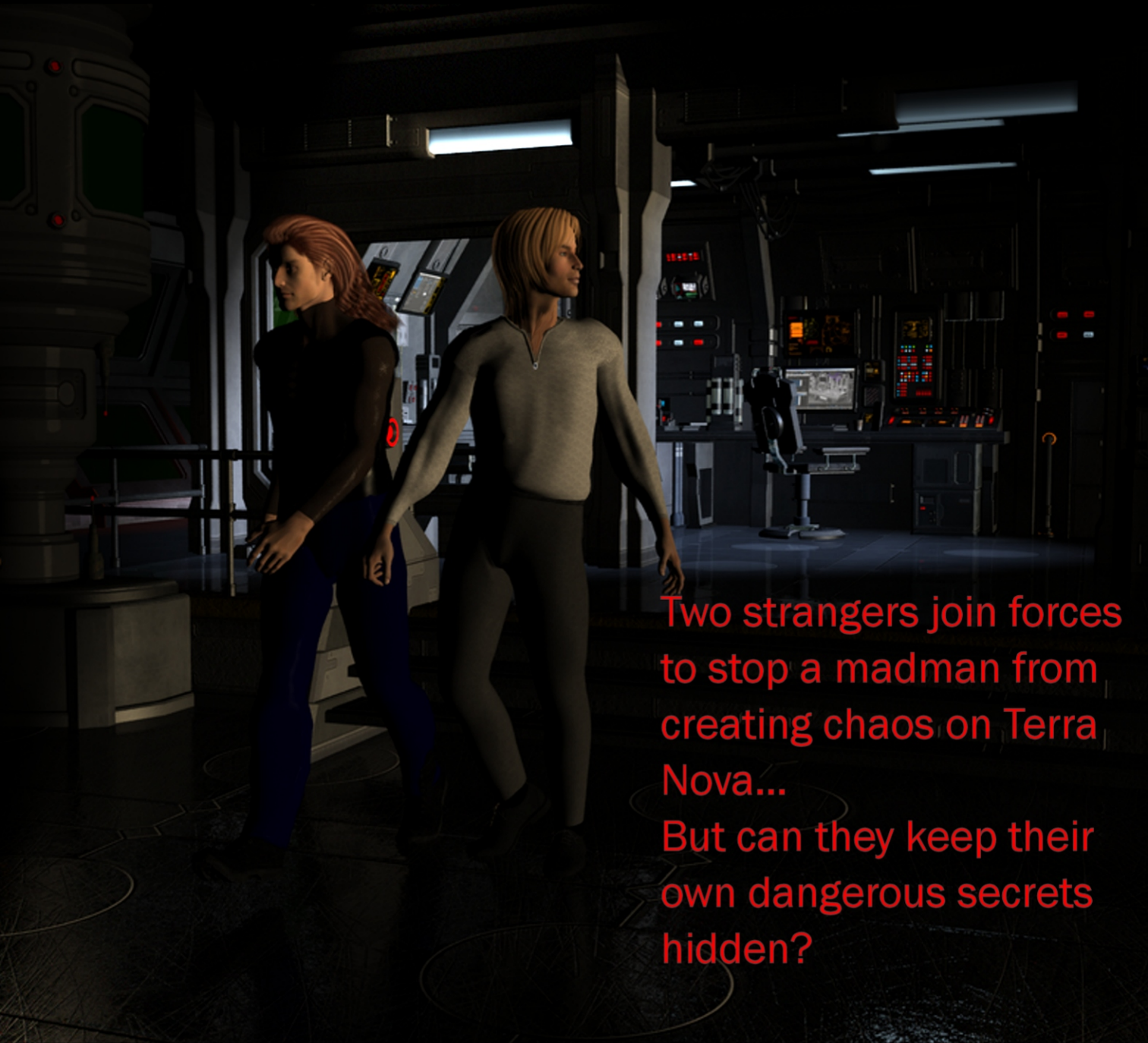


PSI



Two strangers join forces
to stop a madman from
creating chaos on Terra
Nova...

But can they keep their
own dangerous secrets
hidden?

Lazette Gifford

PSI

By

Lazette Gifford

Notes:

Two incidents are mentioned in this story that relate to other material I've written. The first is the plague on Terra Nova, which is the central part of the novel Devlin's Team 3: The Medusan Mutation. The second is Bear Dancing, which comes from Devlin's Team 1: Dancer. Neither of these books has yet been published.

This story does, however, take place in the context of the Inner Worlds Universe, of which several pieces have already been published.

For more information on any of my books, please check out my website at:

<http://lazette.net>

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One

Working for Terra Nova Investigations had often been frustrating for Kanton, but it had never been boring until now. Not, he reminded himself, that boring was entirely bad. There had been enough excitement on Terra Nova during the plague and riots of the previous year. Trouble still flared up at any provocation -- and he didn't want *that* kind of excitement. There had been too many outbreaks of violence in the last year.

Still, sitting all day at a metal desk inside the office with a dozen other employees very nearly drove him mad. He ran computer checks on old files and missing person reports, and watched the readouts on various screens around the room, hoping for something interesting that might warrant one or two of them going to check it out. That hadn't happened much in the last twenty-one days.

Whenever he got too bored, he considered the idea of working for his mother instead -- and sitting through endless board meetings discussing the increasingly bad economy. Those thoughts always made staring at his computer screen looking for something interesting to investigate rather more inviting.

Kanton leaned over his computer and keyed in another search of colony files, looking for any person who had been missing before the plague. He would take

whatever chance he could find to get out of the office and into the streets. Maybe he could still find someone --

"Kanton."

He looked up to find his direct supervisor, Collis Mahler, standing behind his desk. Someone else stood right behind the taller man, like a shadow that didn't want to come out into the light.

"I have new personnel I want you to work with," Collis said. He sounded annoyed and uncaring all in the same breath, and that made Kanton want to tell him *he* had better things to do as well. "The boss just hired him. Do what you can."

Collis stepped aside and headed back toward his office. Kanton looked up at the new man -- brown hair, fine features, and wariness in his eyes that seemed to come from more than meeting a fellow employee.

"My name is Silver," the stranger said, quietly and stepped closer.

Silver offered his hand and Kanton stood and took it, wondering what he should do now -- and the shock of that touch brought Kanton's attention back with a startled gasp. Silver's gray eyes went wide, and he pulled his hand away very quickly.

"Glad to meet you, Silver," Kanton said. The words came automatically, an instinctive attempt to cover what had been a very disturbing reaction from both of them. The words were not true; he could have gone *forever* without meeting Silver, and felt much better for it. "I have some work I need to do downtown, checking on some old cases I might still be able to close. Why don't you come along? I don't think we'll get much work done around here."

Greta glared as they went past. Silver gave her a curious look, and she turned

back to her work, red-faced at her lack of manners. She wasn't a bad worker -- just annoyed that Kanton had never shown an interest in her outside of work.

Kanton paused only long enough to tell Collis they were going out for the afternoon to look at some info on a three year old unsolved case. The man nodded and told him to find some work -- a true sign of how bad things had gotten when even Collis no longer argued about wasting time digging up old cases.

Neither Kanton nor Silver said anything in the building, though they drew stares as they hurried out. He would have been more amused if he hadn't already felt so paranoid. He ignored the stares and the whispers, wondering how he was going to handle this.

He led his companion out the street level door rather than up to the walkway, where they wouldn't have any privacy. He could feel a hint of rain in the air, and the dark clouds made the day all the more depressing. Silver said nothing, even when Kanton started down the street in the cold mist. They walked for three blocks in silence, through the deserted streets, past businesses that were still closed.

"I think we can work together anyway," Silver suddenly said aloud.

He stopped and looked at the companion who had not disappeared, and didn't seem likely to. Kanton shook his head, thought about going to work for his mother, and shook his head again, finally focusing on the problem.

"It's not that easy. People are bound to pick up on the fact that we're both psis, and I don't think that's something we want known."

"It's not illegal," Silver said, but there wasn't much conviction in his words.

"But there is plenty of antagonism anyway. We can't work together," Kanton said

again. He started walking, not entirely certain where he intended to go. Silver stayed with him, and Kanton could, unfortunately, sense something wrong that had nothing to do with working with another psi.

"I came to work for the firm because I know something -- something I picked up," Silver said with a shake of his head. "I can't go anywhere with unless I have a legitimate way to explain it. I'm not going to make myself a martyr, not for a dead man."

"You know about a murder?" Kanton asked. He didn't want to know, but he had to ask. Maybe it would be a case after all, and get him out of the office.

"Yes, a murder." Silver leaned against the wall beside him, looking wet and miserable. Kanton felt sorry for him --

"No, I'm not miserable because I'm wet. I don't mind. And I don't like offices any better than you do."

"*There*. That's exactly why we can't work together," Kanton said. "We'd say something like that to one another, and people would figure out one or both of us are psis. It won't work."

Silver nodded, looking -- and feeling -- no less miserable.

"You're stronger than I am," Kanton said.

"I think so. Or I have a different type. You seem to be stronger on emotions. I pick up -- memories, but not the feelings that go with them. I can't read minds. I don't know what you're thinking: I know what you've *thought*. There's a difference. A dangerous difference in some cases. When there's strong emotions the thoughts can be jumbled, and some that are days old can be closer to the surface than current ones."

"Oh." Despite himself, Kanton found this part intriguing. And Silver had caught it

right about the emotional part. Picking up the emotions made it harder to walk away. Silver wanted to see justice done, and he felt it strongly.

"I don't want to influence you," Silver said. "Let me just tell you what I know, and maybe you can figure out a way to use it. I'll quit and say this obviously isn't the work for me."

"But maybe it is the kind of work you should be doing." Kanton said. He had to admit it, both to Silver and himself. "This work makes use of our special talents. It's why I'm working for TNI. I don't think it's fair that you be cut out just because I was here first. Like you said, being a psi isn't illegal. We aren't even required to report it, you know."

"Not yet." Silver stopped and shook his head. "We'll, it's not happened yet. Let's see if we can't work out this little case that I have before we worry about anything in the future. I need this one settled."

"What have you got?"

"Something at my apartment. It's near here. Can you slip away for that long?"

"If it means an honest to God case, absolutely." Kanton suddenly realized this might be the answer to his prayers. "You don't know how much I wanted out of that office."

"Actually, I do."

It amused him. He hadn't ever dealt with another psi. He hadn't even known different types existed. People with their powers didn't usually advertise them. People in the OWMS -- Old World Morals Society -- sometimes ranted about the mutation, and the lack of humanity attributed to psis, but so far they hadn't done more than make life

uncomfortable for the few people who had admitted to the powers.

Kanton didn't understand the people who joined the OWMS, the ones who were willing to let others decide morality for them and to make judgments on their lives and neighbors --

"You're a much better psi than you think," Silver suddenly said. He stopped by the door to an apartment building. "I've been worried about the OWMS for days. One of my neighbors is one, and has lectured me in the halls every night."

"Damn. I don't want to have anything to do with them."

"Me, either." Silver coded in the lock and pushed the door open, signaling Kanton in ahead of him. The entry hall looked dingy and dark. The emotions here were much the same -- people who hadn't much in funds, who lived hand-to-mouth, and expected that to fail at any time. "I live on the third floor. Walk up?"

"Yeah." He started toward the stairs, anxious to be out of this area, and then looked back and grinned. "Don't like small spaces, huh?"

"Small spaces that were filled with lots of people and all their thoughts, day after day. And you?"

"About the same." They started up the wide staircase, lights along the edge of each step, but the place still dark. Few people came this way, though, and that was a relief. "You know, even if we can't work together, I think I'd like to spend some time comparing notes."

"Yeah, that might not be a bad idea," Silver said. He sounded a little short of breath by the time they reached the first landing.

"You aren't from Terra Nova," Kanton said, surprised.

"Took you a bit to pick that one up," Silver said and grinned. "I suppose that's the down side to feeling emotions and not the words. I'm from Forest."

"Oh. Ah -- Bear Dancer?"

"I was. Not top line -- I'd only danced four times."

"And you're glad to be out of it."

"I think that would be obvious to anyone." He stopped and rested midway up the next flight. "I took bear poison in my last dance. Most people don't survive it. I did -- and it changed me. I wasn't psi before that -- at least not enough to count."

"How long ago?"

"A little over two years." He pushed away from the wall, and started up just ahead of Kanton. "I was pretty ill for the first half year or so. That's when all hell broke loose on Forest. By the time I recovered, they had started shipping the humans off to other worlds. They suggested that Bear Dancers not go with the rest of the population out to the Pavo Fringe, though I know a few of them did. I didn't want to."

He paused, breathless again. Kanton seemed to remember something about bear poison being very hard on the body. And that once it was in the system, it stayed.

"That's my story. I'm not sorry to be out of Bear Dancing, but I would like to find something else I can do. My government relocation funds run out in a few weeks."

"Why TNI? Better yet -- *how* did you manage to get hired? We're not exactly doing well just now."

"I --" he stopped again and shook his head this time. The emotions were very odd this time. Embarrassment overlaid worry. "I was desperate, for many reasons. I hadn't ever tried it before --"

"Used your ability to get the job. Felt out what they wanted to hear?"

"Yes," he said and looked miserable. "I suppose it's no excuse that I didn't expect to find anyone else with the same abilities."

"Well, it depends on how that other person got their job at TNI, doesn't it?" Kanton said and grinned when Silver looked back at him. "I've more practice at it than you do. I grew up being a psi. And I came to work for TNI because I thought I had finally found someplace that I could work where my ability would actually help."

Silver looked at him for a long moment. "You don't need to work there. Not for the money. Your family is rich?"

"Yes. Not that it matters much," he said and shrugged.

"I want to work with you. Just for a little while. I'm too new at this, and I've been running scared for two years now. Forest was a damned backward world, you know. I barely have the ability to cope with normal life out here, and *this* has just made things worse."

"We'll see if we can stand it," Kanton said. He could feel the desperation, of course. It didn't make it any easier.

They finally went up the last flight of stairs in silence, Silver bothered by his own outburst, Kanton wondering what he could do to help. And if he dared.

At the end of another dark hall, Silver opened a door into a room nearly empty of belongings, except for the sofa and chair that must have come with the room. A Bear Dancing Hologram hung on the wall, very likely an original, and probably worth a fortune. The dancer was Silver, cuts bleeding down the side of his neck and arm. Kanton dared a look and saw the scars, barely visible above Silver's high-collared shirt.

"I keep that to remind myself there are worse things I could be doing," Silver said. He went to a cabinet by the sofa and withdrew a small box. He opened it and held it out. "I was out in the streets about a month ago when I came across a very strange, and old, memory. There was death, and fleeing. Murder. *Get rid of it and they'll never know.* I found this in the bushes near by. I hope we can do something about it."

A knife. Kantor didn't like to hold weapons, and he usually managed to avoid them during the few murder investigations he'd worked on. But this time he steeled himself and reached in, taking the blade carefully by the hilt.

He learned one thing immediately: there is a major difference between holding a laser pistol that had been used by someone for murder, and taking hold of a knife. The knife not only *remembered* the man who used it, but it also intimately *remembered* the victim.

He felt the knife go into his back, felt it rip through his side --

"Damn!" Silver shouted somewhere else.

The world went black.

Two

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize. It never occurred to me that you would feel --"

Kanton held up a shaky hand. He had fallen, and he ached and he was having trouble following anything that Silver was saying. He knew the man was frantic and distraught. He knew he still hurt in places that should not hurt. He just wanted quiet for a couple minutes.

Silver went silent and still, closing his eyes and trying to will himself to calm. It was a good distraction for Kanton to watch. He was finally able to get his mind settled, even if Silver wasn't doing a very good job for himself.

"Sorry," Silver said again.

"Look -- I obviously didn't know what to expect either, or I wouldn't have picked the knife up." He shivered, unable to help himself. "I did pick up a lot information in that contact though. We need to check the police records, and see if they have any unsolved murders where people were knifed in the back. It may be solved, you know."

"I don't think so," Silver said. "You got the feelings, but I got the words that went with it." He shut his eyes for a moment. "The man who held the knife -- he never thought of himself by name, unfortunately. He told the other one, *You let your guard down at the wrong time, Doug. Everyone is disappearing. You should have realized it wasn't just the plague. I can't let you go on with the hand.*"

"The hand?"

"I don't know. Some sort of group, I think."

"So, we are probably talking about more than one murder," Kanton said. He sat up, slowly. His head pounded. Silver seemed a little less on edge now, probably because he had found someone he could report this to. "Did the killing take place where you found the knife?"

"I don't think so. I had the feeling of carrying the weapon away, getting rid of it. That doesn't make it any easier."

"No, it doesn't." His back ached. He had felt himself being stabbed, and he couldn't convince his body it wasn't true. "Is there anything else you picked up down there?"

"TerraCal. He thought that a couple times. I have no idea what that means."

"A local large business. That might be worth looking into."

He started to stand and Silver offered his hand, and then grinned when Kanton hesitated. "I'm calmer now. This has helped. You're right."

"We'll go back to the office and pretend that we don't know anything." Kanton took Silver's hand, holding his breath as he stood. "We start playing with my work computer and we *find* a reason to start looking into TerraCal. It may not be the answer we need, but it's a start. And it is better than what I've been doing lately. But Silver, we have to be damned careful when we're in the office. Greta, in case you didn't notice, is already hostile. Colis is indifferent most of the time, but right now we're all walking on the edge."

"Yes, I see," he said, very serious in that moment, though he *felt* chaotic.

"What is it you really want to do? What kind of work?" Kanton asked as they left.

"Something more than I've done before. People keep telling me I ought to go into entertainment. I don't want to. I had the adoration of the crowds already, thank you. They almost got me killed, and didn't give a damn."

Bitterness. Honest, deep bitterness.

"Sorry." Silver looked back and finally smiled. "I'll be fine, don't worry."

Three

He did worry, of course. For the first hour they were back at the office he handled things much worse than Silver did. But after that they began sorting through computer files. Silver didn't know very much about computer work, having grown up on a low-tech world like Forest. He pretended to know, and picked up much of what to do from Kanton's silent orders. It looked good, and amused Kanton. In some ways, it was a fun little game.

The office comps were monitored, so it was no good to go charging right over to TerraCal files, and grab what info they could. Instead, Kanton set them on a roundabout search, looking into pre-plague murders, to see if there were any that were unsolved. First one month back, and then another and another. Not many people at TNI wanted to pick up a case that out of date, since so much had been unsettled or destroyed during the plague. When Tel asked why they were even bothering, Kanton looked up and grinned. "Boredom. I don't care if it's a case I never solve -- I just want one. Any case. *Something to do*. And hell, as long as I'm teaching Silver what it is we do around here, he might as well learn the frustrating part first, right?"

Tel sighed and nodded as he moved on. Silver glanced at Kanton who nodded -- shared knowledge that Tel was about to quit and go to work for Inner Worlds Council

Security.

"Happens a lot around here," Kanton said softly. "We have a good reputation. If you stick around long enough --"

"Maybe," Silver said and looked back at the computer screen. "I'd have to know what I'm doing first."

Kanton decided they had spent enough time covering themselves. He took the search back one more month local. Several unsolved murders. Two of them were a lower level manager and a coworker at TerraCal.

Kanton casually checked to see what kind of work he had doing when he died. TerraCal was a big corporation, with their fingers in a lot of different projects. It turned out that Doug Ian had been working in computer programming, a project the company had been phasing out since the death of the project leader, Porter.

"Still looking for the first real AI," Kanton said. "Means he wasn't working on anything important. If they haven't found a way to create artificial Intelligence by now, they never will."

Silver just nodded and obviously felt a little lost in the conversation. "So, it's unlikely he was killed over something work related. How was he killed?"

The autopsy came up with a couple keystrokes -- and they knew that they were at least on the right track.

"Knifed. Both of them," Kanton said. His hand had gone to his back despite himself, although the pain had finally faded to a tolerable ache. "That's not common, not in the kind of circles a man like this worked in. Head stuff. The profiles say that kind of man is more likely to be either poisoned, or shoved off a very high building."

"Profiles -- like people who kill other people do it by certain rules?"

"You better study those profiles," Colis said, passing by the desk on his way out. He looked down with all his smug superiority back again. "They are important tools in our business."

Silver managed not to grin, despite that Kanton was considering shoving the officious bastard out of the window, and adding more numbers to those profiles.

"You look into them. I'll go over the data with you in two days. I expect you to know the numbers by then."

"This isn't a damn school room, Colis," Greta said as she stood from her desk. "Stop lecturing."

He turned on her but she was already heading for the door. He followed, too embarrassed to stay and continue his act.

Someone who found himself in a position of authority without a clue of what to do with it, Kanton supplied. Then he said aloud, "That's about it for today, Silver. You got somewhere to go? We can have dinner and I'll fill you in on a few more of the rules and regs around here, since Colis might give a pop quiz at any time."

That won laughter from Dave at the end of the room and a smile from Bailey. No one seemed to think it odd that the two went off together. They'd pulled it off. Pulled it off really well, in fact. Kanton felt rather pleased, and that obviously made Silver feel better. They were both grinning as they went down the hall past the front offices and out into the street again -- still anxious for a few minutes of privacy.

The day had turned colder and wet. The sunset looked muddy, dark and oppressive, and he feared the sky might open up with a real downpour at any moment.

Kanton half feared it might even snow, which would be a pain in the ass to deal with. It didn't happen very often this far south, but this was probably the year for it. Nothing else had gone right.

"Are you always this optimistic?" Silver asked.

"This is not a good year for optimism. You're bound to be disappointed."

Silver laughed. Kanton thought it almost rude, but then he realized that Silver had been going through the same, and possibly worse.

They went to dinner at a small café down the street that he liked to frequent. Kanton insisted on paying, which annoyed Silver at first. He got over it as they talked business -- but not too much about the case. He thought Silver would be good at the work since he asked all the right questions

The night had gone dark and surprisingly late by the time they left. It was the sort of night Kanton wished he'd flown his aircar in to work, as much of a hassle as it was in the morning rush. He even considered hiring a ride home, but it would take as long for the company to get an aircar to him as it would take for him to ride the city's excellent tram system home. Kanton's place was farther than Silver's, but mostly along the same path, so he didn't mind walking with him. The rain had come in full force, so they kept to the covered walkways where too many others were passing as well. They didn't dare speak of important things.

The walkways were always trouble for Kanton, but he'd learned to deal with most of it. The real problem with living on Terra Nova for Kanton was that there had been a wild rush of emotions during the plague, feelings that stayed strong because of their intensity. They had made Kanton's own emotional state unstable, and he had been just

lucky that everyone was still so self-absorbed that they never looked too closely at anyone else.

Silver looked at him and gave a little nod, knowing he had become part of the problem. Or maybe he wasn't, actually. In a strange way, Silver's own abilities to know how he affected his new friend helped Kanton in this walk through the crowds. Silver moderated his own feelings, and as long as Kanton stayed close to him, it proved far easier than walking through the wild, unbridled emotional paths of others.

They reached the branch to Silver's apartment all too soon, however. If it hadn't looked so strange, Kanton would have gone out and walked the rest of the way home in the rain.

"See you tomorrow," Silver said aloud.

Kanton felt a jolt of shock at hearing words, and silently cursed himself for getting so caught up in the feel of everything again. He smiled with embarrassment, and patted Silver on the shoulder. "See you then. We'll see if you survive day two."

Silver laughed and turned away, heading out of the walkway and toward his apartment building. Kanton turned around and headed back for the nearest tram post, intending to ride the rest of the way home. He almost felt like a nice long walk tonight, but he sensed just enough of an edge in the air that he wanted out of the public areas and back into his own little apartment.

Just too much unease. Now that he no longer walked with Silver, it felt much worse. He frowned and kept moving, head down. His thoughts kept going back to Silver and he didn't like what he felt, as though he'd missed --

Kanton didn't know when he caught...*something*. He realized, suddenly, that the

unease he had picked up really was directly related to Silver, but it was not his own emotions. Someone else had been coming this way behind them --

The stopped, stepped to the left -- and picked up a real, solid thought -- strong enough in emotion that even the words came fairly clear as he stood, shocked by the feel. *Silver lived in the apartment building. The knife was gone. Silver had gone to TNI. TNI had looked into TerraCal files.*

Silver was a danger.

Kanton turned around and ran back toward the corner, but he could no longer see Silver, even out on the street. He cursed and continued running, knowing Silver couldn't have gone very far.

Down, and around the corner. The walkway ended before the apartment, and Kanton had to go out into the rain. He moved quickly, past the feeling of cold that had nothing to do with the rain. Someone had been here. Someone with a strong intent to -
-

To kill Silver.

He hoped Silver had picked up on this, though he realized the person had been behind Silver and passed this way after his friend.

I don't know what they think -- I know what they thought.

Kanton reached the gate to the apartment when he felt the sharp pain through his side and cried out, going to the ground. He thought he'd been stabbed and reached to his side. No wound --

Silver!

Someone moved not far away -- running off into the darkness, he thought. He

didn't care. Kanton got back up and stumbled a few steps to the covered doorway to the building. Silver had made it that far and obviously had tried to key his way in.

Silver's eyes snapped open, and he tried to move.

"Careful! It's me!"

"Damn," Silver said softly. He let himself slide back down. Blood stained the wall behind him. "I didn't -- until too late --"

"Me, too." Kanton braced himself mentally, and walked the little ways farther, despite everything he felt. He hit the emergency key on the board and almost cursed, finding the door controls dead. He pulled out his pocket comp and coded in a quick call for help, hoping it wouldn't be long in arriving, though authority was sometimes slow to respond to neighborhoods like this --

"Get back," Silver said. "Don't stand so close."

"Stand back and watch you bleed to death before someone can get here? No."

"B-back --" Silver said, his voice fading.

That made it a little easier. Silver's panic at slipping away helped fuel Kanton's ability to override the incoming feelings. He did have some first aide training from a TNI class. He knew what to do once he steeled himself to the work. The city guard arrived faster than he had expected. Lt. Wilson, the man in charge, looked over the scene with a shake of his head, and started shouting orders. He said medics were on the way as well, checked what Kanton had already done, and nodded. Then he began to ask questions.

"So, you just came back by chance?" Lt. Wilson said, sounding not at all pleased by the answer. The shorter, stocky man rubbed at the slight stubble on his face,

shaking his head. It unsettled Kanton even more, which didn't help. Wilson wasn't a psi, but he did have that work-related ability to see when a person was upset, and he pushed a bit. Kanton, his hands still on Silver, wasn't tracking very well anyway. "You came back for no reason."

Silver moved, turned his head a little, startling them both. "For-got to tell me where to meet tomorrow before -- work."

"Huh." The man's thoughts still bordered on disbelief, but that was the nature of his work. "Why didn't he just call you?"

"No -- vidcomp yet," Silver said. He was breathing slowly, calming himself, holding on to consciousness. "Just got place. Just got job."

"Where do you two work?"

Kanton withdrew his work ID and held it out. "TNI. Field Agents."

"Oh. Hell." The suspicions about Kanton disappeared, but they were quickly replaced by suspicions of another kind. "This is work related?"

"I don't know," Kanton said. He could lie well, if need be. "It doesn't seem likely. Silver just started today. Given the location and everything, I would guess it was a robbery. Sorry. Didn't mean to second-guess your work, Lt. Wilson -- but that would be my guess."

The man nodded, looking a little amused. The medics had finally arrived, the aircar sweeping down and settling behind the City Guard vehicle. Spectators came out of the buildings, even in the rain, to see what was going on. Two of the medics took over from Kanton, nodding that he'd done a good job to slow the bleeding. They were professionals. They had Silver bandaged, drugged, and on a stretcher so quickly it

even surprised Wilson.

"He needs care. There's some internal damage," the woman said as they began to take the stretcher toward the med aircar. "If you have any more questions for him, you know where to find him."

Professional. Wilson wasn't going to argue with her. Nonetheless, Silver still reached out and caught Kanton's hand, startling them all. His fingers felt very cold.

"Saw -- reflection in the door," Silver suddenly said. Was standing -- back by wall. Tall man, thin. Not clear though. Can't say more."

"Good," Kanton said. "I'm going with him."

Wilson nodded. He looked a little surprised, though, when Kanton first went to the wall and stood there for a moment, looking around. He didn't expect to find anything but he had expected to feel -- something. And it was there. Cold, hard, ready to kill again. Unfortunately, he still couldn't decide why, except that Silver, and he had tripped something. A tagged file?

He darted over to the med's aircar and climbed in before they left him behind. Silver wasn't conscious this time. It didn't help. There were more emotions and feelings in this little vehicle than Kanton thought he could deal with, so he sat quietly in the corner all the way to the hospital.

Four

The man with the pocket comp and medical scanner stood his ground, shaking his head.

"He has no provider. The work order on TNI hasn't gone through," the man said, standing by Silver's bed. He didn't seem to notice that Kanton's growing anger. They had been here for two hours already, and Silver needed care that no one had given. Now that Kanton knew the nature of the problem, it only made him more irate. "We can only do a low level treatment, keep him alive until morning when this can be straightened out. Maybe access government funds. He's not a native."

"That's not acceptable," Kanton said. He buried his anger, knowing he could easily correct this problem. "I'll cover his bills myself, but I want him on regen tonight. The medics said there is internal damage. I don't think it's wise to wait until morning."

"If you want to pay, that's fine," the man said. "But I'll need ID to check your account."

Kanton pulled out his TNI ID, shook his head, and then drew out the other one that he kept behind it. Terra Nova required only that you keep your individual ID number handy, and you could use whatever name appealed to you. But, as it happened, Kanton had a name that occasionally helped him.

He held the card up for the man to see. "I'm Kanton Day Fair."

"Fair?" The man looked up, startled. Very nearly panicked. "Of the First Ship Fairs?"

"Yes."

"Ah." Consternation surged up again, fear that he would handle this badly. Kanton felt Silver's distant interest in the conversation, watching on the edge of consciousness. "I do need to check your ID number --"

"If you run that check, do you know what will happen? It will trigger an alarm. Someone will wake up my mother and say that the hospital is running her son's ID. My mother is Atishin Fair. Do you really want to wake her up in the middle of the night and have her come down here, only to find out that I'm not injured?"

"Oh hell. Atishin? Oh. We'll -- run this in the morning. Someone will pay for the treatment, I'm sure. I'll order the regen set up immediately."

The man hurried out. Kanton watched with a shake of his head. "Amazing what my mother's name can do to people."

"Mother?" Silver said. His face was damp and pale but he had obviously tracked quite a bit of the conversation. "Family -- First Ship? Founders?"

"Not like the Forest Founders. The Fairs don't control the world, but they are rich. That buys something, now and then."

"You -- rich?"

"Oh yes."

Apparently the revelation about Kanton's background unsettled Silver, even though he had known Kanton didn't need to work at TNI. Kanton didn't like to use his

name to buy favors, but it had helped in this instance. They came and took Silver off for regen within minutes.

But that left him alone here with the emotions of others surging around the room, bouncing off the wall -- relief, fear, sorrow. Getting Silver regen treatments right away would get them both out of here as quickly as possible.

Five

By dawn the two had retreated to Kanton's apartment in one of the nicer buildings in the north end of town. Silver looked around with a little trepidation as he followed Kanton in to the living room. There were still *founder* thoughts in his muddled mind, but Kanton didn't pursue them or the emotions he felt.

"Sit down and relax," he said, waving toward the sofa. He went to the computer and keyed in the office number. "I'm going to report us off for the day -- hell, for the rest of the week. We can work here, unless there's something we think we need from TNI's computers. They do have certain accesses that even I don't have -- though I suppose I could get them, if I really wanted."

"Here is fine," Silver said and carefully sat down. He ached, but Kanton felt an underlying sense of having ached before and knowing he would survive it. "I don't know what you think we can do. Should do. I'm lost in this."

His hand brushed against the sofa and he looked unsettled.

"Stop worrying so much about how much money I have," Kanton said. "It didn't matter before, it doesn't now. We aren't founders. We're just rich."

"Means the same thing on Forest," he said and leaned back, at least trying to look relaxed. "I'm still having a hard time separating the two."

Kanton nodded as the vidcomp connected and put him through to Colis.

"There you are. Just got the report," Colis said. He looked a little less belligerent than usual. "Where are you? Do you know where Silver is? He's not at the hospital or at his apartment --"

"He's here. We're not coming in for a few days. I figured you wouldn't mind not having to look at me, and Silver isn't supposed to work for a week."

Colis frowned, but then he nodded without any argument. "Just as well. Dylan Dannan just sent word down from upstairs suggesting anyone with vacation time take it now, and anyone who wants to take some unpaid time off can do it without any backlash. However, I need to have the report on the incident. Standard TNI procedure, Kanton. Anyone involved in a weapons incident has to sign off for the personal reports."

"Yeah, forgot about that one. I can come to the office --"

"You aren't the one we really need. I'll come out to your place, and get Silver's scan on a report."

He didn't like the idea of Colis coming to *his* home, but he buried the thought as quickly as it arose. The man was actually doing them a favor. "Fine. I'll leave word at the door to let you in. They're picky about that sort of thing around here."

"I'll bring a second witness," Colis said. He looked like a man happy to find an excuse to get out of the office. It was probably unpleasant there, with people wondering if unpaid vacation would soon lead to no work at all. Kanton hoped TNI pulled through this. A half dozen other major businesses had already gone under in the city, though.

"You don't like Colis much," Silver said after he had closed down the link.

"Just a clash of personalities. He's not a bad guy, just an officious, arrogant

office clerk with delusions of grandeur."

Silver laughed but he still looked pale. Kanton sent orders to let Colis and company in when he arrived, and then sent for a light breakfast. What he really wanted was some sleep. He thought Silver wouldn't complain about it, either.

He kept the windows opaque and didn't open the balcony. He wanted the world to go away.

They ate the food and Kanton hoped Colis arrived soon so they could have that work out of the way. At least they were safe here in his apartment. Kanton hadn't thought much about the real danger until then, and was suddenly grateful for the best security money could buy. Nobody got into this place uninvited.

So he was quite surprised when the door buzzer rang and he opened it, only to find that it wasn't Colis on the other side. Nor was it an enemy -- but it hadn't occurred to him that his mother would show up without warning.

"You should have called me," she said. Tall, regal, dressed in silver, with her dark hair sculpted around her head. She swept into the room with a guard at her back. Two more stood at the end of the hall by the lift.

"It wasn't necessary. It wasn't an attack against me, mother."

"You're sure?" She stopped and looked back at him, a little agitation in her usual sea of calm.

He should have realized she would be worried. "I'm sorry I didn't call. I should have realized that even if I wasn't the one injured, you'd wonder what it was all about. It may be work related, but not family problems. That doesn't mean they won't try for me, too -- but now that I know about it, it's unlikely anyone will sneak up on me. I hadn't

really thought it all through like that. It's been a long night. I'm tired."

His mother nodded, and looked toward Silver for the first time. He had stood at the intrusion, even if he did keep one hand to the back of the sofa.

"And you work with my son at TNI?" She looked him over a couple times and then smiled. "Are you happy there?"

"I don't know," he said, looking uncertainly at Kanton. "I just started."

"Did you really?" The smile grew, looking a bit more predatory. "Then you aren't settled in. Good. You can come to work for me instead."

"Pardon?"

"You're a very nice looking young man --"

"He's also a psi, mother. He knows what you're thinking. Sit down Silver."

"A psi? All the better. Very good pay. You'd make a lovely display piece --"

"You aren't going to win him that way," Kanton said. He went and settled on the sofa beside Silver, hoping that his own good humor toward his mother would help Silver relax. "He's a former Bear Dancer. He's had enough display already."

"Too bad. I'll just have to try something different. You will work for me, Silver," she said and settled in the chair by the desk. Her guard kept to her side, silent though his mouth twitched a couple times during her job negotiations. Julian had been with Atishin for five years, and he was definitely a display piece. That didn't mean he wasn't damned good at his work, but he knew his value. "Have you enemies on Terra Nova, Silver?"

"I -- don't know," he said. He was still partially drugged and really didn't like the questioning.

"I don't think that was it, exactly. We -- may have stumbled onto something involving TerraCal." Kanton saw his mother's face brighten at those words, which didn't surprise him at all. "Lower echelon workers mother."

"Ah. Too bad."

"TerraCal is the second oldest firm on Terra Nova," Kanton explained to Silver.

"Oh? And the first?"

"FairFall Unlimited, of course." Kanton said. "Which my mother owns and runs."

Silver grinned. He had started to pull his thoughts together. Atishin made him nervous, but then she made just about everyone in the world nervous. And Julian wasn't much help. Kanton wondered if his mother even realized the guard stood there, even in her son's apartment. Ah, but Silver was an unknown, so it wasn't a real surprise.

"Tell me what I can do to help you get this sorted out," Atishin said, looking from one to another. "And don't argue. You know I'll just worry if I think there is someone out trying to kill you. You don't want me to feel that way."

"No, of course not. I'd have the entire house guard following me everywhere," Kanton said. He thought for a moment and nodded. "I need your best hacker. Someone who can get into TerraCal files without notice, even if they're tagged."

"Good thing I brought Julian along, then," she said with a wave toward the guard. "Consider yourself on assignment with Kanton until this is cleared up."

"Yes ma'am."

She stood again, already anxious to move on. The woman never lighted anywhere for long. "I know you won't keep me informed, but I do want all the juicy

details later. And any info I can play with. You know the game, Kanton, even if you don't get involved very often any more."

"I'll try to come up with something appropriately scandalous," he promised as he stood and walked her back to the door. Julian followed, his fingers tapping out codes on the wristband he wore. There would be a new guard to take his place before she stepped outside the door.

And when he opened the door to let her out, he found Colis and Greta and two more guards. Julian had already drawn his weapon.

"Ah, you're here," Kanton said. It was going to be one of those days. "It's alright, Julian. I was expecting them. I work with these two people."

"I don't know what the hell is going on, Kanton, but I don't appreciate being harassed by these people --"

"Let me introduce you to my mother, Colis," Kanton said, ignoring the man's words and his indignation. "This is Atishin Fair."

"I --" Colis began. Then he lost his train of thought. It was an amusing moment for Kanton who felt the little disbelief flooding in. "Atishin Fair of FairFall Unlimited?"

"Why yes," she smiled, looking quite predatory again. "A pleasure to meet you both. I've wondered about the people my son *chooses* to work with."

"They're here for a report on the incident," Kanton said. He waved a hand toward Silver. "Go ahead and get his part. I'll see my mother out."

"Yes. Of course," Colis said. He gave Atishin a nod of his head. "A pleasure to meet you."

"Thank you. I can find my way to the lift alone, Kanton," she said. She wasn't

alone, of course. Five guards stood outside his apartment -- the two who had been standing guard, two who had brought Colis and Greta up, and now another to take Julian's place. "Let me know if there's anything you need. If you need him, I can send the Fair house physician over, as well."

"Thank you, mother." He kissed her gently on the cheek and she smiled again. "If Silver has any problems, I'll call. But he had excellent care once I convinced the people in charge that credits were not a problem."

She nodded and patted him on the arm. "Good luck."

Then Atishin Fair swept out of the room and down the hall, guards falling in around her. Kanton watched and chuckled after he closed the door.

"She does love the show."

Colis looked at him, shook his head, and then looked at the hand comp he held. "I have the report from the City guards. It just needs to be verified and have you scan your Ids in," he said. His eyes looked toward the closed door. "You're really the son of Atishin Fair?"

"Oh yes. Very much so."

"What are you doing at TNI?" Greta asked.

"Better work than sitting in a FairFall office. I like it -- until recently. Let's do this quickly. Silver really does need to rest."

"You both look like hell," Colis said. He brought the chit over to Kanton, but his eyes darted to Julian who stood close by. He didn't ask about the guard.

Kanton made a quick read of the short report, and fixed his ID scan and thumb to it, and then Silver did the same -- mimicking him, of course. By then Colis was more

than ready to leave. The place made him very nervous -- or maybe just Julian that did that. Greta seemed too stunned to react. At any rate, they took the chit and left without anymore questions or comments.

Julian unsealed the balcony and went out, leaving the door open to the cool morning breeze. In a moment the Fairfall aircars lifted. Kanton wasn't really surprised to realize his mother had stayed until Colis and Greta left. She wasn't very trusting.

The aircars slipped away into the cloudy morning sky, and Julian stepped back into the room, pulling the link from his ear and taking off the wristband. He dropped both on the desk and leaned back, looking far less austere than he had moments before.

"I don't know how you can work for her, Julian," Kanton said, dropping back on the sofa by Silver.

"Your mother is a lot of fun, actually. And hell, there's far worse work to do out there," he said. Silver looked confused which drew Julian's attention. "You're really a psi too?"

"A drugged psi, Julian," Kanton explained. "And he has a slightly different feel than I do."

"Ah. Tell me what you have on this case, and what I should start looking for. Then the two of you get some rest."

Six

Kanton slept for a few hours and came back out of his room to find Julian still happily typing away and Silver, surprisingly, in a chair close by, watching.

"Good thing you had me here," Julian said looking up. "Someone made a very credible attempt to hack into your apartment system about half an hour ago. I put a tag on your lines, and I don't think he's going to try again."

"Thanks," Kanton said, more wide awake now.

"It's a nice break from the usual work," Julian said before Kanton could comment. "I do like working for your mother, even being her prize show piece, but I get bored to tears at most of those meetings."

"You and me both. I thought you'd still be asleep, Silver."

"I was until a few minutes ago. Sitting out here seemed better than staying in there."

"Yeah. We need to start considering our next moves, anyway. You come across anything yet, Julian?"

"You were right about the tagged files, and that's probably how this guy was alerted to check things out and found you two. What I've learned is that all the team Doug Ian worked with is dead, most of them in the plague or the riots afterwards. The

AI project they were working on was all head stuff. Project Sigh never came to anything -- that S-I-G-H not P-S-I. It's an acronym for System Intelligent Generated Hyperpath."

"Ah. Good," Kanton said. He'd had a moment of startled worry. "Just another Artificial Intelligence program, huh?"

"They seemed to have been trying a different approach, but I can't find anything in the files to warrant all of them being murdered. All the deaths are verified and there's nothing even suspicious there."

"Hell," Kanton said and sat down on the sofa. "This is not going to make mother very happy."

Julian snorted, and turned back to the computer, his fingers darting on the keyboard as he pulled up files. ID pictures flashed across the screen --

Silver stood, startled -- and then went down on his knees with a sharp pain in his side. So, unfortunately, did Kanton who had been caught unaware and gasped as well.

And Julian leapt on his feet, weapon in hand, looking for the enemy.

"S-Sorry," Silver said, raising a hand in a gesture of peace. "Just saw -- the face I saw in the reflection, the man who knifed me. Sorry, Kanton. I shouldn't have stood so quickly."

"It's all right, Julian," Kanton said. The guard still looked around, waiting for an attack. "He had a pain in his back and I caught the echo, that's all."

"You two scared the hell out of me!" Julian complained. But he did offer his hand to Silver, helping him back up. "You're dangerous together. Don't do that to me again."

Silver grinned. Apparently the contact with Julian finally helped. Kanton stood and went back to the computer, pulling up the picture that had so startled Silver.

"Project Manager," Julian said with a glance at the screen. "Died of natural causes before the plague. It's impossible to fake that kind of data, you know."

"It was him or his twin," Silver said.

"Or his clone," Kanton added. "But that's the one."

"If it was Porter," Julian said and frowned this time. He was keying up info again. "These files are supposed to be absolutely tamper proof. I couldn't get into them. There was no way to fake that death report. Clone would be my best guess."

"But not mine," Silver said. "Not unless the clone was also working at TerraCal."

Kanton grabbed a chair and pulled it over and sat by Silver. "This manager -- Porter? What if he's not really dead?"

"Porter," Julian said. "The report says he died of natural causes. Liver failure, apparently. What about the other one who was killed with a knife. Are you certain it was the same person who went for Silver?"

"I held the knife that killed Doug Ian," Kanton said with a shiver. "I felt it kill him."

"Oh hell. I didn't know you could feel --"

"Neither did I, until it happened." Kanton leaned back and thought for a moment, trying to recall the thoughts and not the pain. It wasn't working. "I need to hold that knife again."

"No," Silver said. "Absolutely not."

"It wasn't pleasant, but I survived it. And I won't be taken by surprise this time. The knife is at Silver's apartment, Julian. Can you have someone pick it up and bring it here?"

"Yes," he said but didn't sound very assured. "But -- just remember what your

mother will do to *me* if something happens to you."

It was a good warning, but still not enough to stop him. "We need to find out if we're on the right track at all, Julian. I don't want to waste time on this. I don't want to feel trapped in this apartment, and neither do you. Where's the knife, Silver?"

He looked inclined not to answer. Julian came over, putting a friendly hand on his shoulder. "My people will find the knife eventually, you know. It might even be fun -- if we had the time."

"There's a pack under the bed with my Bear Dancing Equipment. It's there. I figured people would just think it was another part of the act."

"Good choice of hiding place," Julian said. He went back to the computer, and keyed a coded order to the people at Fair House. "I don't like it, Kanton, but you are right. And you better hope your mother never finds out I let you do something this stupid."

"Do you really think she'd hold you responsible?"

"Once she put me in charge of keeping you safe, you bet she would. And being her favorite display piece wouldn't save me. You know what happened to Heler."

"True enough. Previous head guard, Silver. He's out in the Pavo Fringe somewhere trying to grow corn, I believe."

"Not exactly the kind of work I want to do," Julian added.

"I'll remember that," Kanton promised.

Seven

Julian answered the door to pick up the box. Silver watched, shaking his head, and it was apparent neither of them liked this idea. Kanton wasn't going to be dissuaded, though. He wanted answers -- and he felt that the knife held them.

"At least make sure you're sitting down this time," Silver said, and put a hand on the sofa beside him.

"Not there. You --"

"By me, so I can know what's going on, too."

He started to argue, and changed his mind. Julian came over with the box but didn't hold it out yet. "I still don't think this is a good idea."

"You don't have to tell me that," Kanton said. Julian didn't smile at the joke this time. "I want answers, Julian. Now. Because, for some reason, I get the feeling there are things going on we really need to know about as soon as possible. I may even have picked that up in my brief contact with the person who tried to kill Silver. I just want the answers."

Julian nodded, opened the box and held it out.

He didn't waste time for more than one deep breath, and a reminder to his body that this was not *his* wound. It barely helped. He had the knife in his hand, and the pain

shot through him so fast that he almost blacked out again. Julian reached for the knife and cursing, but Kanton fended him off with his other hand.

"No. Hold on. I'm past -- that part. I want a feel for who held the knife, not who died by it."

His voice sounded steadier than he'd expected. It helped calm Julian. They'd worked together before, and he knew what was going on, even if he didn't know the depth of what he felt. It wasn't easy to fool Julian and impossible to fool Silver. Luckily, he didn't need to even try to lie to them. They were all here to find a truth.

And he held a piece of that truth in his hand.

"There's an odd feel," he said after a long silence. His breath became ragged, and he felt a little lightheaded. He wouldn't be doing this for much longer. "An odd feel to the knife -- no, to the hand that holds the knife. A change to the hand. He thinks about it. Sigh."

"Sigh?" Julian said and leaned closer. "The project? What has his hand got to do with the project?"

"Link."

"Oh really," Julian said. He reached for the knife, but Kanton wasn't ready to give it up yet. "Give it to me --"

"No. A bit more. I want -- someone to go with that hand."

"Let me try, Kanton," Silver said and put his hand over Kanton's.

And that proved to be a very bad mistake.

By the time Julian got the knife out of their hands, and got them separated, Kanton barely held to consciousness and Silver was having trouble breathing.

"I'm going to kill you both," Julian said. He even half meant it at that moment. Kanton couldn't remember the guard ever being that upset.

"Mother wouldn't like that," Kanton reminded him.

"Your mother be damned. I'm doing it to save everyone. You two are insane. You shouldn't be allowed to drive other people crazy as well."

Julian's hair had come free of the knot, and his thin brown face was damp with perspiration. The man never perspired, even the times he had gone up against assassins.

"I'm sorry," Silver apologized, still breathless but sitting up now. "I -- my fault. I never worked with another psi before."

"Me either," Kanton reminded him.

"And you will never do this again, will you?" Julian stumbled back to the computer desk chair and sat down. Then he looked from one to another. "Tell me right now that you aren't going to do it again."

"I think -- I think we picked up a lot of info in that moment," Silver offered.

"I'm going to kill myself," Julian said. "It's the only real answer. I won't have to deal with either of you or Atishin."

"*Lots of info*, Julian," Kanton said, and this time did get the man's guarded attention. Julian surreptitiously put the knife behind him. "Don't worry; we won't touch the knife again. I don't think we need to. It is Porter, Julian. Porter and not a twin or a clone."

Silver nodded. Julian looked from one to the other, and kept shaking his head. "Can't be. There is no way to fake those death notices, and no way to change them

once they're in the files! How the hell could he get away with that?"

"Sigh," Silver said.

"They were working on some esoteric computer programming, and they found -- *something*. I don't know what, but I do know that Porter has access to things he shouldn't have. And I know he's alive."

"Hell. Computer programs." Julian looked at the desk. "If he can change that much, there's no way we can track him, you know."

"No way a normal person could," Kanton said. He stood. "But Silver and I can."

"We're going out?" Julian said and didn't look at all pleased.

"Yes. We're going hunting."

Eight

Julian wanted more guards. Kanton pointed out that he was the only one outside the immediate family who knew Atishin Fair's third son was a psi, and if that word got out it was not going to be pleasant for any of them. So they went out with just Julian to back them. Kanton felt sorry for the man. He did take his work very seriously, and he didn't like being the only one who stood between Kanton, Silver and some crazed killer.

Silver may not have been doing well physically, but he had calmed. Kanton wasn't sure what it had been in that last link that triggered his new companion's controls, but he no longer moved along the edge of panic. That helped as well. With Kanton and Silver at ease, Julian calmed as well.

One of the clearest things the two had picked up from their contact with the knife was a place -- an office with a view Kanton realized put it in the Birdwell district. Offices filled that quarter, in fact, including the TNI building -- but this one was small, with a single window looking out toward the old brickyards that had been converted into a park. That helped to pinpoint the area, and the three walked along the paths with dozens of others who were out shopping in the early evening. Once Kanton convinced Julian that they wouldn't draw so much of attention if he would start acting like a companion instead of a guard, things got better.

Down the long street with the park to the left and several tall buildings to the right -- Kanton looked up and over many times, trying to get the line of sight in perspective. He finally found the view and Silver confirmed the feel at the door leading into the building. The place was locked and coded. However, it didn't take Julian long to get them access, using his pocket comp to hack the system. Silver stepped into the hall beyond the door and frowned, then nodded. "Yes, definitely him. Let's try the lift. I think we can feel out the floor."

Julian followed, intrigued again. They had found no records of this office in anything related to Porter, and yet they knew he came here. Often.

"And lately, too," Silver said. Julian sighed -- the two had been answering each other like that more often as they stayed together, and the guard couldn't hide his frustrated. "Sorry, Julian. Porter comes here often. He's been here today."

"Oh, has he?" Julian said. Frustration disappeared. "Came in *and* went back out? Or could we get lucky and catch him here?"

"Not here now, I don't think," Kanton said. They stepped into one lift and Silver ran his fingers over the numbered board. Floor seven. He hit the key. "But it won't hurt to be careful, just in case."

"Right." Julian already had a weapon in hand. It came easily to him, even though he didn't like to use it. "Do I have to warn the two to be careful?"

Silver looked at him for a moment, his head tilted. "I'm not helpless."

"I haven't seen any --"

Silver moved; quickly, easily and very effectively. It surprised the hell out of Julian when he brought one foot up, and easily pinned the guard's weapon arm to the

wall of the lift. Silver twisted the pistol out of his hand, and spun back out of the way of Julian's blow with the other hand. He moved damned fast.

"Well hell." Julian looked at the weapon. Silver gave the pistol back. "I want you to teach me that."

Silver bowed his head. The lift opened and Julian was *almost* not ready. He still looked stunned, and then he looked at Kanton as though he'd been hiding something.

"I had *no* idea, Julian. Honest."

"Bear Dancer," Silver reminded them, a hand to his side -- obviously it had been more movement than he probably should have made, but it had been an effective way to make Julian realize he was not helpless. "I just don't think about it much any more. What I am -- or was -- seems to keep getting lost lately. I only became a psi recently."

"Ah," Julian said. He didn't ask, and he didn't question when Kanton and Silver turned to the right and started down the hall. He followed, weapon in hand, and ready.

The door at the end of the hall had no plate on it. The coded lock also had a palm scan. Julian looked at it for a moment, then shrugged and pulled a probe from his back pocket. It didn't take him long to get the door open, either.

"Getting into the building was a minor problem -- easy to cover. But this is breaking and entering. If we're caught now, your mother is going to have the kind of scandal she really doesn't like to hear about," he warned as the door slid open.

Kanton nodded and followed Silver into the office, knowing no one waited inside. They also knew that Porter hid something important in this room.

The computer system sat beneath the window with the view of the park -- a non-standard model, with a dozen odd boxes and components. He'd expected as much

from someone one who worked in the computer field. Except for that desk, the room was empty. Not even a picture hung on the wall.

One of the boxes looked odd and he found a hand-shaped indentation on the top.

"Don't touch it," Silver warned when Kanton almost put his hand down. "He's had some very odd thoughts about that box. I'm going to sit down in the chair and see what I can get."

Kanton stepped to the side of the desk and Julian moved behind the chair, hardly out of reach. Silver carefully settled into the chair, his head bowed and silent for a moment. Whatever he picked up seemed confusing. Kanton could feel that part.

"I come from a low-tech world." Silver sounded apologetic. "All the technical thoughts about the computer don't translate well for me. But what he did -- I can show you that part, I think."

"There's no telling what will happen if we turn on that computer," Julian said. He sighed with a shake of his head. "But on the other hand, I suspect we'd be fools to leave here without doing it. Just be careful, Silver."

He nodded and turned the computer on. Kanton watched Silver close his eyes, and how his fingers moved across the keyboard, trying to call up the recent files. It took a couple tries before he finally reached something ...interesting.

"He shouldn't have access to TerraCal's private accounts," Julian said even before Kanton could comment. "He shouldn't be able to reach them. What the hell is he doing? How is he doing it?"

"Sigh," Kanton said. "This is the Sigh research, isn't it?"

"Something. They found something. Not an artificial intelligence, though." Silver looked at the odd-shaped box. "They found a way to use human thought to navigate computer systems."

Julian gave a little whistle of surprise. "Humans linked with computers?"

"That's the implant in his hand -- what we kept sensing as odd in his hold on the knife. I don't quite understand it, but I know he does it by thought. And I know Porter can feel his way into just about any file on any system."

"And make people believe he's dead, and get the other deaths written off as part of the plague," Julian said. He looked worried at the implications. Kanton felt the same way at the idea, realizing nothing might be safe from him. "And... if he can get into TerraCal's Inner computer systems --"

"He can go anywhere. Do anything. What's he planning, Silver? Where is he now?"

"I don't know, at least not physically. But I'm sure I know where his mind is."

"You think he's somewhere in the system now? But not from here?"

"This isn't a link. This system is self-contained -- not even vid out. The only connection he has here is a power source. This apparently the system takes more power than he could safely build into power cells. He wanted no one to find this computer. He brought these files on the accounts from the outside."

"Then what's that?" Julian said, waving a hand toward the box.

"That's our key in."

"It builds the link, doesn't it?" Kanton said. "And if we use it --"

"Not we. Me," Silver said. "I have to be the one."

"Why?" Kanton asked, shaking his head and ready to deny whatever Silver said.

"Because I can follow his thoughts, and you can't. And because Julian needs to be free to guard us. Both of us. I can get in, but I think I'm going to need your help."

"You don't know what will happen," Julian began to protest. "He may have trapped it --"

"No," Kanton said. "It's the only one of its kind. The rest of the team is dead and he can't rebuild. He doesn't trust the system. He's afraid his own link will break down. He's given up everything -- including his identity -- because this will make him rich and powerful. If it fails him, he's in real trouble. But Silver --"

Silver pushed his hand into the molded part at the top of the box.

"Sorry. Didn't think we should argue any more. We just... don't have time. He came for me already...."

"What the hell --" Julian said, his voice panicked.

The box hummed and closed around his hand, reshaping itself like a glove. A bright pulse of light flashed on and off, illuminating the surface. Silver took short breaths, trying to stay calm. Something -- hurt, though not intolerably. Something moved in his hand and he didn't like the feel of it, and that made Kanton shiver until Julian pushed him aside. The guard had begun cursing under his breath.

Kanton suddenly realized this box wasn't just implanting something in Silver's hand. Something small and wire-like had begun snaking its way up his arm.

"Don't," Silver said when Julian reached pulled him away. "It's started. It won't stop because you pull me out -- but it might break the contact and we can't fix it."

"I don't like this!" Kanton said, panicked now where he had only been worried

before. "It's going --"

"For my brain," Silver said, his voice almost steady, but he closed his eyes now. It didn't help Kanton who could feel everything far too well. "Hadn't considered that part. Thoughts to control. Almost --"

Kanton tried to push past Julian, but the guard held him back. Realization that it might be more dangerous to stop than let this machine complete the work unsettled him for the last moment it took until the probe reached Silver's brain.

And that hurt like hell.

Nine

"We have to get out of here," Julian said. Kanton could almost understand the words again. "Kanton, if you don't get up and start moving, I'm going to call your mother and have her come down here and get you. And then no one is going to be happy, are they?"

"Go? Something wrong?" Kanton blinked, his eyes slowly focusing in the near dark.

"Yes, something wrong," Julian said. His hair had completely come free now. His face looked damp, though he couldn't tell for certain. "Silver blew out the system. I think he may have even done it on purpose --"

"Silver --"

"He's unconscious," Julian said. "I can't bring him around. And if *you* can't move on your own, we're going to have to leave him here. People will be on their way to check out what blew the power in this area! It won't take them long to trace this building and *we do not want to be here.*"

That got through to him, with the thought of what his mother would do. He sat up and stood only a moment later. He could hear sirens in the air nearby. Silver sat slumped back in the chair, his hand free of the box -- which had changed shape again.

Silver didn't look good, but he could see the rise and fall of his chest. No rush of emotions, at least. That helped, except for Julian who started to panic at what would happen if they were caught here.

"Get him. I can move on my own," Kanton said and already started to the door.

Julian gathered Silver up in a fireman's carry. At the door, the guard paused just long enough to toss a small capsule back inside before he closed the room.

"And that was?" Kanton asked, muddled still by his own headache and being so close to Silver.

"Bio acid. Wipe out any traces of DNA in the room. Come on. We're going up to the roof. We might get lucky and find an aircar to steal."

"You can't pretend you aren't enjoying this, you know."

Julian shook his head and started for the stairwell at the far end of the hall. "I don't mind the running around and evading the City Guard. It does beat the hell out of some of those meetings your mother drags me to. However, I do mind that the two of you keep doing things I don't understand. I fear you are going to get us into a situation I can't get us free from, and then we really do have to call Atishin. I don't want to put your mother in that position."

Kanton only grunted an answer as he helped balance Silver. They had reached the stairs, and headed upward. They passed through one door -- opened on their side, but coded like the front door on the backside, so he knew they would have no easy way to go back down if they needed to. It didn't help Kanton's state of mind.

They had another four floors to the roof where they might find an aircar, and even Julian knew they weren't going to make it that far before they ran into trouble.

The tenth floor provided their only hope. They could hear people coming from below, and they could hear the sounds of others on the roof. But the tenth floor opened to the city walkway -- dark now, with only a few bars of emergency lighting in this section. They couldn't hope to get away without being seen in the walkway, but Kanton came up with another plan.

Unfortunately, he had neither the time nor the breath to explain to Julian. So he pushed the guard, who landed unceremoniously on his ass, Silver landing beside him. It still didn't look quite right. Kanton heard people only half a flight below them. No time.

He kicked Silver in the side of the head and stepped back, shaken. Blood welled just to the left of Silver's eyebrow and ran down the side of his face.

"Have you gone stark raving --"

Kanton raised a hand, and Julian went silent as he got back to his feet. In the next moment they were no longer alone.

"What's going on here? Who the hell are you?"

"Kanton, TNI," he said and pulled out his ID. "We saw the trouble in this area, and didn't realize you people would arrive so quickly. I wouldn't have run so hard!"

"Caught this guy?" the man said, a foot nudging Silver's leg.

"No. He's one of ours." Kanton fished out Silver's ID, and prayed no one asked for Julian's, though they could probably talk their way through that one as well, given who the man really worked for. "He got here ahead of us. We found him like this."

The City Guard took the ID and nodded, though Kanton caught that he intended to do a little more checking. Call TNI -- and someone there would say that he and Silver were on indefinite leave and hadn't been there today --

Help, unexpectedly, came down the stairs from the roof.

"You two again," Lt. Wilson said looking at Kanton and then down at his fallen companion. "Silver's not having a good week, is he?"

"No, not a good week at all," Kanton agreed. He hoped he didn't sound as relieved as he felt. "I think he ran into someone. The man must have gone the opposite way down the walkway from TNI. We didn't pass anyone."

"You need a medic unit again?"

"No. We'll just take him back to TNI. There's someone on duty there who can help out."

"One of you give them a hand. I'll want to know what he saw, Kanton."

"Yes, sir. Do you know what happened?"

"We think someone had an illegal computer system and it got fried -- and took a number of the sector relays with it. People are not happy. Go. Give me anything Silver has as soon as possible."

One of the uniformed men helped Julian get Silver back to his feet. He looked groggy now, and Kanton put a hand on his arm, urgently imparting everything, and wishing him to stay silent until they reached TNI, and out of the eyes of everyone else. He caught a faint hint of understanding overlain by a blinding headache. He hadn't noticed that he'd been kicked as well, but that hardly helped Kanton's feeling of guilt, even if the ploy had worked.

He let the other two carry Silver the four blocks back to the building. There TNI personal took over. They went down to the office where Colis happened to be just preparing to leave.

"Hell -- what are you two doing back here?"

Unintentionally perfect words. The city guard lost all disbelief in their story. Now Kanton only needed to make certain the conversation just stayed that way.

"We needed to bring Silver some place close by. Can you get the med supplies?"

Someone else had already gone to the cabinet and came back with the box. The man Wilson had sent nodded and left, which relieved Kanton of a great deal of his anxiety. Julian felt the same way, though he still worried about Silver. Kanton began to open the case, his hands shaking now in the aftermath of what had happened -- and the dawning realization there might really be something wrong with Silver. Julian took over. Colis continued to hang around though. He wanted the man to leave so that they could talk.

And then Julian's private link beeped. He looked at Kanton as pulled it out. "This will be your *mother*. She will not be pleased."

"He's that guard that was at your apartment," Colis said, finally recognizing him.

"Head of FairFall Security," Kanton said.

That surprised Colis, who stared in wide-eyed surprise. Julian put the link to his ear and stood silently for quite a while, his eyes only blinking now and then.

Silver looked up, pale but steady. Even the pain in his head began to lessen. It helped.

"Yes ma'am. I understand," Julian finally said. And then, "No ma'am. I don't think I would like farming at all." Silver very nearly laughed. Julian tried not to grin, even though Kanton knew he took Atishin's threat very seriously. "Yes ma'am -- what?"

Now? In the last half an hour? Yes. We'll do what we can."

Kanton sensed the sudden change in Julian's attitude and he knew that this had to be serious. Even Colis seemed to understand that something had happened.

"There's trouble out there. Services have shut down throughout the city, stranding people. A central power station had such a spike in power that it set fire to most of the building. The trouble is spreading outward to some of the other towns, as well."

"Computer controlled," Kanton said, looking at Silver and his hand. "Porter is creating havoc out there. But why?"

"To keep people busy while he handles other things. The Terra Nova EconMarket is failing," Julian said as he dropped the link back in his pocket. "And people are already starting to riot again, raiding every place they can find. They think the world's falling."

"The market is stable!" Kanton said. "It can't just --"

"TerraCal's assets are disappearing," Julian said. And he put a hand on Silver's shoulder. "They're the second largest company in the world, and with those assets disappearing out of the system, everything that is based on them is failing as well."

Kanton caught only a piece of the information passed in that touch. Julian wanted to keep Silver and Kanton safe. But he didn't want the world to fall, either. They had difficult choices.

But really, no choice at all. Kanton knew it even before Silver nodded. And Julian, though no psi, understood as well.

"Porter knows what I've done. He realizes we're close," Silver said and sat up

straighter. He flexed the fingers of his hand and looked at Kanton. "We need to go in."

"How? From here?"

"Any computer with a central link," Silver said. He got up, and stumbled to the nearest computer console. It came on at his touch -- odd to see him so assured, who had been afraid to touch a computer just yesterday. He pushed open the peripheral port and looked back at Kanton.

Riots. *People would die.* Kanton felt the world tottering on the edge of madness again, and he didn't want to see it happen.

"Put the market reports up so we can see them," Silver said. He sounded very assured, and when Kanton came to sit by him, he couldn't feel the slightest hint of hesitation in what Silver planned to do, even with strangers here. Kanton knew they were about to reveal all their secrets, but it didn't matter if they could stop Porter, and at the same time save lives. He made a silent promise to Silver that the Fair fortune would keep them both as safe as they could be.

Silver looked at him and nodded. Kanton unobtrusively put a hand on his friend's arm just before Silver reached forward and laid his hand over the keyboard port.

The world changed.

Silver must have picked up what to expect when he worked with Porter's computer because the change didn't startle him nearly as much as it did Kanton. They *stood* on the precipice of a drop into the Terra Nova net, and he felt their powers merge, grow, and mutate to suit the environment. When he looked to the side he found Silver -- or a Silver shaped whirl of data. Kanton held up his hand and saw lines of white and blue, fingers moving...but he knew it wasn't real.

They became what they needed to be in those seconds, because they could feel what those needs were. He had never felt so well-attuned to his power and his mind... and he wondered if it was because they weren't distracted by the thoughts and emotions of so many others here.

They faced a jumble of colors that possessed capacities and sounds that were not real. The miasmic rush of powers nearly drove Kanton back out. Pull, push -- sound that wasn't there. Kanton shivered and wanted out.

No problem. Just let go of my arm and you'll be out.

I'm all right, Kanton answered. Odd to talk mind-to-mind. What do I do?

You know computers. I don't. I can get us in, but I don't know what to do when I'm here. Where would Porter go to make this happen?

Kanton had started to protest that he didn't know computers, from the *inside*, but when he looked up, he realized he could see patterns here. Colors held data codes. Patterns, and sometimes even whole words, swam among the power lines that cut everywhere, linking data to ports throughout the world. He saw the ghosts of old binary codes floating along the tunnel, and the brighter lit pieces of modern neo code, all light and power. He didn't think they should be able to see it this clearly, to interpret what the code and see words and patterns that made sense --

Something in the implant translates, Silver thought. Where do we go?

TerraCal's main computer. That's where we're going Silver. I don't know what we do when we get there.

He won't expect us. That's our advantage. He doesn't know either of us are psis, and without that ability, no one could do this the first time. It has taken him years before he felt he knew the system well enough to kill his fellow workers and pursue this

for his own gain.

Silver moved through the waves of color, Kanton holding to him. A tingling began to feel like a shock of electricity, unpleasant and growing worse. Light streaked away from them in paths that looked deceptively easy to follow. He suspected the implant translated everything to images they could understand. It helped -- except he had no idea how to find TerraCal's computer. He tried to find links in the code, or locate a center core that would branch out to many places, but the net felt like a maze to him, and the goal never grew any closer.

A growing pain made it harder to work. He realized he could feel his body -- and the growing headache distracted him. Time passing, trouble in the real world, and he felt lost --

A hand on his shoulder, a touch from the real world. Julian, upset -- Julian who didn't like what he saw, and pried Kanton's fingers from Silver's arm.

"No!"

He came back in the real world, gasping, his body trembling and his head ready to explode with the pain that double with the unexpected separation. He very nearly swung on Julian, but his arms felt lethargic, and hard to control.

Silver was in there, alone. Silver who didn't understand the code, even when it was translated. Silver, hunting for one other human -- a dangerous human --

He started to reach again, and Julian dragged the entire chair away.

"You tell me why I should let you do that again. You give me one good reason to risk the wrath of your mother."

"We need to find the TerraCal computer," he said. His voice trembled. He took a

deep breath and steadied himself, ignoring that Colis stood close by, looking stunned. "We need to get in where Porter is and try to stop him. Set things back before this goes on any farther! But we can't find a path into TerraCal --"

"Hell," Julian said. He looked at the computer screen where the market graphs dropped at a dizzying rate. A smaller screen showed a news report with vid of fires. "Hell and hell. *She'll kill me.* I can get you into TerraCal's computer. You better make sure this counts for something, Kanton. I'll type in the code from here. Can you get it?"

"I think so. I'm going back in after Silver. Don't pull me back out again, Julian. It's unpleasant in there, but it'll just take longer if we have to keep stopping."

"I'll do whatever I have to. Your heartbeat had gone way up, and your body had started toward seizures. I know the signs. Silver is just about there as well, so you better move quickly. If I think this is going to kill you, I'm pulling you both out. Remember that and work fast."

There was no arguing it. Julian helped him slide the chair forward again. He wondered what Colis thought -- but hadn't the strength left to try and find out. Julian began to type. Kanton braced himself, and caught hold of Silver's arm again.

He had a harder time making the connection to Silver this time. The device that made the computer translations still had hold of Silver, and made him feel alien, different. Kanton had been pulled out of the program, and now he saw only flashes of light without pattern. But he held on.

Silver!

He pushed into the miasma of data, tracking what he hoped would be the link to his friend -- a feel of subdued panic from the other psi.

And found him. Silver's relief came quite clearly in that moment.

Sorry. Julian didn't like it. But he has an answer. We need to go back and start from our terminal again. He's typing in a path to TerraCal.

Excellent. Back to the terminal.

He hated retreating after all the work they'd done to get here, but it worked for the best. Julian had the terminal set when they arrived, and he could clearly see a straight, clean path to TerraCal. Silver rushed down it, Kanton in tow, both of them anxious to be done with this madness, although Kanton still didn't know what they could do.

They found themselves not in TerraCal's central computer, but at the SIGH project terminal in some office. Porter's former work site.

Excellent.

Kanton wasn't sure if that came from him or Silver. It didn't matter. They flittered through the private files on this site looking for information. SIGH -- System Intelligent Generated Hyperpath. Ah. That made more sense now. Tests done from here. Games played, mostly. Each of the team implanted.

Porter had been here in these files. Porter had been here not very long ago, in fact. Why?

This is his path to the main computer, Silver thought. We can follow him more easily from here. He's done it so often -- can you see?

Silver pointed out Porter's trail, a dark path through the world of light. Kanton could see thoughts -- human thoughts, where there should never have been any, not this far into the machine. Silver started down that path, moving slowly, careful because

they could not tell the difference in an old thought or a new one. Porter could be just ahead of them.

They found a junction; a spot where paths trailed off in a dozen directions, into different areas. Silver stopped, started down one, came back, down another. Each led to secure areas. Each could be what they needed...

Ask. Ask what he's doing now. We have to hurry!

Kanton wrenched himself out of what Silver saw, and come back to the real world. Julian stood behind him, hand on his weapon. Colis had finally put everything together. He was saying something about psis. No matter. Too late to worry about it now.

"What's Porter doing? Where is he in the system?" Kanton asked softly.

Julian leaned over to the other computer, keyed in a few codes and watched the screen.

"Off-world holdings. Things are changing --"

Kanton nodded, put his hand back on Silver's arm and went back in. It didn't prove any easier, following his link to Silver, locked this time on where he would find the other psi. Down, down to TerraCal again, and along the path. Silver had waited for him, absorbed the data from Julian, moved in the right direction. Down another color, through another green --

Porter.

They saw a lump of darkness where they were used to seeing light and patterns, like a cloud obscuring the sky. And like a dark storm cloud, this one was a harbinger of problems. They had found him. Neither had any idea what to do now.

Manipulate data, Kanton thought.

Porter must have *heard* him. Kanton saw the cloud shift in a way that seemed to indicate attention drawn in their direction. Kanton wondered what Porter saw.

No! You cannot be here!

Porter had been here often, and had the ability to manipulate the powers around them. He caught a surge of power and sent it straight at them, like a bolt of tamed purple lightning.

Kanton had expected to be hit by the power but instead he found them surrounded by a cloud of data -- chaos data, unrelated code, a whirlpool of circular patterns that tried to lock them into the circuits, tried to bind them to this place.

If only one of them had found his way into this place, it might have worked. But while Kanton fought the effects of the chaos, Silver found the way around it. He pulled Kanton after him, through a place of orange and out again.

They stood closer to Porter, whose thoughts were directed toward the data he manipulated. They saw credits siphoned from one account to another.

And the world fell while he stole those credits. They rushed forward, knew that he only realized they were still present at the last moment before the collision of --

Minds and minds, two psis, one murderer.

Chaos.

Kanton lost his hold on Silver, and panicked trying to grab him back. Porter panicked for other reasons. He wasn't used to the intimacy a psi experienced every day. He didn't want them in his mind, and didn't want to be part of theirs -- to see him judged, to see his evil in the eyes of others.

But instead of trying to draw away from what he hated so much, he attacked it instead. It was his way, to kill instead of hide, to attack rather than retreat. Kanton knew what he planned. Porter, unused to having his thoughts known before he acted, still charged forward. He had aimed at Silver, the one who read his thoughts far clearer than his emotions, but Kanton got in the way.

By now Porter had grown angry beyond coherent thoughts as he slipped toward panic and rage, both hard emotions for Kanton to deal with on such an intimate level. He didn't like it much better than Porter did, but he still had a better grasp of the situation, having spent his entire life dealing with other people's emotions. Porter used the powers of the system to attack. Kanton, sensing what he did, used the same technique to send the data flying away in rainbows of code. But it began to hurt -- he could feel his body grow weaker with each battle.

As long as he fought Porter, the man could not deal with Silver as well. He could not direct his mind to two places. Silver had pulled away. Silver knew. Kanton pushed farther into the attack, grabbing at the power the way he had perceived that Porter had done, and driving it into the heart of that dark cloud of thought. Again and again, even though he felt the echo of shock each time he hit.

Again.

And then Silver struck, a blow that numbed both he and Porter by the sheer power spent. Porter howled and retreated, trailing pieces of cloud where he left. Bits of data? Parts of his mind, torn from the whole? Kanton shied away from the smaller pieces, and reached frantically for Silver whom he could not see. Porter hadn't gone far. He sat at the edge of the portal to this TerraCal site, like a rabid guard dog, waiting

for someone to dare his post. Kanton could see madness in the swirl of colors in the darkness. Chaos and pain and --

Kanton.

Silver came near, caught him in their psi link again. He felt so relieved that it took him a moment to realize there was something very wrong.

He's cutting our path.

Panic surged up, and all his own this time. He didn't want to be trapped in here. He attacked with such ferocity that he pushed Porter back and they got past. Which way? The colors didn't look nearly as strong as they had been. He felt as though the world flickered around him in a pulse of truth and lies, all blending in a reality he couldn't grab hold of and follow. He looked back and saw Porter following, but the dark cloud moved slowly. Wounded in mind, Kanton thought and shivered at what he and Silver must have done.

Not our fault. We had to stop him. Riots. Others dying.

He held to that thought, which gave him the strength of right. That and the need to get free --

Back to the real world. Back where they needed to go --

Porter surged closer with a hatred that glowed dark, pulled power to him, and pulled even at them when they wavered. Not the same Porter as when they first encountered him. Changed. Darker. Less human.

Catching them.

Silver started to pull free, intending to confront the enemy. Kanton caught him with frantic haste and tried to drag him along.

Go find the way! Silver ordered. Pull me there. I'm stronger than him! I can hold out until you can find our way!

A dangerous ploy, but Kanton could see no other answer. Porter had begun pulling far too many colors to him. Kanton had to get clear the chaos Porter created to find their own path.

Be careful!

Kanton let go. He rushed away through a path of red, following it to a faint and flickering blue. A long ways. Had he lost the way? No. He could feel something familiar here, the shadow of his own thoughts trapped in the interface. Silver had to find his way to the hand that linked him here, and Kanton had to mark that path.

Found it. Found the portal, and went out... and found himself not in his own body, but in Silver's. Silver's pains and Silver's regrets, stronger than he had ever picked up in the psi contact. It surprised him, stunned him for a moment. He looked around -- vision that was not the same as his. Julian sat beside him, frantically typing. Numbers on the screen changed and changed as Julian's work in TerraCal's computer banks affected the moment-to-moment fluctuation of the Terra Nova Market. Other scenes flashed on the Newslane, many of them frightening. He didn't linger to watch. Didn't look over at himself, either. He had a fix; he had caught his balance, even in so strange a place as someone else's body. Kanton went back in to bring Silver out.

Back into the blue and then red and straight toward his friend -- but could feel the difference the closer he got. Unstable. Unhealthy gray and black light arched along the edges of where he moved and codes swirled uncertainly. He felt systems dying on the periphery of the links, and Kanton couldn't tell if that meant computers being physically

cut off by their owners or information destroyed. He didn't like it.

At first he couldn't see Silver. He didn't want to go too far, mistrusting this path. He wanted Silver to come to him. He didn't want them both lost in a system falling apart around them.

Silver!

He caught the edge of a frantic thought, and then the whisper of an edge of darkness. Porter, or what was left of him, moved nearby. Chaos. Thoughts and anger and -- and Silver there within that darkness.

Kanton would not allow it. He surged forward, grabbed Silver out of the dark and yanked him free... and ran. That was the best allegory that he could give for what happened. Raced ahead of the dark cloud that pursed, with Silver stunned and unable to help. Rushed up to the portal, and literally shoved Silver through, back into his own place.

Knew Silver had drawn his hand away from the port, and the link had broken the path to here -- but it didn't matter. He still had his own link to Silver.

Leapt up, let go of Silver's arm, and found himself fully in his own body and falling to the floor.

It hurt.

"What the hell --" Julian said, aware that they were both here again.

"Cut him off," Kanton said, trying to get back up, even with Julian dropping down to hold him still. "Don't let him get back --"

"Can't stop him," Silver said with a shake of his head. "Not fast enough."

"System's operations," Julian said and reached past, keying in new info on the

board, though he still stayed by Kanton. "We can't stop him, but we can watch. You two just stay still. If you do anything that I don't like, you're going to answer to me this time."

"Just watch," Kanton said, and carefully sat up, leaning against the chair. He found it almost impossible to even lift his head to see the computer screen. Then he thought of a far easier way. He leaned against Silver and closed his eyes.

They were far too much in synch with one another now. He felt no moment of transition. He was just there, sharing the thoughts and sights through Silver, who didn't seem to find it odd, either. It might bother him later, but right now it was a relief not to have to work so hard.

"There," Silver said. "That's him."

Something moved erratically within the matrix walls, sliding down paths, slowing sometimes, and then gaining speed again. Like a man running, who out of breath, slowed for a dozen steps before he jogged on again.

"He's not going back to TerraCal's computers, thank God," Julian said. He typed again, trying to isolate the intruder. It didn't work against someone who was inside, and could manipulate data.

"He's just trying to get out. Enough mind left to know he wants back to his body," Silver said softly.

Julian glanced at Silver, troubled by the words. He didn't ask what had happened.

Porter moved, slowed -- and then disappeared.

"He's out!" Julian pounded more keys, but Kanton picked up that the info went

straight to Fair House. "I'll try to get people down to that terminal area, see if they can grab him."

Silver nodded, so spent that Kanton slid down to the floor, his own exhaustion doubled. Porter was out. Stopped -- this time. At the moment that was enough.

He wanted very much just to sleep.

Ten

When he opened his eyes again, Kanton found Julian still in the chair, looking haggard and as disheveled as Kanton ever remembered. It had obviously not been a good night for the head of his mother's security.

But when Kanton moved and started to sit up, Julian smiled.

"It's a damn good thing one of you is awake. I suspect you picked up my panic. Your mother is on the way in. I was trying to decide if I should jump out a window, or start booking a flight to the Pavo."

"Mother? Coming here?" He wasn't entirely sure where here was at first. Then he realized he had been sleeping -- and sleeping quite well -- on the floor of his office in TNI. Someone had brought blankets and pillows. Silver was still wrapped in his own nest, but he started to awaken as well, and wasn't happy to be here. Kanton ached, but Silver felt worse, with the pain of his recent wound far more noticeable after such a hard night of work. It wasn't going to help either of them.

"What...happened?" Kanton asked, trying to piece together the madness of the night before. "Catch him?"

"No," Julian said. He ran fingers through his hair, trying to get it brushed back and look respectable. "We need to know what kind of danger he's going to be in the

future."

"Be awhile before he tries again," Silver said, slowly sitting up. "I don't know -- how much he'll have of himself. Lost a lot in the system."

"The system has been unstable all night," Julian said. "The entire Terra Nova grid fluctuated in ways that it shouldn't, but it seems calmer today. The whole world is calmer. Get up off the floor, Kanton. At least give me half a chance of surviving."

He and Silver both made it up into chairs with Julian's help. Colis hovered nearby, watching, along with some of the other office people as well. No one had left the night before, not with the streets so unsafe.

But, glancing through the computer feeds, the world did appear to be far calmer today. Kanton watched the Newline reports with growing relief. Riots had been quickly quelled, and although they reported several injuries, there had been very few deaths. Fires appeared to be under control -- and just as important, the market had stabilized.

"TerraCal came through the near disaster with most of its power still intact," the reporter said, his finger tracing the path of the stocks in a brightly lit grid of neon colors. "At one point during the night it looked as though all was lost for the company, and probably the world's economy. However, Atishin Fair of Fairfall Unlimited stabilized the stock with her own funds, while some as yet unnamed computer expert reworked the corrupted computer files that had caused the apparent loss of corporate credits. This morning, in an unparalleled gesture of generosity, the head of FairFall signed all the stock she had bought during the night back over to TerraCal --"

"Generosity?" Kanton began to laugh. "Hell, she's just pulled the best coupe of

the game so far! God, they must be sitting at TerraCal's Corporate Office and spitting nails by now."

"It was, I have to admit, one of my best moments. You look like hell, Kanton."

"Should I start packing now?" Julian asked.

Atishin came into the room with three guards at her back. She looked from one to the other, pausing at Silver, and then on to Julian. She finally smiled, but that was no sure sign of favor.

"Sit down, Julian. You were up all night with that corrupted computer file. I watched your work from a distance, and if you hadn't stabilized TerraCal's computer, I never would have been able to pull off the rest of this wonderful little game. You did well, Julian. I suspect that you all did well, though I'm not sure what my son or his friend's part in this was."

"Stranger than you want to know," Kanton said.

"Maybe so. Would you tell me anyway?" she said, leaning against a desk nearby, looking deceptively relaxed. Kanton wasn't fooled.

"Not yet. Later."

She nodded, and didn't argue. She would have her answers.

Atishin turned her attention to the last of their trio and shook her head. "You're even more battered than the last time I saw you, Silver. How did you get that bruise on your forehead?"

"Your son kicked me."

"He did what?" It wasn't often someone took her by surprise. She looked back at Kanton, eyes gone wide. He almost laughed.

"That's another part of the really long story, mother. Later. There are witnesses and you don't want to be caught up in the complicity charges." He grinned -- a smile far too much like her own, and which might mean any number of things. She looked less certain, but he could also feel something more in her look, eyes glancing around the room, measuring things. "What are you really doing here? Why didn't you send a car to pick us up?"

"Observant as always, Kanton," she said. "I made other business deals last night. I bought TNI."

"What!" Kanton came to his feet. Luckily, Julian did as well, and helped him back down to the chair when he almost fell. Atishin looked worried, but he waved it away as he tried to get his pounding head to focus on what was happening here. "Bought us -- but --"

"I had the company under consideration for over a month standard, Kanton. Dylan Dannan wanted off Terra Nova, just like so many others. He came to me and offered to sell out his 75% of the shares. He wanted them all gone, in one buyout, and with as little publicity as possible. I didn't think that I wanted to buy a detective agency, even if my son did work there. But I changed my mind yesterday."

"Why?" Julian asked.

"The income looked fairly steady, even during this hectic time. It looked like a good investment for future gain." She grinned, and looked at Silver. "And I decided it would make a pretty show piece. You should have listened to me, Silver. I did say you would work for me."

Silver looked at Kanton, stunned. "She didn't really, not because I said --"

"Oh yes, I'm sure she did," Kanton said. Julian nodded as well. "And now we all work for Fairfall, do we?"

"Yes, you do."

"I won't go to the damned board meetings, you know."

"Oh, I have far more interesting work for the three of you," she said.

He had considered, for the briefest moment, quitting and going off world. But if his mother didn't intend for him to go to board meetings, maybe this wouldn't be bad. Atishin Day Fair had a knack for finding unusual things for others to do.

Silver looked from him to Julian, to Atishin, and back to him. "You're all crazy."

"Didn't take a psychic to figure that one out," Julian said.

And even Atishin laughed.

Oh, this was going to be interesting...

The End

About the Author

Lazette Gifford lives in Nebraska with her husband and several cats. She usually produces at least half a dozen new novels and twice as many short stories a year. So be prepared. There's no telling where the stories might turn up if they escape. (Or maybe that's the cats....)

Zette's published work includes two chapbooks (*Honor Bound* and *Star Bound*) and a Double Dog publication from Yard Dog Press titled *Farstep Station*. Her story, *Between a Rock and a God's Place*, appeared in the Issue #21 of Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine and she's had numerous stories published in ezines, and small press anthologies. Her novels include *The Dark Staff Series* and *The Singer and St. Jude Series* from Double Dragon Publishing, *Silky* from Embiid Publishing, and the upcoming *Mirrors* from Zumaya Press.

Lazette is the owner of Forward Motion (<http://fmwriters.com>), a large on-line community for writers. She is the editor of Vision: A Resource for Writers (<http://lazette.net/vision>), now in its sixth year of production. She is also the Associate Publisher for Dragon Tooth Fantasy, an imprint of Double Dragon Publishing.

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