Word went out on the net before Freight 2105 was even off the ground—Casper Beech was aboard, tucked in a crate in the cargo hold with his own oxygen, water, and food supplies. The passenger flights were too closely watched, and he'd wanted to get to the Fringe, so he'd had himself smuggled aboard an unmanned supply ship.

All along Florida's northern Atlantic coast, people looked out their windows at the line of flame that was Freight 2105's launch from Kennedy and ascent toward space.

Most of them, thanks to the rumors on the net, knew that Casper Beech, already something of a folk hero, was supposed to be aboard.

And hundreds of eyes saw the sudden flash and knew instantly what it meant.

"The guy gave his name as Thomas Paine," the security guard read from the screen. "It's apparently phony—we aren't getting a description match on any real Thomas Paine, so it set off the security check, a bit late. He's already left the port. Whoever he really is, we think he might be connected with People For Change."

The spaceport's traffic manager asked, "People For Change— isn't that the group Casper Beech runs?"

"Sure is," the guard agreed. "Rumors on the net say Beech is being smuggled off-planet, and this guy checked some freight aboard 2105—a goddamn big crate, according to the shipping people. Big enough to hold a man and three days' supplies. We thought you might want to hold the launch until we've searched it."

"You're a little late," she said. "2105 took off for the L5 colony five minutes ago."

That was when the alarms went off. The flash hadn't been visible in the windowless office, but there were plenty of other reports of the explosion aboard Freight 2105.

"Goddamn it," the White House Chief of Staff said, "I thought I told you to countermand those orders."

"*Idid*," his aide said. "Someone must have gotten the word late."

"Shit. This'll mean another show trial; it makes us look really bad." He sighed. "Well, at least Beech is out of the way."

Cecelia appeared before the cameras with tears on her cheeks, her make-up smeared.

"Casper Beech was aboard that ship," she said, "and the Covert Operations Group, a branch of the government of the United States, shot it down to make sure that he was not able to bring his message to the people of America. *Idemand* that those responsible be brought to trial for murder!"

The White House spokesman was visibly ruffled, though nowhere near as distraught as Cecelia, when he said, "This was an unfortunate accident. The orders to destroy any ship Casper Beech boarded *had* been countermanded, but apparently word had not reached everyone. We're still trying to locate whoever was responsible."

Casper smiled as he watched. Even the feds thought they'd done it, and that he was a burnt corpse on the bottom of the Atlantic.

The wreckage ought to be so far down that no one could recover it and find out that there weren't any corpses, or at least none that had Casper's DNA.

If they ever *did* find it, of course, they'd guess the truth—that he was safe in a cabin in the Poconos, and Mirim would be joining him as soon as she could get away.

There were still other loose ends to be dealt with, as well. He had to make sure that Ed was out of the

way, that the genetically-engineered virus he'd injected with that slap on the back had done its job and erased his memory—otherwise, the possibility that Ed might reveal the fraud would always be there. Ed and his terrorist past didn't fit with the new People For Change, in any case.

He hoped the virus wasn't fatal; the black market gene tailor hadn't made any promises. The thing had originally been developed with the idea of erasing outdated or proprietary imprints, but had never been used—it ate out huge chunks of the user's memory, along with the imprinted skills, and the developers hadn't been able to find a way to target it more precisely.

Casper was trying to resist the Spartacus File's ruthlessness. He hadn't simply killed Ed, though that would have been the easiest way to cover his tracks and remove an embarrassment from PFC—but Ed was going to lose so much of his past life and personality that death might almost have been preferable. If the virus performed as advertised, the old-line revolutionary would never be able to tell anyone that Beech was still alive, or that the crate that had supposedly held Beech and his life support system had actually held the bomb that destroyed Freight 2105.

That would take care of most of the loose ends, but there were other things he still had to do. Casper knew he'd have to find some way, working by proxy, to convince Cecelia to let Mirim act as her speechwriter, so that he could supply Mirim with the words to keep PFC on the right track.

But all in all, everything was going just fine. The revolution would continue, without violence, and *this* time no one was going to crucify Spartacus.

He'd beaten them to it.

Epilogue

It was snowing in Washington, but nobody seemed to care; the crowd listening to the new president's inaugural address applauded enthusiastically at every opportunity.

Maybe, Casper thought cynically, as he watched the spectacle on his screen, they were doing it to keep warm.

For himself, his enthusiasm had worn away over the past seventeen years—along with his control over the PFC. He listened to Cecelia delivering her speech, and could not find a single sentence of his in it.

The populist ideals were gone; instead, she was mouthing platitudes about compromise and reconciliation. The Democratic-Republicans on the dais behind her were applauding as loudly as the PFCers.

The PFC might have taken control of the government, but it was plain that the government, in turn, had taken control of the PFC.

Had taken it away from Casper.

The PFC was just more of the same old authority.

For sixteen years, Casper had appeased the demon in his head by exercising regularly with elaborate martial-arts routines, by keeping in practice with every weapon available, by planning campaigns for any

PFC candidate who didn't look like a sure winner, by writing speeches for Cecelia and a dozen others, but now, as he watched President Grand, the Spartacus File was active again, and unsatisfied.

He watched Cecelia's every gesture, listened to her every word, thought over everything Mirim had relayed of late.

The PFC was the government now. They had the presidency, they had two hundred thirty-eight seats in the House and forty-three in the Senate.

And the Spartacus File compelled him to rebel against the government—*any* government.

That son of a bitch Schiano had never bothered to put in any end to the program; he and Covert had always assumed that their Spartacus would wind up dead, one way or another.

Covert was under Cecelia's command now. They'd tell her anything she wanted to know about the Spartacus File.

Casper knew that she had figured out, long ago, that he was still alive. She'd never said so, never told anyone else, he was sure, but she'd read those speeches, seen those campaign plans, and Mirim's name at the top or bottom wouldn't have fooled her.

And she hadn't forgiven him for lying to her, or she'd have sent him a message. She wouldn't have cut his every word out of her inaugural. She'd have mentioned her party's martyr during the campaign.

She had probably stewed constantly over the image of Casper and Mirim holed up somewhere, cozy and safe, while she fought her way up step by step through the political nightmare of the past sixteen years.

And when she talked to Schiano and the others, she'd know what would have to be done.

And Casper already knew what *he* had to do.

He wondered, as he packed, whether the Spartacus File had planned this all along, whether it required a constant cycle of revolutions, or whether this was a bug in the program.

In the end, it didn't matter whether it was a bug or a feature, so long as it was there.

When the SWAT team arrived two days later they found the cabin dark and empty. A note was pinned to the door with a knife.

"The battle continues," it said.

It was signed "Spartacus."