

MEL KEEGAN

NARC
3



SCORPIO

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SCORPIO

PARC #3

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

SCORPIO

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PARC: SCORPIO

CHAPTER ONE

Kevin Jarrat sprawled flat on his back, glaring up at unfamiliar constellations and listening for the whine of overdriven repulsion engines. His helmet lay discarded in the rank grass at his right hand, and he ignored it. The imaging systems were so badly damaged, his own senses were preferable. A scar the width of his thumb was gouged into the polished black dome. His neck and shoulders still ached after an impact that had tossed him off his feet.

The ruins of Montevideo were a field of bleached bones before and below him, picked clean by the grudging light of three tiny moons. The city was abandoned, but the lights of the spaceport still lit up the night sky, like a battlefield over the horizon. Sheal was on Jarrat's mind as he watched the sky, listened for the whine of incoming engines and acknowledged his body's stubborn aches. Three years of corporate war had almost leveled Montevideo. Lately the spaceport had been downgraded to a low-security bulk cargo field, on a world where the terraformers had never really finished their work before the colony was abandoned.

The air was too thin and dry for humans' comfort. Jarrat was breathing heavily. His lungs protested since he had discarded the helmet, and its rebreather, of necessity. With the imaging systems out of commission, he needed every sense he possessed. The column of gray smoke and fire retardant fumes angling out of the west marked the position where his aircraft had gone down. The Corsair was not burning, but he had pushed the descent into critical overheat on both repulsion generators to break his fall from low orbit, and even the VM 104 — so newly assigned to both Starfleet and NARC that most pilots were still training — struggled to arrest the blaze.

Stone was out there somewhere. Jarrat's ears strained to pick the sound of engines out of the whimper of the wind in the scrub forest which had begun to reclaim the city ruins. For ten minutes he had heard nothing, but he *knew* Stoney was out there, perhaps in space right over his head, perhaps over the terminator, where a storm front was breaking over the war-ravaged city. Jarrat *knew* this, while the helmet sensors had shown him only an empty sky and the AI aboard the stricken Corsair reported only sporadic traffic on the comm bands used by the smugglers.

Oromon might have been officially abandoned as a colony, but it was more than halfway terraformed. At least two of its smaller cities were largely intact, the cargo port was still operational, and it was so far off the beaten track, neither Starfleet nor the Army had the time or resources to police it. In a matter of months after the withdrawal of colonial services, Oromon became a haven for smugglers of every description.

And for Angel smugglers in particular. Jarrat's wide pupils, attuned to the blue darkness by now, picked up the sternflare of a small, fast craft headed northwest. It could have been a Corsair. Another man might have risked his cover and called out, drawing down fire on his own position, but Jarrat did not even reach for the helmet. He knew it wasn't Stone. His partner was a good distance away, and *busy*.

He was probably bucking reentry, Jarrat thought: he felt the heavy buffeting in his own spine, and his nerve endings tingled with Stone's reactions as he kicked his repulsion higher and sharpened his descent angle for a fast, hard reentry.

Which meant someone was right behind him. Jarrat was not surprised. The smuggler pilots were damned good. Ex-mercenaries, often trained by Starfleet, turned 'free-market' for quick dollars. For over an hour, since they launched from the Starfleet carrier in Oromon high orbit, Jarrat had been aware of the physical stresses, the fierce adrenaline rush, as Stone made himself visible. His role was to decoy the smuggler aircraft, freeing Jarrat to make the covert run, fast and low, over the ruins of Montevideo.

The mission plan was simple. NARC observers had pinpointed a facility in the foothills of the Caucus Mountains — this Angel lab was feeding cities as far afield as Alvarez, in the heart of the Cygnus Colonies. The security of the Montevideo cargo port was stretched thin. Angel manufactured in the shadow of the Caucuses was shipped out under the noses of at least one shift of freight loaders, and the next time it showed up was on the streets of cities like Elysium. Until Vic Duggan broke the smuggling racket, there was no doubt Avalon's supply of Angel would have been made here on Oromon, though the burden of proof always rested squarely on the shoulders of NARC.

The sternflares chased quickly into the northwest, angling over the sprawl of the ruined city. Jarrat began to relax. His gloved right fingers slid away from the butt of the Colt AP-60 and he lowered himself back into the tangle of buck briar and rhino grass. Patience, he told himself. Easy to say it. Difficult to take his own advice, when his every instinct was to knock Colonel Jack Brogan on his ass.

The mission plan had been simple, but as usual the simple found a way to go haywire. Brogan's squadron had been flying the Vincent Morello Aerospace Corsair for three weeks now. They should have been fully competent to fly topcover for a NARC 'special op.' But Brogan's crew contrived to be elsewhere when the two NARC aircraft were picked up by the radars from Montevideo Field. In seconds the smugglers were in the air, using the feed from the spaceport radars for guidance. They were inside spaceport security, and again Jarrat was unsurprised, though he swore bitterly as he and Stone were jumped.

The rogue pilots were impressive, and they were flying assorted Yamazake, short-range craft, space to surface, lightly armed — but enough to put a missile into the engine housing of Jarrat's 104. By the time Brogan's squadron was in the right place, the NARC operation was taking heavy fire, outnumbered five to one, and Stone had not yet shaken the tail he had picked up as he commenced the decoy run.

Jarrat would have given anything he possessed for a NARC gunship in the air over Montevideo. If Gil Cronin's Blue Ravens had been on call, he would have felt no prickling of adrenaline, no rush of blood in his ears as he listened for the howl of overdriven repulsion motors and thought he heard them, still a long way out.

He had been listening for the sound since he put down the Corsair and left fire control to the AI. The engines shut down immediately. Electrical fires were smothered fast, but the plane remained a big, fat target, glowing brightly in infrared. As Jarrat's boots hit the ground he went down in a tuck-and-roll and then he was running with just one thought in his mind: distance and cover.

Cover was easy to find. Montevideo was a field of blasted ruins, the shells of buildings still upright here, pits fifteen meters deep there, and everywhere the formidable buck briar, native to this world and thriving in the heavier air, the product of an abandoned terraforming program. But Jarrat was still a bright target on thermoscan, and he went to ground on the slope of a storm-water channel, where the elements and rhino grass had almost erased the buildings.

A dozen shots spat at him from two or three hundred meters out, and if the shooter had been using something with a little more caliber Jarrat would have been out cold. The shot tore a piece out of the helmet, spun him around and flung him into the bottom of the washaway. Wisely, he stayed down.

At once, imaging went intermittent. The helmet was as blinding and deafening as any VR visor. The rebreather seals broke with a hiss of compressed gas and the helmet skittered away into briar.

On knees and elbows Jarrat snaked into the undergrowth. Thorns snagged the thin pressure skin he wore, and he swore lividly. The second thing he would have traded any item he possessed for was riot armor, but Starfleet used no such hardware, and the cockpits of the borrowed VM 104s were not designed for armored pilots.

Beggars, Jarrat thought grimly, could not be choosers ... and for once in its thirty-year existence NARC was reduced almost to begging. The legacies of Equinox Industries were far-reaching and still wreaking havoc. It was Randolph Dorne who put Jarrat on his back, nursing transient injuries in a stormwater channel while Stone dropped like a brick through a difficult, re-entry that tested every joint and tendon.

Aside from the *Athena*, the only carrier left operational in the quadrant was Starfleet's *Olympic*. Every other big ship, NARC, Army and Starfleet alike, was drydocked while a crew headed by Yvette McKinnen and Karl Budweisser systematically ran the routines McKinnen had written to release the *Athena* from Equinox's strange bondage. The *Huntress*, the *Avenger*, the *Virago*, the *Vixen* — all were stood down, while the *Athena* herself was on assignment, two days into the Cygnus Colonies.

NARC was spread dangerously thin. When the Angel lab on Oromon was located at last, the only ranking NARC officers in the zone were Jarrat and Stone, aboard the only operational Starfleet carrier, and for once NARC got lucky.

For ten days Jarrat and Stone had been flying with Brogan's training squadron, coming up to speed with NARC's new acquisition, the VM 104 Corsair. On orders from Darwin's World the *Olympic* diverted to Oromon, and the routine of carrier-based training missions switched gears dangerously fast.

Jarrat sucked in a breath as he felt a sudden falling sensation in the pit of Stone's belly. The other Corsair had dipped a wing, pivoted like a dancer on its repulsion cushion, and Stone cut speed so hard, so fast, the breath was knocked out of his lungs. Jarrat *felt* him gasp windedly, felt his heart race, almost saw the 'shock diamonds' in his own vision as violent G-forces squeezed his eyeballs. Then the hot flood of Stone's adrenaline hit him, a body blow to the gut, and he could only guess Stoney had come up on the bandit's tail.

Where in hell was he? Jarrat's wide eyes had begun to scan the sky, looking for the blink of running lights, the blue-white of superhot tailpipes, the arc of tracer, when his ears pricked. The distant whine of repulsion motors was thicker, heavier, becoming a persistent, aggravating howl.

With an intense effort of will, Jarrat set aside the keen acid-burn of Stone's feelings. Stone was almost certainly in command of his own situation, but the dizzying secondhand sensations were about to be the death of Jarrat. Teeth gritted, he turned over in the coarse grasses and visually scanned the hillside above the washaway. He broke the pressure seals and pulled off the gloves, tossed them away, and his right hand molded about the long-familiar shape of the Colt.

As he saw the halogen flare of massive driving lights he thumbed off the safety. Stone's sensations faded into the back of his mind and Jarrat took a deep breath of the dust-dry air. The floodlights glared over the crest of a rise marked by a two-meter thicket of rhino grass and a spire of naked steel, all that remained of a tumbled building. The vehicle behind the driving lights was lost in the glare, but Jarrat had caught a bare glimpse of it just before he ditched.

It was some kind of construction tractor, more than likely a relic abandoned by the terraformers. An ugly array of cranes, drills and geocannons armored the front of it. The rear hull, around the engine deck, was as solid as the skin of a gunship, protecting the nuclear powerplant. Twenty meters long and four wide, the tractor came over the rise with a howl of overstressed machinery. It may be a behemoth, with a frightening weight of armor and a geocannon providing unspeakable firepower, but it was old and patched together. Angel smugglers rarely respected their equipment.

Flattened out in the stormwater channel, Jarrat blinked against the glare and watched the tractor labor over the rise, roughly in his direction. They had a sketchy idea of his position, but the driving lights were angled away into the darkness and he realized they were guessing. He felt a hot prickle through his nerve endings — not from Stoney this time. It was the very edge of a powerful scanner field. He froze, in case motion sensors were aimed at him, and held his breath.

In the pilot's skinsuit he was almost ambient with the environment, but not quite cold enough. Repulsion generators howled in protest as the tractor

slewed around, wallowing like a pig in mud. The floodlights shriveled Jarrat's irises and he swore. They had picked him up, he had known they would eventually.

The tractor was still more than two hundred meters away, but at that size, that mass, the distance was trivial. Jarrat no longer had any reason to guard his position. He bobbed up fast, and the Colt pumped six armor-piercers into the blinding lights. The floods exploded and the night was dark once more.

Too dark — his night vision was ruined. All he saw was a confusion of green arcs, like solar flares in his protesting corneas. He squeezed his eyes shut, dove back into the washaway and *listened*.

The whining roar of the beat-up old repulsion sled under the tractor blanketed every other sound, hurting his ears as it wallowed closer. Machinery on the deck began to growl. Were they maneuvering the crane, starting up the drill? The geocannon would be overkill, and Jarrat would have bet money on the fact they had no ammunition for it, but the tractor's routine tools made awesome weapons.

Fear sped Jarrat's heart, and he knew Stone must feel it. But fear was healthy. His senses sharpened, the long muscles in his thighs tingled with blood. His fingers cradled the Colt as if it were a captive bird, and Sheal was on his mind again as he pressed into bare earth, briar and rubble-dust, and waited for the tractor.

He knew where to hit it, to hurt it — not to kill, but to cripple the behemoth. But he would have to let the machine come perilously close. "Stoney," he muttered as he crouched over the AP-60 and turned his head to shield at least one ear, "where in Christ's name —"

The tractor seemed to be almost on top of him. Jarrat could not even hear himself yell as he rolled away from the roasting heat of the repulsion downwash and fired instinctively. These tractors were so similar to Army troop transports, he could have piloted one in his sleep, jury-rigged running repairs in the field. Or undone someone else's work.

A dozen armor-piercing .60 caliber rounds from the Colt raked the underside of the hull. He could never hope to shoot through, but he held his breath, held down the trigger, until several consecutive rounds slammed into the forward repulsion projector.

A cloud of escaping coolant haloed the projector. Generators overran, screamed in agony, and kill-switches shut them down before an explosion could blow back through the tractor. The eighty-tonne monster slewed away from Jarrat, back toward the top of the rise. Heavier generators in the sled under the engine deck struggled to compensate for the failure of the forward gravity resist, but in moments they too were screaming, overloaded and rushing into critical overheating.

As the primitive AI shut them down the tractor bottomed out hard. The crane jarred loose, the arm broke free with a shriek of steel on steel, and Jarrat dove into the bottom of the stormwater ditch as the five-tonne boom swung toward him.

With a sound like an artillery round striking it tore through the ruined shell left from some raid close to the end of the corporate war which had ruined

Oromon, and buried itself in the earth. Main engines grumbled dangerously, and moments later the tractor's rudimentary AI — showing more sense than the humans aboard — shut them down.

The sudden quiet was as stunning as the thunder of protesting engines, but for the moment Jarrat had the advantage, and he was not about to let it slip through his fingers. He was moving while the tractor was still settling into a bed of dirt and rubble. He had one ace to play, one gamble left to make.

Sheer surprise would make the Angel smugglers slow. They had come out in a vehicle they believed made them invulnerable; now they were crippled, immobile, with their target still on the loose. They would not hesitate for long, and Jarrat had not disabled their power or their sensors. They certainly had him on instruments, but Jarrat was ex-Army. He was keenly aware that systems optimized for long-range engagements sacrificed close-range scan fidelity.

Another man might have taken to his heels in the seconds after the tractor bottomed out and the engines shut down, trying to put distance between himself and the monster. Jarrat ran also, but *toward* the tractor, into the cloud of dust and the dissipating heat-storm from the burned-out gravity resist generators. It was a sensor blind, and as he felt the first wave of heat parch his cheeks he knew he was off their screens.

He climbed the handholds, up the side of the machine toward the cab which peeked over the housings of the drill and geocannon like the bill of an absurdly small cap. The service ladder led up to the top of the cab, where crew entered through a circular hatch. Inside was a lock-in, lock-out chamber, from which one rode an elevator platform down into the cockpit. Jarrat was interested in none of this. He had only two targets, and he knew exactly where to place his shots.

Thin, desiccated air burned his lungs as he climbed, hurrying now, counting seconds. A wind out of the east plucked at his hair, tossed dust into his eyes as he made it up onto the roof of the cab and straightened his spine. He coughed as he turned about, and his first target was easy to pinpoint.

The comm array was just aft of the cab, the tractor's highest point. Jarrat leveled the Colt, and five rounds tore the aerials out of their mountings, threw them over the side in a whirling mass of scrap metal. The tractor was deaf and mute now. Signals for backup could not be sent, offers of aid would not be heard. Jarrat hoped he had knocked out the comm arrays before the advantage of stunned surprise wore off. If the backup call had already been made, life was about to become interesting.

He spared the twisted, shorted-out comm array mountings a bare glance, and turned swiftly toward his second target. With a dull click the Colt switched over to its auxiliary ammunition. He was firing hollow-nose incendiary rounds as he drew aim on the hatch's lock mechanism, and in seconds steel was replaced by bubbling marshmallow.

The hatch was the only way in or out of the tractor save for the escape pods, and he had already seen empty nacelles where they would have been when this vehicle was twenty years younger, and properly maintained. The men inside were imprisoned in their own machine, deaf, mute, crippled.

Now, Jarrat dared take a moment to catch his breath. He scanned the unfamiliar constellations visually, looking for sternflares, the wink of running lights, the flaretails of a missile exchange, but only the three dwarf moons interrupted the blue-black of night. His own voice was harsh in his ears. "Stoney!"

If he opened himself to the rush of sensation, Stone was there —

Sweat prickling his ribs inside the pressure skin, the flicker of virtual instruments in the headup display while the Corsair spun in the sky like a dancer, pulse beating in his throat and temples, teeth clenched till his jaw ached as he dove and rolled, G-forces soaring painfully, making him struggle to remember why in any world he was doing this —

They came in out of the southwest, two aircraft that seemed to be formation flying, until the lead plane barrel-rolled, and looped up in a desperate effort to escape the hunter.

"Christ," Jarrat breathed, eyes wide, fixed on them as they raced toward him, losing altitude and apparently gaining speed with every kilometer. Jet noise echoed back off the hills, bounced between the ruins of Oromon's lethal corporate war and churned into an angry confusion.

For the life of him, Jarrat could not tell which was Stone, the hunter or the hunted. His heart was in his mouth as missiles launched, and a double sonic boom rolled over him. It shook his bones, jolted his senses as if a thunderbolt had grounded out beside him. Two super-bright engine flares leaped across the distance between the planes and Jarrat was not even breathing. The fugitive was one hell of a pilot. He stood the plane on its tail, threw her into a backbreaking arc over the hills and as a last resort lit the afterburners in a desperate attempt to outrun the missiles.

Jarrat had watched Stone pull the same maneuver. The wild skies of Calleran haunted him as he stood, feet braced, on the cab of the tractor and watched the missiles. In the battle over Calleran, Stone won. He brought the shuttle back to the *Athena* in one piece, filed the report which gutted the White Lightning syndicate and deliberately sank a bottle of bourbon, also while Jarrat watched. The maneuver was sound. It worked. If just enough time and space were on the side of the fugitive.

Not here, not now. Both missiles locked on the blazing afterburners and Jarrat's throat clenched as the fireball rolled over the godforsaken remains of Montevideo. It blossomed so close to the tractor, Jarrat barely had time to dive onto the roof of the cab before the wave of heat hit him. His fingers clenched into the handholds as the shockwave went over, and his voice was no more than a whisper in his ears as he screamed Stone's name.

Unlike a hundred other VM 104 missions they had flown in the last three weeks, this was no simulation. A pilot had just died, and Stone —

The hunter raced on into the dark and looped around hard, fast. Cameras would be running as he overflew the scene of the wreck and for a moment Jarrat was weak with relief. Stone's sensations barreled into him like a physical blow which gentled into a caress. Repulsion roared as the Corsair braked down. Powerful floodlights kicked in a moment before the public address bawled with Stone's voice, massively amplified, weird with echo distortion.

“Jarrat! Kevin, get down here, fast. We don’t have long, but we can make the run. I overflowed the facility five minutes ago. They launched everything they have, and now they’re spinning in the wind. Kevin!”

He was already moving, going down the handholds faster than he had climbed up. Twenty meters away, the Corsair touched down lightly in the rank grass of the rubble-strewn hill above the washaway, and Stone left the engines idling, the repulsion at eighty percent while the rear cockpit canopy whined up. Jarrat raised a hand to shield his eyes as he ran into the glare of the floods.

He went up the side of the 104 with the ease of much practice. For two weeks he and Stone had lived with these aircraft aboard the *Olympic*, and with 903 Squadron, Jack Brogen’s ‘Bad Company.’ He had learned no great love for Brogen’s people, but for the VM 104 Corsair, Jarrat had quickly acquired a deep respect. The fighter-interceptor was designed and manufactured not far from Chell, in the Rethan colony. It was smaller, faster, more agile and kicked much harder than the Yamazake *Daimyū* which had served as the space-to-surface shuttle aboard the *Athena* for the six years of her service life. Vincent Morello Aerospace were justifiably proud of their aircraft, and Rethan was already thriving on export credits and colonial dollars.

In the fore cockpit, Stone was helmeted and strapped-down tight. The featureless full-face visor turned toward Jarrat as he climbed in. As Jarrat settled the aft cockpit’s helmet on his head and plugged into the comm loop he heard the whisper of Stone’s breath in his ear, as close as a lover’s, and as intimate. Comm from the *Olympic* and 903’s radio chattered in the background, undercut by a sporadic murmur from the civilian bands, far below the military frequencies, but Jarrat was intent on Stone’s voice and ignored the rest.

“Jesus, Kevin,” Stone was saying. “You scared me spitless.”

“You notice I’m in one piece,” Jarrat retorted. And then, “NARC Airborne to *Olympic* Control.” A bark, as harsh as his temper was short. “Brogan, goddamn it!”

The leader of 903 Squadron was some distance away, his radio torn and twisted by interference from the spaceport radars and the ECM which had been popped up by the Angel smugglers seconds after the *Olympic* launched. “Hold your water, NARC Airborne, we’re busy.”

“Busy?” Stone echoed. The Corsair was already in the air, kicking off in a storm of rubble-dust. “Brogan, you were supposed to be our backup! Where were you?”

“Right where I always am, watching the carrier’s ass,” Brogan told him sourly. “Tracking picked up a half-dozen missiles out of Montevideo, Stone. Where would *you* be?”

Anger rushed through Stone. Jarrat felt it so clearly, it might have been his own temper, but it was an unfocused wrath, equal parts frustration and cynicism, and it spent itself quickly. Brogan had his own priorities. The success of an unscheduled NARC special op was much lower on his list than the security of the carrier.

The Corsair plunged up into the night sky, and for the moment Jarrat sat

back for the ride. He watched the spaceport sprawl out below, a checkerboard of colored lights, automatic systems, cargo hangars, gantries, cranes. Less than twenty humans worked in an area the size of a small city. And at least one shift was in bed with the Montevideo Angel cartel, which worked in the wasteland between the cargo port and the Caucus Mountains, and shipped Angel out of Oromon in the guise of legit cargo, with kosher documentation.

“Vic Duggan would love to be here,” Stone said with rueful humor. He took the Corsair up around the navigation beacon on the crest of Mount Carlyne and then gave away altitude, putting himself under the tracking ceiling of the port radars. He cut a racetrack pattern over the city and back, coming up on the NARC observers’ coordinates.

The demolition order was signed by Colonel William Dupre himself, and if most of NARC had not been drydocked in the aftermath of the Equinox assignment it might easily have been the *Athena* or the *Huntress* in Oromon high orbit, and a gunship releasing four Saracen missiles into groundside coordinates pinpointed by an ‘obbo team’ who had invested almost three years in this mission.

Like Vic Duggan, they would have relished the sight as Stone’s missiles slammed into the target and erased it from the face of Oromon. The Angel lab went up in a white-gold firestorm, and Stone looped back around to capture video. The strike was surgically precise, even here. Three kilometers to the east were the spaceport outfields; two kilometers north and five hundred meters higher were the Starfleet comm relays on the forested shoulders of Carlyne and Josephine, and although the city of Montevideo was officially abandoned, it was far from deserted.

A shifting, always changing population of scavengers combed the ruins for ‘salvage.’ Several thousand civilians would have watched the Angel lab erupt like a new volcano in what had once been the Ranjit Sector — upmarket, trendy, in the days when Montevideo was the place to be, when vast industrial fortunes were being made ... and corporate war was never more than a whisker away.

Stone’s deep satisfaction reverberated through Jarrat’s nerves, almost a sexual sensation. “You enjoyed that,” Jarrat said, amused.

“I enjoyed that.” Stone was not about to apologize. “NARC Airborne to *Olympic* Control, we’re headed in. Recall your aircraft.”

“And send a cleanup crew,” Jarrat added. “You’ve got a construction tractor flat on its belly, right on top of my ditch-point. I disabled it, knocked out its repulsion and aerals, but you’ll get prisoners. I sealed the cab. Bring them in ... NARC’s going to want them.”

A moment’s stunned silenced echoed his words, and then Brogan was on the air. “You disabled a construction tractor? They’re freaking monsters, Jarrat.”

“I spent ten months of my life driving one of the goddamned things,” Jarrat said sourly. “I can show you how to dump one on its butt with a screwdriver. Knock it off, Brogan.” A note of warning sharpened his voice. He and Jack Brogan had been sparring since the moment he and Stone came aboard.

A routine training tour had become a minefield, and Jarrat's patience had worn thin.

"Leave it alone, Colonel," Stone said tersely. "I got most of it on long-range sensors while I was shaking the last of their pilots, and the rest on video when I picked him up. If you want to review the video, I'll authorize you to attend the debriefing."

Jarrat smothered a chuckle. Stone had assigned himself to the position of referee. He seemed to know Brogan from somewhere, but whatever the two shared in common, it was far in the past. And Jarrat doubted they had ever been comrades.

The Corsair was headed for orbit at a leisurely pace. He watched the spaceport dwindle below and pass over the terminator as the 104 headed into daylight. The visor darkened to mute the sunglare and Jarrat flexed his whole body, felt out his bruises, the small, passing injuries which always accompanied an action.

"You okay?" Stone cut them out of the external comm loop.

"Of course I am." Jarrat worked his shoulders around.

"You're hurting," Stone observed.

"So are you," Jarrat said sharply. "You pulled some G's so high, your bells are going to ring for a week."

"I'll live," Stone said with an old, familiar humor which mocked only himself. "I'm only doing what I love to do. Fly. They sent you out to do what you do best: take Target Alpha and pulp it."

"King shooter," Jarrat mused.

"You spent ten years building the reputation," Stone reminded him.

"And you took out the Angel lab."

"So you took the construction tractor instead," Stone said offhandedly. "That was quite a maneuver." He paused. "Brogen's going to hate you for it."

"Brogan," Jarrat muttered, "can screw himself. What's the deal with you two, anyway? You bloody know the man!"

"I *knew* him," Stone affirmed, but for a long moment he did not elaborate, and Jarrat felt his reluctance to go on. "College, Kevin. Before I dropped out, went over to Tac. Brogan was at Floyd Webber Polytechnic with me, class of '54. We ... weren't the model of comradeship, if that's what you're wondering."

"Rivalry?" Jarrat was watching the CRT at his elbow. The fat blip marking the position of the *Olympic* was coming up fast as Stone accelerated out of orbit. The Corsair shut back speed and Stone had just entered the 'lanes' around the big ship, waiting for landing advice, when a squad launched. The clean-up crew.

"Rivalry," Stone echoed. "We were kids, Kevin. He was taller, five months younger, better looking —"

"I'll be the judge of that," Jarrat told him.

Stone chuckled. "Thanks. But my family had money, remember. I was fast-tracked for the whole brilliant future at the time. Science and politics. Or they thought I was."

"Then came the bust-up," Jarrat finished. He knew the story well enough. Stoney was still bruised. Some wounds went so deep, they never properly healed. "I want the bastards off the tractor, Stoney. I want them back on Darwin's. Hand them to Intelligence. The cleanup crew just launched."

"I saw." Stone jinked the nose around. "Control is inviting us to land. Hold that thought."

Like any carrier, the *Olympic's* hangars were in the belly. Stone nosed up under the big ship like a tuna approaching a blue whale. He matched speed and then took his hands off, passed control to the AI to let the Corsair drift into the small, bright hangar and rotate to fit the slender docking space. Four other assorted aircraft docked after them, and Jarrat listened to the carrier's comm loop, eavesdropping on ship's business, until the hangar blew up to something resembling pressure.

The air was still freezing and Jarrat's ears popped as the canopies went up. Stone was out before him, dropping to the black steel deck, limber, artlessly elegant in the silver-gray pressure skin. Only a few microns' thickness of kevlex-titanium were needed to protect the human body from the ravages of vacuum, and the flexible 'smart seal' of the collar molded to the pad of the rebreather between his shoulders. Jarrat perched on the side of the cockpit, enjoying the simple pleasure of watching Stone stretch his back and shoulders, until the elevator growled open, and Jack Brogan's face appeared.

He was taller than Stone by a hand's span, and easily out-muscled him. The pressure skin outlined every bone, every sinew. On the left shoulder was the cartoon unit badge of 'Bad Company,' a scruffy youth of indeterminate gender in oversized buckle boots, with a smoking gun in each fist and a curl on his or her lip.

The 903 were arrogant. Jarrat was not at all sure they had earned the right to the arrogance. He looked Brogan up and down again as he stepped into the hangar, and knew his face must be set into a hard mask. Brogan was a natural blond, but he had added bronze streaks to his hair, which he wore in a braid, reminding Jarrat of Joe Ramos. Brogan was handsome, with the chiseled features of a carving in marble. Or ice. None of Stone's warmth, his humor and humanity, showed in Brogan. The moment they came aboard, Jarrat had seen both Brogan's good looks and the man's chill. In the next moment he had lost interest, and he ignored 903 Leader when Stone called out, and tossed over the remote for their baggage trolley.

Brogan was glaring at Stone now, but his blue eyes flicked to Jarrat. "You're wanted in the ops room. Some encrypted message just arrived. More NARC bullshit."

"You don't like NARC," Stone observed.

"Give me a reason to." Brogan was studying Jarrat rudely, as Jarrat came down the side of the Corsair by the hardpoints.

"What gets under Jack's skin," he said to Stone, levelly and ignoring Brogan, "is the question of authority. The chain of command. Starfleet's asses are higher from the ground than everyone else's ... and then we show up." He caressed the NARC badge on the shoulder of his own pressure skin. "We show up and the chain of command goes all to hell." He stepped away

toward the lift. "If the message came in encrypted, it's from Bill Dupre's office, which means it's important. Stoney?"

"After you." Stone turned his back on Brogan, and as the elevator closed over before him he said, "You could be right. In college, ol' Jack was your fundamental control freak. He took the routine, the discipline, just long enough to get where he wanted to be." Stone gestured vaguely. "Leader of a Starfleet intercept squadron. Top of the heap."

"Until NARC shows up," Jarrat added. "He looks at me like I'm the scum of the earth."

"He probably ran your file," Stone said quietly. "He has access, and he's the kind who'd stick his nose in. He knows where you're from."

Jarrat frowned at him. "So do you."

Stone only shrugged. "I'm not a social-climbing control freak. I have nothing to prove, Kevin, never had. And I have no score to settle with Sheckley. I've never even been there."

The elevator opened before Jarrat could comment. The carrier operations room was almost opposite, with an officers' lounge to one side, Tracking on the other, flanked by a double rank of pods, the escape modules serving this part of this deck. The ops room's wide doors were open; twenty screens flickered with a variety of data and Jarrat focused on the one displaying the course corrections and visuals for the tender that had gone out to recover the tractor crew.

The carrier's XO was a short, thickset man of Gene Cantrell's age, on whom the Starfleet fatigues looked uncomfortable. He gave Jarrat and Stone an ambiguous salute and pointed them to the work station in the corner, where the comm officer was absent, the system on auto. "Help yourselves. It's level three encryption, so I'll make myself scarce."

"Thanks, Paul." Jarrat liked the man. He and Stone had played poker with some of the carrier's specialists. They were not all like Brogan, and for this he was grateful.

"Coffee?" Paul Estevez offered.

"Thanks again." Stone swiveled out the comm officer's seat and parked himself in it. The message was waiting. He keyed in a nine-digit clearance code and leaned back to give Jarrat access to the keypad to do the same.

The physical closeness was taunting as Jarrat leaned in across him. He smelt the last of Stone's aftershave, the warmth of his skin as he opened the seal down the left side of the suit, and the angle of his chest appeared. Every instinct was to lower the shields they had deliberately built between them for the sake of efficiency if not sanity, and revel in sheer sensuality, perhaps a celebration of *life*. They had left Oromon unscathed, though the assignment had gone haywire.

Mocking himself for the impulse, Jarrat gave Stone a wink and mouthed the word *later*, before he reached over and tapped in his own security clearance. Stone choked off a chuckle and sat back, the better to see the screen.

As they had expected, William Dupre's face was framed in it. To his left, a column of data scrolled slowly, and they recognized the gist of their own report. A condensed version of the Equinox mission log. Almost all items had

been bulleted in green, which indicated the department's approval of their activities. But a few items were bulleted in red, and Jarrat muttered the kind of language that would have got his wrists slapped in the hospice where he had grown up.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Dupre said to the camera recording the briefing. "As you can see, I've appended a file for your attention, but the majority of the Equinox report was very straightforward. Several items remain to be clarified, but they're presently in the clutches of the legal department. Suffice to say, certain civil authorities in the city of Elysium are far from happy to have had the battle fought out in their jurisdiction! Lenore Maddigan, however, has attained complete political domination in the colonial government, and she is a powerful advocate for us.

"We've asked Colonel Duggan to come over to Darwin's to represent both Tactical and Maddigan's government, and I'm confident the legal wrangle will be settled in a few weeks. You may have to give evidence before the NARC Commission, Jarrat, Stone, but in my estimation it's a mere formality. A going-through-the-motions to keep the record straight. However, read the annotated Equinox file, familiarize yourselves with the questions which remain to be answered. You'll have plenty of time to review the Commission's concerns, and catch up with the *Athena's* business on the way over here.

"Effective immediately, you're recalled to NARC. The Starfleet courier *Persephone* is en route from Rethan." Dupre paused and looked aside to consult another screen. "We have an assignment for you. The *Athena* is still the most trustworthy carrier in the NARC fleet. She had her oars back in the water when the rest of us were still blinking, wondering what kind of bomb we were sitting on! So you'll be on assignment again sooner than you might have hoped."

He reached out of the frame with his left hand, touched a key, and the datastream in the side of the screen changed to a heavily-subtexted mission briefing. Jarrat barely glanced at it. The on-screen display was the tip of a mountain. Behind it would be terabytes of data, fifteen layers deep, making the synopsis deceptively simple.

In a glance, Jarrat saw the name of Aurora, and his teeth clenched. Stone was too close to him, and too finely attuned, not to feel the spark of tense reaction, quickly smothered. Aurora was the oldest of the Cygnus Colonies, and the richest. Sleeper ships had opened it up almost two centuries before, and for half that long it had been booming, first as a mine, then as a center of trade, shipping, the export of luxury *things* to the frontier and beyond. The more distant and harsh the colony world, the more people were willing to pay improbable prices for 'rare' extravagances. Goods which were deemed necessities in the so-called home colonies, the worlds closer to Earth and home.

Jarrat had never visited Earth, but a childhood spent on Sheckley was an education in the raw edges of the frontier. Like anyone who watched the newsvids occasionally, he knew Aurora had been getting rich for fifty years on the through trade to the mines, hell-worlds on the wrong side of the Cygnus Colonies. The capital was the spaceport city of Thule, and Tactical there had been squealing about Angel for months. Four weeks ago, while Jarrat and

Stone were filing the Equinox assignment report and taking a brief furlough before shipping out to the *Olympic*, NARC researchers entered the city of Thule to broadly verify Tactical's data.

"The colonial government of Aurora," Dupre was saying, "called for NARC following the submission of a Tactical dossier of massive proportions. Tactical Colonel Kris Janssen is waiting for your arrival at this time. From Darwin's World, the *Persephone* will transfer you directly to Aurora. The *Athena* is already there, gentlemen, running 'dark.' The colony is absolutely unaware of her presence, and Lieutenant Petrov is liaising with Colonel Janssen while performing preliminary data gathering. Janssen, incidentally, is the last generation of one of the original pioneer families.

"The so-called first families seem to believe the system is their own private property. They're taking their Angel problem as a personal insult. Thule has been almost paranoidly safeguarded, but in the end the rot has gotten in. The Angel syndicate which owns, body and soul, the city of Thule, is known locally as Scorpio ... and there, gentlemen, it gets complicated." Dupre's brows rose. "Study the file on your way here. We'll have more for you when you get in — and I'll fend off the NARC Commission as far as I can, for as long as I can. You have better ways to spend your time than repeating the same report over and over! I'll be expecting you, Jarrat, Stone. And the Oromon special op report."

Dupre reached out of the frame once more, touched a switch and vanished. The screen offered a selection of attached files, but for the moment Stone opted to download the whole thing to a datacube. Jarrat turned around, leaned on the back of Stone's seat and frowned at monitors until he saw a flight status board.

The courier *Persephone* was due to dock in a few minutes over four hours. Before he could grumble, Paul Estevez stepped back into the ops room with a mug in each hand, and slapped them down on the comm officer's work space.

"You done? Good news?" Estevez wondered.

"It never is." Stone buried his nose in the mug, tried the coffee, and made a face. "What the hell is this?"

"It's almost a philosophical question," Estevez warned. "It's synthetic, whatever that means." He gave the flight status board a nod. "Comm received signals from your courier. You're leaving. Back to Darwin's, and then on to some assignment. NARC bullshit, according to Brogan, but he's famous for talking through his ass."

"This time he's right," Jarrat said, amused. Estevez did not like Brogan much either. "What do you know about Aurora?" Stone was listening. The chair creaked as he swiveled it around and leaned back. Jarrat rested a hand on his shoulder, dealt him a companionable squeeze, and Stone stretched out his long legs. The skinsuit molded about him, creasing and arrowing in some fascinating directions. Jarrat averted his eyes and urged his attention back to business.

"Aurora. Now, there's a place to stay out of," Estevez said with a scornful curl of his lip. "My other half's brother works in Thule. I was out there myself,

looking at an apartment ... I got retirement coming up soon, on decent pay." He made a face and turned his attention to the curious liquid in his mug.

"So what's wrong with moving to Aurora?" Stone was honestly intrigued. Jarrat felt the prickle of his curiosity.

"Can't afford it, can I?" Estevez gestured at the ops room, and by extension, the carrier. "Twenty years in Starfleet, fifteen of them on active service, one side of the frontier or the other. Retirement on full pay. Sounds like a sweet deal to you?" He shook his head. "You take those credits to Aurora, you'll get a short-term lease on a packing crate. And it's ten below zero outside, in summer. Nice climate they got there." He finished the coffee and peered into the bottom of the mug. "No dregs. Now, how can you have coffee without dregs? Anyway, there's a lot of folks on Aurora who live rough, and they're Thule people, *born* and bred. They have Angel trouble now? What a surprise. The truth is, Thule's a grand place to live ... if you got the bucks. If not, the only way to survive is to get good and shit-faced and stay that way. The day comes when Angel looks attractive." And then Estevez flushed, realizing who, what, he was talking to. "Not that I'm in bed with the Angelpack, you understand."

"But you can see what would make a kid snort that crap," Stone said thoughtfully. He looked up at Jarrat, blue eyes wide, dark, thoughtful. "Old colony, big population, lousy climate, and if you don't have money —"

"Which most folks don't, and never will," Estevez said sourly.

"— you live rough, hard," Stone finished. He drained the coffee and passed the mug back to Estevez with one hand, while the other plucked the white metal datacube out of the machine. "Four hours, Kevin. You want to take a look at Dupre's file?"

"No," Jarrat said darkly, but he knew they would look at it anyway, at least the overview. The whole document would unfold in a millrace of video and stats after they boarded the *Persephone* for the thirty-hour flight to Darwin's. He stepped back to give Stone space. "Take care of yourself, Paul. Stay the hell out of Aurora, you and your better half."

"*Other* half," Estevez corrected glibly. "I'll watch out for you in the news-vids. You guys always make headlines."

The crew quarters were below and aft. Jarrat was silent as the lift went down, returning them to the small, cramped accommodations assigned to them for the training tour. They reminded him too strongly of the Army, and he gave the compartment a glare as he stepped inside. The door locked behind him, and a moment later he closed his eyes, smiled, as Stone's arms slid around him. Stone's chin rested on his shoulder, and Jarrat forcibly relaxed back into the bigger man's embrace.

"Don't let Jack Brogan get to you," Stone advised. He feathered a kiss around Jarrat's right ear. "He's a sonofabitch, but he's ... mostly harmless. Starfleet's full of guys like him. The service is a great way for a kid from the burbs to rise very high and do it while he's still young. Colonel by the age of thirty-five, if he's any good. Take the rank back into civvy street, score a job that'll put him in a penthouse on Darwin's, or right back on Earth. Think about it, Kevin. Leave the gutters of Rio or Saigon or wherever, return to

Earth as an executive. I don't like Brogan, but you have to respect the man."

"A social-climbing control freak, so you said." Jarrat turned in Stone's embrace, slid his arms around his partner's waist and laced his fingers at Stone's back. "What's that make me?"

"A survivor," Stone said without hesitation. "The only thing Brogan ever had to survive before he got out onto the frontier was mediocrity." He laid his lips on Jarrat's, kissed him lightly and then frenched him. "Enough about Brogan. If I never saw his face again, I wouldn't grieve. You, on the other hand ..."

With deft hands, he broke the seals and plucked open the skinsuit, a few microns of kevlex-titanium to hold pressure, lined with thermotex to hoard heat, laminated on the outer surfaces for radiation screening. Under normal cabin pressures the suits were soft as fabric, but much too hot. Jarrat's skin was sweat-damp and he made hedonistic sounds as Stone stripped him to the structured jockstrap which safeguarded his balls when the G-forces soared. Stone's eyes were hot on him, head to foot, and not at all mocking.

He heeled off the boots, kicked away the suit, and stepped into the shower stall. As the strap followed the boots he said, husky and not quite teasing, "Feel free to join me."

"You trying to tell me I stink?" Stone quipped. The seals on his own suit rasped open.

"Not the word I'd have used." Jarrat gave him a sultry look over his shoulder as he set the water, and watched Stone drop the suit. He was looking good. The ordeal at the hands of Death's Head was only a bad memory now. Stone was tanned, supple, his muscles well-worked, the inner man at peace with himself. Blue eyes lingered over Jarrat, bone by bone, and with a deep breath Jarrat 'opened' himself to the strange pleasures of another's sensations.

It was so familiar now, and welcome: the storm in the nerve endings, the surge of feeling which had once been confusing, distracting, even frightening. Jarrat's half-closed eyes rested on the dark nest of Stone's groin, and the thick root of him, rosy with growing excitement. They had been too cramped, kept too busy and under too much pressure since they came aboard to be intimate.

The stresses of another assignment were due to begin in a matter of hours, and Jarrat was keenly aware of Stone's desire to make the most of what little time they could get. In these few hours, before the *Persephone* docked, they were technically on their own time. They had closure on the Oromon mission, they had officially been recalled from the training tour, yet the Aurora assignment was still no more than a file to view, data to digest.

"Take what you can get," Stone said quietly as he stepped into the shower stall. Two large bodies in the stall made for close quarters. His arms wound around Jarrat.

"They own us," Jarrat growled. "I have a habit of forgetting."

"Not for the next few hours," Stone argued. "When we go aboard the courier on Dupre's orders, we're on his time. Till then ..."

"Take," Jarrat echoed, "what you can get."

And he twisted in the small space, slithering down Stone's warm, wet body to rest his cheek against the flat plane of his Stone's belly. Abs rippled,

crisp hair tickled Jarrat's ear and then his lips. He smiled as Stoney groaned, low and deep in his chest, and the flood of sensation rolled through both of them like warm honey. Jarrat's lips parted. He breathed across Stone's hard, risen shaft and took the gasp as a kudo. The flashfire of Stone's excitement thrilled through him, bringing him so close to the edge, his teeth clenched and the breath fluttered in his throat.

"Kevin," Stone groaned. "Damnit, Jarrat!"

It might have been a warning; it was the last coherent sound in the tiny cabin for some time.

CHAPTER TWO

The NARC dock at geostationary above Venice was so congested with ships, Stone had never seen a logjam like it. Two carriers, eight tenders, six engineers' tugs and several score smaller hulls were docked in strict order, picked out in colored floodlights and spinners, forming a corona about the kilometer-long spindle shape of the dock itself.

And in their turn even the big ships were dwarfed by the troll-ugly shape of the fleet tender, the *Mitsubishi Aerospace Osaka*. According to the public newsvids, it had arrived from the port of Kure four days before. Stone whistled as the courier maneuvered in through the jumble. It looped high over the back of the *Osaka* and down again into what seemed to be a crevasse between its mountainous side and the flank of the dock itself, which offered the last available hangar.

"Will you look at that. When's the last time you saw a fleet tender out here?"

"Never." Jarrat's voice was quiet. "If you hang out long enough in a place like Sheckley you'll see almost everything sooner or later. But this?" He moved closer to Stone's shoulder and ducked down, the better to see the *Osaka* as the Starfleet pilots spun the *Persephone* inside her own length to fit her stern-first into the hangar.

The instrument lights painted his face green down one side, red down the other, and lit witchfires in his eyes. Stone rested a hand on Jarrat's back, rubbed him there absently, unaware of the small mark of affection until Jarrat angled a smile at him.

Nothing in Stone's memory came close to the situation faced by all the deep space services in the aftermath of the Equinox assignment. Almost every ship carried Equinox components. Various levels of panic continued to reverberate like aftershocks through Starfleet, the Army, even NARC itself, though they at least had their 'oars back in the water,' as Dupre had put it. McKinnen and Budweisser were going to be kept busy for some time to come, with more

than a hundred ships on the NARC roster alone to be gutted and made over. Made safe.

The hangar doors closed before the immensity of the *Osaka*, and Stone shook himself. The courier pilots were eager to shut down and get out of the dock. They had forty-eight hours' R&R coming, and their plans included a concert and an all-nighter at some place in downtown Venice. Stone had never heard of it. He and Jarrat had spent too little time here lately to know Darwin's World well any more. Like any city, the face of Venice changed constantly.

Listening to the pilots' chatter as they left the courier, Jarrat made a pained expression. They were headed for a den called Cocktails, and predictably, he knew it at least by reputation. At Stone's raised brow he said, "It's a VR den, exactly like it sounds. Dope, toys and piped-in designer fantasy till you just can't play anymore."

"You ever been there?" For an instant Stone was haunted by one of his own fantasies, and he felt a rush of heat in his face as he remembered, belatedly, Jarrat had shared them.

The gray eyes sparkled with rueful humor. Jarrat gave him a look, heavy-lidded, unashamedly carnal, as they shouldered through the hatch and stepped out into the ice-cold, breezy air of a gunmetal hangar. He zipped the brown leather jacket and thrust his hands into his pockets. "Once or twice."

"Any good?" Stone punched for an elevator and they waited, aware of the time, the shuttle schedule, and the *Persephone's* late arrival.

"Depends," Jarrat said darkly.

"On what?" Stone knew he was being teased, but it was a gentle mockery.

"If VR's the best you can get," Jarrat told him, "Cocktails is a hell of a place to burn a week's wages in a night. If," he added, "VR's the best you can get." And he lifted his brows at Stone, an expression filled with a heady mix of suggestion and invitation.

At last Stone laughed, but before he could make any glib remark the lift opened and a bevy of techs in Starfleet coveralls stepped out. They would be working on the *Persephone* until she left. She was troubled by some problem with the electronics, the very reason the courier was an hour late. Stone looked at the time and swore.

"They'll hold the shuttle." Jarrat stepped into the elevator. "They know we're on the platform."

And William Dupre wanted them both in the NARC facility outside Venice, promptly. The next scheduled shuttle flight was not for six hours. Stone relaxed, shoulders against the metal wall as the lift went up fast, headed for the very apex of the dock.

Jarrat was right. The shuttle was holding, its crew obviously annoyed, its other passengers more curious, as Stone went aboard a pace ahead of Jarrat and dumped his bag in the nearest overhead. They were still strapping down when the clamps released, and Jarrat swore softly as the transport in NARC livery turned its tail toward the platform.

Ahead and below, the globe of Darwin's World was blue-green, wearing a frosting of cloud through which Stone easily picked out the coastline and

the peninsula where Venice was cradled by low hills. He settled back, closed his eyes. Riding as a passenger had never appealed to him. He might have slept, but Jarrat was restless. He swiveled out the comm access and logged onto a news channel, looking for anything to pass the time.

Not quite surprisingly, stories from Thule featured among the mundane domestic reports from Darwin's, Avalon, Mars, Earth. Rumors of NARC involvement in a city's business always made headlines, and the Angelpack was already on the street. Stone's lips compressed as he watched a windmilling crowd in the confines of a mall, flanked on all sides by Tactical. The news camera captured the exact moment when someone began to shoot. A Tac officer was picked up by a heavy round and spun into a storefront. Glass shattered, panic erupted on both sides and the street exploded into chaos.

"Damn," Jarrat whispered. "They need a gunship."

"Not while the carrier's running dark." Stone regarded the scene sourly. "We're going to be right in the middle of that in a few days."

"Don't remind me." Jarrat flipped channels to get rid of the Aurora story and frowned at an excerpt from some dance show. Eight young men in body paint and little else, apparently enacting a battle scene. After the images from Thule, the ballet appeared simply trite and Jarrat flipped channels again, still restless, impatient to bury the Equinox job and get his teeth into the Aurora assignment.

With a curious resignation, Stone closed his eyes and waited to feel the buffet of reentry. Against the odds he was dozing, and William Dupre's voice took him by surprise. He peeled open his eyes to see that Jarrat had accepted a call. Dupre's face had replaced the meaningless domestic news stories in the palm-sized screen.

"Stone's associate arrived on the last clipper," Dupre was saying. "We hadn't expected him here so soon, but President Maddigan pulled some strings, got him aboard some kind of government sub-charter. I'm pleased to have Colonel Duggan on Darwin's ... his testimony will muzzle the dissenters."

"Dissenters?" Jarrat echoed.

"Vic's here?" Stone asked at the same moment, pushing upright in the seat and knuckling his eyes.

"As I said, he got in on the *Taipei*. Good evening, Captain," Dupre said, amused, his eyes shifting to Stone. "And you could expect dissenters in the Elysium business and industrial community. I imagine every soul on Avalon was delighted to see the Angel trade curtailed, but I was far from astonished when the screaming began. You turned their fair city into quite the battlefield, and reduced a lot of it to rubble."

"Not us," Jarrat rasped. "Equinox picked the field and Randolph Dorne himself opened the engagement."

Dupre only smiled faintly. "I'm aware of that, Captain ... Jarrat, take a deep breath. The NARC Commission is not about to censure you or Stone. Not after the decisive nature of your action, and certainly not after you discovered the extent to which Equinox Industries had extended its tentacles into every branch of the service. They just want to do the dotting and crossing, answer the dissenters and close the file." The smile widened. "Humor them."

You're due to make your final testimony tomorrow. Till then, relax. Avail yourself of the facilities." He paused, looking back at Stone. "You ran the Aurora file?"

Stone felt his face set into a mask. "Someone told us not long ago, Aurora is a place for staying the hell away from."

"Unless," Jarrat added, "you're credits up to the eyeballs, with colonial dollars stuffed up both sleeves."

The NARC Quadrant Controller actually chuckled. "Yes, well, in the field you'll be riding a department expense account." His dark eyes glittered in the bright camera light. "Try to remember, I *do* get audited."

"We'll bear it in mind," Stone assured him gravely, and Dupre cut the link. "Riding," he intoned, in a fair approximation of Dupre's rich Barbadian accent, "the department's expense account." He rubbed his palms together.

"Dupre'll probably audit us as well," Jarrat warned.

"A month after the fact," Stone argued, "besides which, anything we get up to is strictly in the line of business."

"Business." Jarrat's brows rose. "Now, there's an elastic concept that stretches to fit almost any contingency."

Stone dropped his right hand on Jarrat's lean thigh and squeezed him there in agreement, just as the transport began to buck the turbulence of the upper atmosphere and the repulsion kicked in hard.

Two hours later, as the sun pooled in crimson over the Venice skyline, they stood in the humid heat of a rooftop landing bay. From four kilometers inside the perimeter of the NARC compound, they watched the tail lights of the departing Chevrolet *Celeste* that had brought them in from the port. Familiar constellations winked overhead between serried banks of cloud which promised equatorial storms by midnight.

"Home again, home again," Stone was conscious of an uncertain emotion, and Jarrat frowned at him. Kevin was much too sensitive to what he felt to be unaware of Stone's ambivalence.

"Home?" Jarrat moved closer. His arm snaked about Stone's waist. They were at a parapet on the east side of the building, and before them the NARC exclusion zone — the testing and training range of the Venice facility — was as vast, dark and featureless as the city of Venice itself was bright and garish.

Stone could only shrug. "This place is as near to home as any other." He leaned into Jarrat's side and took the opportunity to press a kiss to his ear before the duty sergeant appeared to clear their ID. "I like Venice. It reminds me of Barcelona."

"Where?" Jarrat turned toward him, elbows on the parapet.

"A place in Spain. Earth," Stone elaborated. "I used to fly ultralites in the mountains northwest of there, when I was a kid."

"I remember." Jarrat splayed his hand on Stone's chest, over the slow, heavy beat of his heart. "You should do it again. Ultralites."

"Maybe." Stone closed his hand over Jarrat's, holding it against him. His

mouth was almost on Jarrat's when a low rumble of hydraulics announced an Internal Security officer, and they stepped apart.

It was Jon Chan. Even in the half-light, at a glance Stone knew the freckles and the carrot-orange hair in the tight-drawn pony tail. Chan was ex-Tactical, just a year out of the service, and still over-conscious of the NARC badges on his shoulders. But he had known Jarrat and Stone since the weeks they had spent here under Yvette McKinnen's thumb, and he moved aside to give them access to the security elevator without even a routine blink at their ID.

"Your baggage arrived, Cap Jarrat." Chan jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "They put you in 927 again. You want I should get you a move someplace? I can do that tonight."

"927 is fine." Jarrat's eyes remained on the last flush of sunset until the lift closed over. "Where did they put Vic Duggan?"

"The colonel from Elysium Tac?" Chan's brow creased. "I'll find out and give you a buzz. Which reminds me, Doctor Del asked me to pass along a message. His compliments, and if you haven't had dinner, he's eating in the lab tonight, you're invited. He has some numbers you need to see ... or something like that." The young man flashed Stone a grin. "Beats hell out of me what he does in that lab."

"Good. It's classified way over your head," Stone told him dryly. He angled a speculative look at Jarrat. "You want to go right there? My stomach was expecting breakfast, but the details are negotiable."

"Sure." The lift had slowed, and Jarrat waited only long enough for Chan to step out before he punched for the high-security labs.

Even here, in the heart of NARC's own domain, the classified projects were buried three floors under the building, beneath the nuke bunker and armory. Harry Del hated the whole security deal, but since his work had come to the notice of both the NARC hierarchs and the political quarter, from which the department's funding originated, he was out of options.

Left to his own devices, Stone knew Harry would have worked on the beach in front of his house over in Venice's Fairview sector, and cultivated his redesigned tropical fungi in glass houses in the yard. The chances of NARC or the governments of Darwin's World or any of the homeworlds letting Del wriggle off their hook were subzero. For the past seven weeks he had worked in a lab so secure, he had to palm his own locks to get in, a guard accompanied him every time he left the NARC compound, and access to his work was restricted to only a handful of people, even within NARC.

Two of those whose access was automatic were Jarrat and Stone. They were intrinsic to the project. In many ways they *were* the project, and they had been briefed when Del's work was kicked up from level three clearance to level nine. At such stratae of security, only a few NARC captains, a handful of very senior politicians, William Dupre himself, and a small group populated by specialists like McKinnen, could walk into the lab unchallenged, or read a word Harry Del wrote.

The secrecy was a constant source of aggravation to a man who prized his freedom, privacy and personal liberty above all else. For decades he had

hidden himself away in the lush, high valleys around Ballyntyre, and if not for Jarrat and Stone he would still have been there. So would Tansy, Malcolm and the other members of Harry's big, extended family. Stone sighed as he stepped into the lab, a pace behind Jarrat. The door guard had passed them through into a brightly-lit cavern where the loudest sound was a shush of cooling fans from the plethora of machines. Stone suppressed a smile as he viewed the man's clutter, and the man himself.

The jeans were as battered as ever, the oversize shirt just as loud, and Harry was barefoot. He looked like a dropout from a post-grad study program. The truth was so distant from the impression, Stone indulged himself in a smile.

The whiteboard opposite the door was a jumble of holosnaps, leaving little space for notes. He recognized Tansy and some of the kids, and looked closer. In the background was a city extending to the horizon under a gold smog layer. It certainly wasn't Chandler or Ballyntyre, and a question hovered on his lips. He didn't need to ask it.

Harry may not have been any kind of telepath, but he could read Stone's emotions, or Jarrat's, from the other side of Venice. On Rethan the locals called people like him 'queer.' Stone would have called him a magician. As Jarrat appeared, Del looked him over with the critical eye of the neurosurgeon, the microbiologist — the empath — but he said to Stone by way of greeting,

"They're still in Eldorado. I've asked Tan a dozen times to pack up, corral the younger kids even if Malcolm and the others won't move, and get over here. But she won't leave South Atlantis. I don't think she's been offworld in her entire life."

"And you wish you were home," Stone added.

"And ... I wish I were home." Harry had been working at a massive microviewer. He turned off the display and leaned on the bench. "Good Christ, will you look at this? It's a bloody *dungeon*! There's criminals in prison who have more freedom."

"And it's my fault," Jarrat said, not unexpectedly. He flicked a dark glance at Stone, as if challenging him to argue, but Stone only shrugged. Jarrat was right in too many ways. "All this," Jarrat added with a glare at the lab, "started when I sent you Tim Kwei. Jack Spiteri was a routine fix-up, like I was the first time around. But Tim ..."

"Tim," Stone said quietly, "was like me."

An Angelhead. An old dreamhead, dopehead, floating in a heaven-and-hell world of his own making, marking time until the last dream of all sent him slipping into Angeldeath. Rapturous, exultant, joyous. Terminal. For a moment it seemed barbed wire bunched around Stone's heart. He would never completely cast off the memories, but he had learned how to hammer them into perspective, shut them back in the dark corners of his mind, where they would lurk until next time.

A deep frown creased Harry's brow as he regarded the younger man. "How are you Stoney? And don't try to lie to me."

"I'm good," Stone told him honestly. "The VM-104 was a lot of fun to

fly, we got out of the Oromon assignment without much more than a bruise — you heard about that? — and they're sending us to Aurora. I could wish for a few days' vacation, but you can usually screw a few perks out of this job along the way."

"Aurora." Del made a face. "They're in the news too much."

"Their government's making a lot of noise," Jarrat agreed. "We read the whole file on the way over here. You ever been there, Harry?"

"No," Del said musingly, "but I might be making the trip soon."

Stone's ears pricked. "I thought NARC had you nailed down with work right here. After the job you did with Tim Kwei, you're the hottest property they own. Pardon me, *think* they own."

"They can think whatever amuses them," Harry said on an uncharacteristically sour note, not at all like him. His good nature was stretched by the confinement, along with his equanimity. "I only did for Tim what I did for you, Stoney. Tim didn't need a cushion, a distraction, the way you did. He didn't get himself into any kind of empathic bond, but I'll tell you, Jesse Lawrence offered."

"I thought he would." Jarrat drew one hand slowly back through his hair, tousling it. "Damn. Now the buggers have seen you do it a second time, they know it wasn't a fluke. There was no luck involved. You can take a brain that's gotten scrambled and ... straighten it out. Whatever. And when the kid wakes up —" His eyes were on Stone, dark, probing.

"The kid wakes up clean," Stone said softly, "and the next time some bastard forces Angel up his nose, all he does is sneeze." Not all his willpower would prevent the shudder, and he knew Jarrat felt it. A muscle twitched in his jaw, betraying grinding teeth. "So how's Tim?"

The look on Harry's face was thunderous. "See for yourself," he invited, and swiveled a monitor around to face them. "I want you to know, I protested officially. They would have gone ahead without me, so I agreed to be there, though I absolutely refused to participate."

A note in his voice made Stone's skin crawl. Jarrat picked up on his creeping premonition and looked sharply at him, and Stone cleared his throat. "I thought Tim Kwei was writing VR games now. Jack Spiteri told us, before we shipped out to join the *Olympic*, he's doing project design for NARC. The last we heard of Jesse, he was dancing, not hustling. He had some great booking in an uptown club."

Harry's dark head nodded. In the overhead fluoros his eyes looked hollow. "I discharged the three of them from medical care not long after the Equinox bust. And incidentally, congratulations to the two of you on that score. Don't take any crap from the NARC Commission. Vic Duggan got in a while ago, and he's carrying a release from President Maddigan, sanctioning the Elysium action. Bill Dupre briefed you?"

"He mentioned something about it," Jarrat said evasively. "Harry, the NARC big-wheels'll keep. What's this about Tim Kwei?"

"More NARC big-wheels." Harry gestured at the widescreen display in which was framed an image of Tim, sitting in the corner of another lab. It might, Stone thought, have been McKinnen's laboratory, a room both he and

Jarrat had come to know too well, while one of them made a simulated run and the other floated in the isolation tank, monitoring him as no machine ever could. Harry thumbed the remote and let the playback begin. "I know *exactly* what they have in mind, Jarrat, and I don't like any of it."

The video was high quality, from the lab's mobile recorder. Tim Kwei was a little pale, watchful, cautious. He gave the camera an anxious look, but someone was talking to him, out of the angle of view. Stone did not know the voice, but it belonged to a man: "Mister Kwei, we're grateful for your willingness to participate in this experiment. NARC appreciates your input."

"Okay." Tim was hesitant. For the third time in two minutes he recrossed his legs, and his arms were folded tightly. His eyes focused outside the frame. "I mean, it's okay, isn't it, Doctor?"

And then Del's voice: "It's unethical, Tim. It may not be dangerous, but professionally I'd call the procedure wicked. If you want to change your mind right now, I'll back you up. Don't feel forced into it. And don't," he stressed, "go ahead with this because you feel you owe a debt, either to me or to NARC. You *don't*."

The young man's mouth compressed. The camera zoomed on his face as he said awkwardly, "They said it would be valuable data."

"No doubt," Del agreed in acid tones, "they want to see proof. They're pressuring you, and me, to provide them with something they still can't quite believe, though they've read Stone's official report."

The Equinox report? "Christ," Jarrat whispered, and swore beneath his breath as Stone's marrow cooled by several degrees. On the monitor, Tim took a long deep breath and at last nodded his assent for the 'procedure' to go ahead.

A lab tech entered the frame and stood with his back to the lens while he set up sensors to monitor Tim. On the corner of a bench at Tim's elbow was a small box, security tagged, color-coded with yellow chevrons. Haz-mat, Stone observed, and realized he was holding his breath as the demonstration went ahead.

"Stoney." Jarrat stepped closer to him.

"I'm okay." Stone was intent on the screen, unable to look away.

The side of the screen streamed data now: Kwei's vital signs. He was healthy but nervous, tense. Heart, respiration, every sign elevated as he opened the box and took out an object both Stone and Jarrat recognized all too easily. Any dopehead on the street would have known it. A twenty-credit 'pop,' enough Angel to keep the user in a state of euphoria for another eight or twelve hours, depending on his body weight and how far along he had progressed in his addiction.

With a surreal fascination Stone watched as Kwei brought the little plastic bubble to his face, and the kid's eyes squeezed shut. How many times had this been done to him ... and later, had he done it for himself, before Jesse Lawrence could find him? Before Jarrat could make a headlong dive into a club called Palomino and pull him out.

The capsule burst under pressure with an unmistakable popping sound. Tim held his cupped hands to his face and his chest heaved once, twice, as

he breathed it in. Offscreen, Harry Del muttered something that could have been profanity, and in the side of the frame the vital signs leapt in reaction to Tim's sudden panic attack.

But not to the first stages of the Angel 'ride.' Stone watched the numbers as if they mesmerized him. Heart, BP and respiration were soaring, but the hormones, the brain chemistry, remained stable. A timer in the lower right of the monitor was counting seconds. Just over a minute after he had inhaled the full dose, Kwei gave a vast sneeze, and then another, and his stats began to slither back to normal levels.

Stone had his own memories: an office high in Equinox Towers — a man called Strother, John D., who did not actually exist; Randolph Dorne, and Kjell Wozniak. And words branded into the roots of his brain. No matter how he tried to shut them off, they played back in his subconscious, over and over. He wondered fleetingly what gremlins haunted Jarrat's sleep as he heard Randolph Dorne again —

The only weapon you leave me is fear. Picture yourself a ten credit fuck in a laborers' sex shop on Eos. I've traded men like pieces of meat. There are ways and ways to die. I'm sending you to a bordello in Orlando. You'll be glad to talk in exchange for comfort —

"Stoney." Jarrat's hand clenched into his shoulder, bruisingly hard. "Stoney!"

He jerked himself out of the well of memory to find Harry Del peering closely at him while Jarrat's hands had become clamps on his arms, and the brush of Jarrat's feelings on his own was a welcome caress. He turned to it like a plant to the light. "I'm all right," he lied.

"You're not," Del said mildly.

"He will be," Jarrat whispered. "We all have our ghosts, Harry. But if you let Central know they haunt you, it's another psyche evaluation, three months early."

"Bugger," Del agreed. "If it's any consolation to you Stoney, you're human. If you felt nothing ... which may be what the NARC shrinks want ... I'd be worried about you. And this?" He gestured at the screen, where the image of Tim Kwei was frozen again. "The 'experiment' was so far against my wishes, Bill Dupre and I had an argument you could hear all over this building."

"Tim was okay afterward?" Jarrat asked shrewdly.

The empathic healer turned off the monitor and perched on the side of the desk. "Physically, sure. But it was stressful, and the crap is still in his bloodstream, like poison. It'll cycle out over the space of a month or so in sweat and urine, but it's — what did Eve Lang call it?"

"Potted pigshit," Jarrat said with a bitter, dark humor. "You keep in touch with her, Harry?"

But he shook his head. "Not from this *dungeon*. It takes me all my time to get a call out to Tan and my kids, and then half the time I don't get their messages back."

"And it's our fault," Stone said flatly.

"Mine," Jarrat corrected. "I took you to Harry when I got you back from

Death's Head. And I sent Tim to him, which made NARC realize what they've got their claws into. Right, Harry?" He raised a brow at Del. "They wanted to see the proof, right here under their cameras and sensors. Because they want a whole lot more."

The healer looked away with a faint sigh. "Bill Dupre told me, the senior echelon as far away as Earth want me to perform the procedure on other field agents like yourselves, who are often at risk of exposure to Angel. I would make them immune. And along the way they want a corps of agents on the street who can track and monitor each other the way you two do." He hopped down off the bench and thrust his hands into the pockets of the baggy jeans. "I see their point, of course. The worst of it is, I do understand their position!"

"But everything you do ... everything you *are*," Stone said slowly, "is being perverted into a weapon of some kind."

"Exactly." Del shook himself visibly. "Been here, done this, Stoney. When I was a kid I was dumb enough to get into some harebrained research projects. I'd been ostracized at college, med school, and I guess I wanted to prove I wasn't 'queer,' when the truth is, I am. All the Rethan mutations are. But it's a *good* kind of weird. I'm a healer, I've always helped and fixed and mended." He gestured at the screen, where the last image of Kwei was juxtaposed with the young man's data. "Now they want me to go inside healthy brains and meddle, to make your deep cover agents Angel-immune." He looked darkly at Jarrat. "I've told them fifty times, I need something to key on. I have to see where I'm going, I need a route map before I can start cross-wiring, patching, jury-rigging, in a man's brain! You know what this means?"

The concept made Stone shiver, and Jarrat felt the rush of his horror. "It means," Kevin said very quietly, "the subject — the field agent, and it could be myself — volunteers for Angel addiction."

"Advanced, chronic addiction," Del corrected. "You have to give me something solid to work with, or I won't stand a chance." He looked away, rubbing his face hard enough to leave his cheek and jaw ruddy. "I'm a healer, even a queer, but not a magician. I can't seem to get this through the minds of the bastards who are trying to pull my strings."

Jarrat was frowning over the image of Tim Kwei. "You've fixed two terminal dreamheads," he mused. "They can't see any further. Stoney's better than he ever was, and Tim's fine."

"But I can't guarantee results," Del rasped. "Understand, Jarrat. Every individual is different, every brain is as unique as ... as a man's soul. Christ! I'm not tinkering with used cars here! If I make a single mistake I can kill as easily as cure. My work is more of an art than a science. There are no guarantees. There can't be any. I'm not a machine, and the patients I work with are human, not mechanisms. You want fucking AI drones, call Yvette McKinnen!"

"Harry," Stone began, but Del was oblivious.

The healer squeezed shut his eyes. He looked as tired, disillusioned, as he had appeared relaxed and content at home ... at a place that no longer existed, Stone reminded himself as Harry said, "They're pressuring me to try it,

and goddamn it, Stoney, they've recruited themselves a volunteer."

A muscle in Jarrat's gut tightened. Stone felt it clearly. "Who?" Kevin asked.

"You know Janine Cruz?" Harry pushed away from the desk. "I promised you dinner, didn't I?"

"I know Janine." Stone traded feelings of unease with Jarrat. "She was kicked up to captain while Kevin was in deep cover in Chell."

"Captain Janine Cruz," Del said, marching to the bench at the rear of his lab, where an autochef, a refrigerator and a boom box had been installed, "was short-listed for the experimental program. Which probably means she's still 'provisional.' Yet to prove she's worth the rank, or some such crapola."

"She's good," Stone mused. "Hasn't she just been partnered with Scott Auel? It went through when I was buried in Warlock Company."

"And they'll be a good team," Jarrat added. "They're still waiting for a carrier, and five months isn't long enough to prove you can hold your own in this line of work. Sometimes the opportunity to show Central your best stuff doesn't come along. Then your partner makes the next deep cover run, and you sit on your ass in orbit, keeping the paper clips counted." He shook his head. "Or maybe Cruz screwed up somewhere. We all do, occasionally."

"Whatever." Del punched for steak, salad and a baked potato, and stood aside to give Stone access to the 'chef. "Cruz was short listed for the project, and the moron agreed."

Stone read the 'chef's menu and chose the cajun tuna and rice. As he stood aside to let Jarrat see the list he said to Harry, "Cruz must have read your file. She trusts you. Your skill."

"Then she's a damned fool," Del said tartly. "She has no idea how I work, what I do, and *don't* do. And I appreciate, she's only as good as her information. Nobody bothered to tell her, the procedure itself could kill her ... or I can fail, and leave her just as I found her. A chronic Angel addict with a few months left to live." Harry's big arms closed around his own chest, hugging himself. "I won't do it, and I've *told* them I won't, but they don't seem to be listening. Nothing I say will stop them. So Janine Cruz is going to show up here, stoned out of her skull, but it won't be a job like Tim. It'll be like it was for you, Stoney."

"Jesus," Stone whispered. "I remember it all, Harry." He swallowed on the lump in his throat and was not surprised when Jarrat stepped closer, slid an arm about him. "The work almost killed me."

"It would have," Harry told him sourly, "if Jarrat hadn't been there to be your buffer against me. Now, Cruz and Auel don't have anything remotely like the bond of affection you two share. They may sleep together but they're not in love, never were, never will be." He took a covered plate from the 'chef. His brows rose, creasing his high forehead. "If I asked Scott Auel to do for her, Jarrat, what you did for Stoney ..." He made negative noises. "You recall Yvette McKinnen's righteous protests, during the tests before you were assigned to Avalon?"

As if they were likely to forget, Stone thought, making a face. He lifted his own meal out of the 'chef, and it reset itself for Jarrat's kebabs and

noodles. "She tried her damndest to prove we were unstable, headed for the funny farm."

"Empaths are a thousand times more common than telepaths," Del intoned, "and only a comparative handful of them are emotionally stable enough to hold onto their sanity for long. And as for empathically bonded individuals, like the two of you? There's only love makes it bearable. I finally got this through to Yvette and Bill Dupre. They understand, but the old farts in charge of this department don't. They want to put Cruz in your place, Stoney, without the backup. Him." He nodded at Jarrat. "Scott Auel's a good guy, but even if he goes through with it, accepts the empathic bond, to drag Janine out of hell, those two will be at each other's throats in a week. The whole point of the project is to conjure a field agent who's Angel-immune ... and a partnership where one partner can monitor the other without devices, implants, biocyber or otherwise." He shook his head. "They'll end up assigning Scott and Janine to ships a sector apart, before they kill each other, and you're right back to square one! *If*," he added bitterly, "I don't make any slightest mistake and land the stupid woman in the morgue. Or in a hospice, waiting to die."

Jarrat and Stone shared a heavy sense of dread. Many research scientists would not have hesitated to involve themselves in the project. If the price of the experiment was the life of a volunteer, or several, the results more than justified the cost. But Del was a healer and an empath. With a blaze of insight Stone saw his position. In Del's eyes, the project could easily, perhaps inevitably, make him into a murderer. For a man who had invested many years in the search for a cure for Angel, the proposition was bitter indeed.

"We should have expected it," Jarrat was saying as he took his plate to the lab's small lounge, swept datacubes and document files off the table and pulled up a chair. "R&D, and Intelligence are always prowling, looking for new weapons. God knows, their antennae went up fast enough when they got wind of Stoney and me." He frowned at Stone across the table. "I'm sorry, Harry. We should have warned you. NARCs can be sonsofbitches, from the top down ... we have the rep, and we earned it. Sometimes NARCs get caught in our own rat traps."

"Like you two." Del was eating, intent on the food. "They had Yvette put you through the meat grinder. At the time, I expected you to slap your resignation down on Bill's desk and walk out." He looked up at them over the well-done steak. "As I intend to."

Surprise ambushed Stone. "You're quitting?"

"If they'll let me," Harry growled. He pushed his food around the plate and sat back. "I'd quit in an instant if I could go home, but there's nothing to go back to yet."

"The reconstruction?" Jarrat guessed.

"Takes time." With his steak knife Harry gestured at the whiteboard, and the dozen or more pictures of the old plantation. "They won't be done for ten months, minimum. Besides which, it's still too dangerous for Tan and the kids to show their faces. We agreed to give Eldorado Tac a year to tie up their loose ends, chase down the Death's Head runners, lowlife like Joel Assante

and his lover, the bastard Angel courier who turned up dead in Bally." He sighed heavily.

"Give Eldorado Tac the chance to do their job," Stone suggested.

"I will. Like I have a choice." Harry sat back and pushed away the plate. He had barely touched the steak. "But it doesn't mean I have to stay in this frigging dungeon for a year, performing butcher-jobs on kids like you and Jarrat, who were perfectly healthy until they volunteered to shove Angel up their noses!" Anger made his eyes brighten. "I've had the proverbial better offer."

Curiosity diverted Stone from his meal. "From a medical institute? It can't be anything like NARC's project. Your work here is so classified, it's the reason they've got you cooped up in a basement!"

But Harry's wide shoulders lifted in a shrug. "It's classified, but you'd be surprised who has the clearance, and where."

"A while ago," Jarrat said slowly, "you said you were thinking of going to Aurora. That's the job offer?"

For a moment Harry glared blindly at the high ceiling with its fans and strip lights and hovering, unobtrusive security drones. "Aurora's been in the newsvids enough lately. You've got to know the name of Cassius Brand. He placed a call to me, here."

"He knows where you are?" Stone felt the first thread of concern.

"Of course he knows." Jarrat's jaw worked methodically on a chunk of meat. "Brand ... *Senator* Cass Brand, has been one of NARC's loudest, most obnoxious advocates, since the department was floated. In fact, wasn't he one of the movers and shakers who rubber-stamped the proposal to initiate this department in the first place?"

Del pushed back his chair and headed back into the lab. "That's him. He was on the citizen's council, a committee that drew up the proposal for the department and submitted it to government. He's still a member of the Commission, the representative for Aurora. All of which gives him a security clearance high enough to know exactly what I do here." Harry was rummaging among the clutter of datacubes and stacks of hard copies, searching for one item, and spoke over his shoulder. "All that's a matter of public record. What you might not know is, very soon after NARC opened its doors for business, Cass Brand watched a medical team close the lid on the cryotank containing his son ... Angeldeath"

"Damn," Stone muttered, "that'd have to make a guy declare war on the Angelpack."

"It did. Ah, got it." Del gestured with a white metal cube. "I had a few ulterior motives when I invited you to eat with me. I wanted you to look at this, too. Get a second opinion."

"The call from Brand?" Jarrat picked up his plate and ambled after Del, through the ranks of benches and humming machinery.

The datacube dropped into a reader and Harry swiveled the monitor toward the younger men. "It came in via the NARC band, encrypted, and they forwarded it, uncensored. Which gives you a clue about the regard they have for Brand. Frankly, I was surprised to get it at all." He paused to let Stone

catch up, and keyed the playback. "As I said, I need a second opinion before I make any decision. I'll tell you now, Bill Dupre doesn't want me to take the assignment, but as for myself ..." He gave the lab a glare. "I'm ready to climb these walls!"

Stone was less interested in the call than in the caller. Most of what he knew of Cassius Brand, he had learned from the Aurora dossier, a massive document compiled by Thule Tactical. He and Jarrat had reviewed all of it and digested most, on the way over, and Brand stood out from the document like an icon.

He was 86 years old now, and still a senator highly placed in colonial politics. The boy in the cryotank was Marcus, the one and only son of obscenely wealthy parents, and Stone could guess what Cass Brand wanted of Harry. This was the very work for which Del was best qualified. Only he could open the tank, release the boy, and before the Angel could kill him, heal Marcus, just as he had healed Tim Kwei, and before him, Stone himself.

On the screen, captured in the body of the recorded message, Cassius Brand was the archetype of the statesman: senior without being 'old,' his face weathered but not faded, the lines and silver hair of many adult decades tempered by bright eyes and commanding intelligence. He was still an extremely dynamic man, Stone saw; not young, but by no means was he ready to accept the retirement which would be thrust upon him in another decade or two. The voice was deep, almost gruff. The words were impassioned; the job offer was astonishing.

"Heal my son," Cass Brand growled, looking directly into the lens, and through it, at Harry. "Open that *coffin* we sealed him in, and do what you do, Doctor. Give me back my boy, and you can write your own check. Name a figure ... I promise you, no fee you can even imagine will be too much for me to pay for the life of my son." The lines of his face seemed to deepen, and he sighed. "Look at me, Doctor Del. Time has caught me up, and still I'm waiting for the 'cure' for Angel, which we dreamed about when I was young. I don't have very much more time to wait, and as for Marc ... he's waited far too long. You can call me back on this line. It's private, secure.

"And a word to the wise, Doctor: don't let Bill strong-arm you. Billy Dupre's a good boy, but he's second-generation NARC, which means, in his mind the welfare of the department supersedes any individual, any private cause, any personal crusade, no matter how righteous, how sacred." At last the senator smiled, though it was a faint, crooked expression touching only one corner of his mouth. "I don't happen to agree. Billy's got a right to his opinion, but consider this: Angel appeared out of God alone knows where, fifty years ago, and it'll be the nemesis of Mankind for a long time to come. What's a few weeks or months of your time, Doctor, against that?" Brand reached out toward his camera. "Call me. Soon." And he turned off.

For a moment Stone and Jarrat shared a silent conference, until Jarrat wondered, "What's Dupre say?"

"That they can't spare me here." Del pulled up a stool and sat. "That my work here is vastly more important, as if I'm on the edge of a breakthrough. Which I'm *not*. The truth is, he knows how bloody pissed I am at this project.

He's pretty sure, if I once get out of here — much less get my hands on the kind of fortune Cassius Brand is offering — NARC won't get me back in this lab for all the money in the Cygnus Colonies. And," Del added acidly, "Bill could be right." His dark eyes shifted from Jarrat to Stone and back again. "So how about the second opinion I was hoping for?"

Stone did not even have to pause to consider. "Take the job," he said without hesitation. "Do what Nature designed you to do, and take the old man's money. A few million credits would buy a whole new life for you and Tansy, and whichever of the kids wanted to go along, any place you wanted to start over."

"Kevin?" Harry's brows were up.

"Like he says." Jarrat hesitated no longer than Stone. "Do what you can for Brand's kid. Then think long and hard about what NARC is asking for. I know it's a bitch, Harry, but I can see both sides of the question. If Stoney had been Angel-immune when he was shot down in Chell ... and if he'd been able to track me around the planet after I was beat up ..." He shrugged. "Janine Cruz is showing a lot of guts."

"And a paucity of viable brain cells," Del said sourly. "All right, I'll give the project some thought, while I spend a whole lot of Cass Brand's money!" He popped the datacube out of the machine and tossed it in his palm like a die. "I think Bill Dupre does appreciate the position I'm in. He was good enough to let this call be forwarded. Give me the chance, the choice. He didn't have to let it through."

"Dupre's a company man," Stone allowed, "Brand makes a good point there! But Dupre's also a good guy. I've known him a long time." He looked up over Del's head at the plain, metal-face chrono set into the wall above the door. "Thanks for dinner, Harry. We'll probably get to Aurora ahead of you, and we'll keep track of you. We'll do dinner properly next time, on a NARC expense account."

"Somewhere uptown and expensive," Jarrat added, "and you can brief us on the Brand job."

It seemed a weight had been lifted from Del's shoulders. He visibly shed ten years while they watched. "Thanks. I'll appraise Bill of the situation in the morning, get official clearance to go ahead." He took a long, deep breath. "And get the hell out of this hole in the ground!"

Jarrat chuckled. "Don't tell Tansy exactly where you'll be."

"Cloak and dagger bullshit." Harry made a face.

"For a while longer," Jarrat argued. "Let Eldorado Tac do their job. If Stoney and me hadn't been up to our balls in the Death's Head business at the time, we'd have been there for you sooner — but even if we'd been able to save the house, your family would still have had to drop out of sight while the loose ends were tied off, the leaks plugged." He shared a wry glance with Stone. "It's the nature of this business. And it gets right up my nose sometimes." He offered his hand. "Congratulations on the new job, Harry. Now, get some sleep. You look like hell."

The empath, the 'queer,' clasped Jarrat's wrist for a moment, then Stone's. "I will. I'll catch you before you ship out."

“And we’ll see you in Aurora,” Stone promised as they headed for the door, with its granite-faced guard, the discreet drones that were the eyes and ears of the security system, and the single palm-locked elevator which was the only way to get out of the underground.

CHAPTER THREE

Equinox Towers rose like three dragon’s fangs over the skyline of Elysium, and launch bays in the top levels belched fire. Fifteen missiles chased upward, bright in the gloomy shadow of the green-faced gas giant, to meet the Blue Raven gunship. Before they were close, Blue Raven’s intercept warheads were in the air, and at once the sky thickened with palls of blue and gray smoke.

Imaging switched over to a computer-enhanced fusion of thermo and synthetic aperture. Blue Raven’s interceptors picked up almost every warhead from Equinox, and the sky seemed to erupt. The gibbous, cloud-wreathed face of Zeus danced with chemical fireflies for several seconds. But two missiles were smart enough, or lucky enough, to punch through the defense screen.

They ID’d as Paladins, manufactured by Black Mountain Engineers on Rethan for export to the frontier battlefields, on the Army defense contract. These were cheap, short-range ‘dumb’ weapons, and how Equinox Industries had come by a supply of them was as yet uncertain. They should never have been deployed in the city. The Paladin was designed to be launched by the score to defend a perimeter where overshoots, fuel-outs, brain-deads and blazing shrapnel would fall in a wasteland, a desert, anything but the suburbs of a panicked city.

The Blue Raven gunners chased down the mavericks, but Equinox Towers blocked their firing line. In the ECM confusion, the two Paladins had never acquired their target — the gunship — and simply went ballistic over Elysium until they were out of fuel.

Two fireballs blossomed, red-gold in the gloom. A thunderclap rolled over the skyline, but only seconds passed before it was eclipsed by another, deeper and more massive roar. Targets had been acquired by Blue Raven’s gunnery officers before they fired. Thirty warheads launched, and like a house of cards, Equinox Industries folded on itself.

The video was so clear, it had been color-corrected and the audio track cleaned up. “*Blue Raven 6.*” Jarrat’s voice, distorted by radio jamming, and answered a moment later by Gil Cronin: “*Right here. You want we should jump?*” Jarrat’s voice was razor sharp: “*Sample the air. That place was lousy with chemicals. Sniff for that bloody nerve gas!*” The same thing must have

been on Cronin's mind. His response was full of scorn: *"We were too quick. It'd take them half an hour to break that shit out of storage. They didn't get enough warning."* Then Stone's voice, as sharp as Jarrat's: *"Test the air anyway."* Cronin was busy, and annoyed: *"I'm doing it!"* he thundered. The video continued, underscored by the chaos of the Ravens' comm loop, and almost a full minute passed before Blue Raven 6 was back: *"Negative on the gas, Cap. There's a lot of serious crap in that smoke, but nothing that reads like a neurotoxin. We're ready to jump."*

The playback froze there as Colonel Vic Duggan thumbed the remote. The lights brightened in the conference room which had been appropriated for five days by the Commission, and the holo thinned away to pale, spectral colors, insubstantial images.

Jarrat and Stone sat at the back of the room, mere spectators at the session. The players were Duggan — carrying President Maddigan's official sanction for the NARC action, and waving it like a flag whenever the dissenters raised an argument — Bill Dupre, who was the Quadrant Commander, ultimately responsible for the battlefield conduct of units in the field, and Sergeant Gil Cronin himself, who had commanded the Blue Raven guncrew.

All three were in the body of the conference room, and even Duggan had chosen to wear the uniform of his unit. Elysium Tactical's dress uniform was a shade of green known as 'Zeus emerald,' and on Duggan it looked good. The NARC dress uniform was immaculate on both Dupre and Cronin, dark blue and dove-gray. But Cronin looked uncomfortable in it, and out of place in these confines. The lights winked in the big blue diamond he wore in the lobe of his left ear, and he straightened in the chair next to Duggan as the playback stilled.

"That," Vic Duggan said, on his feet and facing the tribunal, "right *there*, is the point where the worst of your damage was done. Two Paladin missiles overshot their target and went maverick, followed by the assault on Equinox itself, which was unavoidable. You heard the audio from Captains Jarrat and Stone, and Sergeant Cronin. All three were in the air, in realtime. In fact, it's Raven Leader's battlefield video we were watching. If NARC had given Equinox any warning ... which includes, ladies and gentlemen, any less swift and aggressive assault on the building ... the city of Elysium would have paid a terrible price."

Three senior NARC officers were flanked by the six mandatory public representatives. Duggan was the oddity: he was both Maddigan's understudy and a principal player in the game. General Myra Sherridan leaned forward over the high desk and nailed Dupre with blue gimlet eyes. "One final question only, Colonel. There was no doubt about the threat of a neurotoxin?"

"In our opinion, General, none," Dupre affirmed.

"Goddamn," Jarrat muttered.

Stone stretched out his legs. "I know. They've gone over the point six times, run the Equinox data every time, heard the evidence given by everyone who was there twice that I know of. I can't believe they dragged Gil Cronin here from Aurora for this."

"Gives him a chance to get dressed up," Jarrat said acidly. "Not that he

looks like he's enjoying it." He paused and looked Cronin up and down from the shaved and gleaming skull to the sueded boots and back to the massive shoulders. "We should have had him show up in a hardsuit."

"You mean, give the fossils on the bench a wake-up call? They've forgotten what it's like on the street when the shooting starts?" Stone smothered a rich chuckle. "Gil would've been more comfortable in the hardsuit, but I doubt they'd even let him through the door. Too many civvies in here, mate." He nodded at the six public representatives. "Too many toes to tread ... and we're wading in crap since Avalon. Besides, Gil looks good in the uniform."

Stone looked down at his own plain clothes, the officer's prerogative, and angled an arch glance at Jarrat. They could have worn the NARC dress uniform, like Dupre, but had not. Stone was in a dark jacket, dark blue shirt and silver-gray slacks, Jarrat in a white jacket, ice-green shirt and the soft black denims he liked. Their choice of plain clothes was a deliberate statement: they had the rank to command, and their assignment was always the urban battle zone where any uniform was likely to be a target.

The dissenters were a group from the Elysium Consort, the traders' guild. Five thunder-faced corporate executives who had doubtlessly lost a lot of revenues in, and after, the war. They were in this for compensation, but to score big money they had to make a good case — that NARC, or its officers, had acted without proper authorization, or without regard for 'the public good,' or without due concern for civilian safety. They were all good points to argue, and every one fell apart when the data was reviewed. Telemetry streamed from a NARC carrier back to Central here on Darwin's, and on, back to Earth itself, every second, every day.

General Sherridan sat back and conferred in frowning undertones with her fellow officers, Koyama and Pasquale-Chin, for several minutes. Gestures were made toward the holo playback, which hovered at freeze-frame over the body of the room, and the tribunal officers were nodding minutely. Jarrat was aware of the coil of tension in Stone's belly, but he was intent on Dupre's face, trying to read something, anything, into his expression before Sherridan stood and faced the assembly.

"Here we go," Stone muttered as the whole room came to its feet with a sound of shuffling and the soft whirl of servos as a drone camera dove in to get a better angle for the archival vid.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Elysium Consort," Sherridan said in clipped tones, one of the east coast American accents, "it is the opinion of this tribunal that the action commanded by Captains Jarrat and Stone was well within the parameters outlined by the Commission. It is critical to remember that when an action has been initiated, for the duration of that action, the field of battle has been redesignated *military*, and the targets acquired are also deemed military. Immediately following the action, all processes of law and government are handed back to the civilian authorities. But until that moment, martial law is in force within the precincts of the zone selected for the confrontation.

"Where possible, the zone will not be a city, but very seldom does Narcotics And Riot Control have the luxury of choosing the field of engagement, and

one is well aware that Equinox Industries both challenged the legitimate authority of NARC to obviate the Angel trade in the Avalon colony, and fired the shots which initiated the confrontation.

"This tribunal has examined the data several times and we see nothing contrary to the public good. The Battle of Elysium was brief and contained almost entirely within the Chandler sector. Only one other sector of Elysium suffered substantial damage, and this was caused by the Paladin missiles fired, and lost, by Equinox itself. It is noteworthy, ladies and gentlemen, that President Maddigan has issued a document asserting the sanction, albeit belatedly *intra vires* of the Colonial Government of Avalon, for the NARC action. NARC appreciates greatly the provision of this sanction, and we thank Colonel Duggan for his presence here as President Maddigan's representative.

"This inquiry on behalf of the Elysium Consort is concluded. Ladies and gentlemen of the Consort, you have seven days to lodge an application for this inquiry to be reopened, pending your presentation of fresh testimony refuting the data of both NARC and Elysium Tactical."

Without another word, General Sherridan made her way out of the conference room via the rear exits, and most of the assembly sat down again. At the right of the long, high desk where the tribunal had sat, Dupre turned off the holoprojector. The image dissolved and Duggan and Cronin collected their datacubes and a sheaf of hardcopies.

Jarrat had stopped listening some time before. The legal jargon slipped like warm oil across his eardrums, and while they waited for the others he was intent on Stone's long legs, which were crossed before him, thrust out into the aisle which ran back to the doors.

As the senior officers stepped out, Cronin swept open his collar seal. He shoved the uniform sleeves up around his elbows, baring smooth, tanned forearms with blue and green tattoos, the unit badge of the Blue Raven unit, and the crossbow crest of the Master Gunner. He pushed both hands into the pockets of the tight uniform pants and strode toward Jarrat and Stone with the familiar prowling walk.

"Good enough, by the sounds of it, Cap," he said to Stone.

"Good enough." Stone got to his feet. "I'm sorry they dragged you over here, Gil, to stand up in front of a bunch of civvies for ... what was it, four minutes?"

"Three," Cronin corrected, and shrugged. "There's squat happening on the *Athena* right now. Petrov and Cantrell are running dark, just collecting data. The Ravens are doing routine recce and training flights."

"Still, four days on a courier with your knees under your chin is hardly my idea of fun." He looked down at Cronin's big legs.

"It's four days away from routine recce and training flights," Cronin said glibly. "Shit, Cap, you guys had all the fun. I saw the Oromon data. You, uh, making me an offer at last?" he prompted as he noticed Stone's eyes still on his legs.

"Otherwise engaged, Gil. Just wondering where you put those shanks in a skinny little courier," Stone retorted.

Cronin angled a disdainful look at him. "How was the 104?"

"Fun, like you said." Jarrat stood and stretched his spine, and stepped aside to make space as Duggan and Dupre joined them.

Stone gave his hand to the commander of Elysium Tactical, and Duggan took it in some odd ritual clasp. It made Stone grin while Jarrat's brows rose. Dupre slapped the datacube into Jarrat's palm and parked his butt on the seat Jarrat had just vacated. "Sherridan's satisfied, and the Consort will only get the tribunal annoyed if they lodge another appeal," he said to no one in particular. "Your data was clean. Gene Cantrell has no second thoughts. This should be closure on the Equinox assignment, Jarrat, Stone."

"About bloody time," Stone breathed.

Dupre studied him with a frown. "You're on the *Persephone* to Aurora tomorrow." He flicked a glance at Cronin. "All three of you. If the Consort committee does decide to push its luck, and the tribunal wants you back here, they'll have to wait till a break in the Aurora assignment, no ifs, ands or buts."

Some note in his voice made Jarrat's ears prick. "You're giving Aurora priority? As of when?"

"The early hours of this morning, local time." Dupre gestured vaguely in the direction of his office. "We received a supplementary data feed from Thule Tactical. I have it for you here." He dived into a pocket and produced a datacube, white metal labeled in red and blue. Jarrat took it, slipped it into the inside pocket of the white linen jacket as Dupre said, "Colonel Janssen just buried another Tac special operative." His brows popped up as he regarded Duggan. "Janssen believes they've pegged the pivot-point around which the Scorpio cartel revolves: his name is Leo Michiko. And every time they even try to investigate, their operative turns up extremely dead. What's that sound like to you?"

"Like they know exactly who's behind the syndicate," Duggan said in a dark, introspective voice. "They're treading toes. Pushing ... and their man won't be pushed. So Janssen's burying the best people Thule Tac's got." He seemed to be looking inward at his own memories, faces, places only he could see, as he said, "Time to go, Stoney. You fart around now, you pay the price later, like we did in Elysium."

A thread of anger kindled beneath Jarrat's breastbone. "We should have been in Aurora a week ago. Tactical had the numbers to invoke NARC. We should have gone there from Oromon."

"You wouldn't have been in time to save Janssen's man," Dupre judged. "And you'd have had the Equinox inquiry sitting on your shoulder like the albatross. Bad medicine."

"So we go now," Jarrat said shortly.

"And you're not the only ones." Dupre stood and considered both Jarrat and Stone with a deep frown. "You know something about Harry Del's business?"

The conference room had emptied out by now. The five men were alone. Their voices had begun to echo in the wide, mock-marble space, and carry. Dupre held up one finger to stall Jarrat's answer, and led the company out by the side door. A short passage led to the executive landing bay. He palmed open the armorglass door, and in the sudden moist tropical air, under the

whine of repulsion generators as a Yamazake Lightning ran up its engines, preparatory to lifting off, Jarrat said, faintly surprised, "You're letting Harry go?"

"Doctor Del remains a civilian," Dupre said regretfully, "and I admit, I was never able to charm him into signing any kind of NARC contract, no matter what it was sweetened with. Which, you realize, is the *only* claim to freedom he has." He shrugged. "I cut him a deal."

The Lightning kicked up on the hot bluster of its repulsion field. Jarrat turned his face away until it angled into the north, where Venice simmered under the afternoon sun. The sky was clear, blue-green, with the suggestion of a weather front headed in from the west.

"What kind of deal?" Stone leaned on the white concrete wall, eyes on the retreating shape of the race plane. "We had dinner with Harry last night. He was pissed with the project, and I don't blame him."

The look on Dupre's face spoke volumes. "Nor do I, Stone. I've spoken several times on his behalf to Earth Central, but as Harry says, they're not listening. The R&D boffins in Weapons and Intelligence have already heard all they wanted to hear, and the details are unimportant to them. But I know a little about Harry's work, and to paraphrase the old saying, the *magic* is in the details."

"Magic," Jarrat said quietly. "I wish it were that simple." He set his shoulders against the wall by Stone's, felt the solid heat through his jacket, the tropical sun on his face, the prickle of Stone's curiosity.

"I offered Harry a little ... backup." Dupre shaded his eyes to watch the Yamazake out of sight, and as it vanished a Marshall Skyvan dropped in on the other side of the bay, the loading dock. "I offered the support of NARC, the use of our facilities, which includes the carrier, if he needs them. In return, I asked only that he doesn't sever his connections with us, and makes himself available to NARC. As a healer," he added, "in the event other officers suffer as you did, Stone."

"Sneaky," Stone accused with a grin. "You let him run, with just enough strings attached to bring him back if we need him."

"And we'll certainly need him," Dupre said bleakly, "if I can't put this *project* on permanent hiatus."

A cold thrill from Stone caught Jarrat unawares. He clamped down tight on the slender channel he had left open to the empathic bond. "It's Janine Cruz's neck on the line. What's Scott Auel's take on this?"

"Intense interest." Dupre raised his voice over the engine noise of the incoming blood-scarlet Marshall. "But I'm listening to Harry. I know the risks, and I don't believe they're warranted. So I let Harry go, and I'll try to use his absence to convince Earth Central to find something else to obsess over."

He was angry, and Jarrat could not remember the last time he had seen Dupre genuinely angry. "There's more, isn't there?"

"Hm?" The Barbadian stirred, as if Jarrat had intruded on some reverie. "Just more details, Jarrat. I spent half the night going over Colonel Janssen's data. Senator Brand is a disillusioned old man. His generation of colonial city fathers have devoted most of their lives to keeping Angel off the hallowed turf

of Thule, and here they are, with as wicked a problem as Elysium or Calleran or Chell."

Stone made scornful noises. "The way we heard it, Aurora's been an Angel-pit in the making for some time. Old colony, big population, harsh climate, and if you don't have money, you're screwed. Not much of which," he added, "made it into the dossier."

"Indeed." Dupre considered the younger men thoughtfully. "Well, form your own impressions when you begin the investigation, and if Senator Brand offers to help, let him." He turned his back on the Skyvan, and slid green aviator's glasses onto his nose. "Brand's business partner is a man called Pete Denehy —"

"I know that name." Jarrat was sifting through disordered memories, annoyed with himself for misplacing it.

"Pietro Denehy," Dupre told him. "A billionaire in anybody's currency. His business is pharmaceuticals, and it's damned big business. He has both labs and markets right across the colonies, way back to Mars. Denehy himself is originally from Chryse."

Now Jarrat had him. Denehy was one of the figures covered in the dossier, though not in great detail. He had been under Colonel Kris Janssen's lens for some time. Denehy was not much under Cassius Brand's age, and still at the helm of PharmaTech. And any recreational 'user' from Earth to the Cygnus Colonies knew the brand name. PharmaTech was worth billions annually, on one product range alone: they manufactured most of the blockers, the 'come-down pops' for the most popular 'treats' on the legit narco market.

"Denehy was in the news himself a while ago," Dupre added as the name clicked in Jarrat's memory, "when his lab on Aurora applied for a patent for a new experimental substance. Harry showed me the research behind it ... he doesn't put much faith in it, but you'll have heard of the stuff. Primax."

"A buffer," Stone said slowly. "They're testing it at hospice level, using it to try to prolong the lives of Angelheads." His mouth twisted, and he would not meet Jarrat's eyes. The memories were too new, too raw. Booze, food, good sex, all a guy could take. It helped. Any user knew this much. Stone cleared his throat harshly. "Harry doesn't think much of Primax?"

"I know the drug itself is damned addictive," Jarrat said quietly.

"Not as bad as Angel," Stone muttered.

"But bad enough. Still, since your normal Angelhead's bought a one-way ticket out, what have you got to lose?" Jarrat stirred. "You want us on the *Persephone* tomorrow, Colonel?"

"She leaves at 19:30," Dupre affirmed. "Sergeant Cronin will be with you, and I'm waiting for clearance from the Starfleet crew to put Harry aboard. Keep him under NARC's wing, so to speak. And you, Colonel Duggan? You need a ride?"

Vic Duggan had been talking in undertones with Cronin. He turned back as Dupre spoke to him, and gestured at the east horizon, where the spaceport sprawled along the Venice outskirts. "I have a clipper reservation, back to Elysium. The *Launceston* ships out in a few days. While I'm on Maddigan's buck, I thought I'd sample the delights of your fair city." He was looking spec-

ulatively at Stone. "Where's a guy go to get laid and plastered, in that order, stay on the right side of the law and not go blind?"

"Laid how?" Stone wiped a smile off his face. "Boys or girls? Both or neither? You want a VR sex shop, a dance shop, leather, lace, steelrock, what's your fancy?" He caught Jarrat's eyes on him, and winked.

"You could try an uptown club called Sensations." Jarrat glanced at his chrono. "Jesse Lawrence dances there. He'll be on stage in a few hours, if you want to get out of that uniform. Show up at a club in Tac dress greens, and you'll either be barred at the door —"

"Or get your bones jumped," Cronin added, "depending on what kinda club it is, on what night. Some day, remind me to tell you how there's folks out there kinky for the riot armor."

If his suspicious, narrow-eyed look could be judged by, Duggan was wondering if the Blue Raven were kidding. "Guys or chicks?"

"Both," Cronin informed him, with some cross between a smirk and a grimace. "And we ain't going there in mixed company."

"Mixed company?" Stone was actually looking for a woman eavesdropping, or approaching quietly, when Cronin nodded at Dupre.

"*Muy senior oficial*," he growled. "No offense, Colonel."

"You mean 'chair polisher,' don't you?" Dupre hazarded. "People, let me get the hell out of your faces." He actually laughed. "Enjoy Venice, Colonel Duggan, and as for the rest of you ..." He gave Jarrat, Stone and Cronin a hard look apiece. "Your courier leaves at 19:30 tomorrow evening. Be on it, gentlemen. Coherent if possible."

He stalked away, leaving both Cronin and Duggan making only half-mocking sounds of relief. "You don't get along with Dupre?" Jarrat wondered, looking at the Blue Raven.

"Like they say, his ass is too high off the ground." Cronin turned his broad back on the departing officer. "In the jump bay, we don't trust nobody over the rank of captain. Nobody," he added darkly, "who don't jump into hell with us, and don't know what it's like down there."

"Amen to that." Duggan thrust both hands into the pockets of the uniform slacks. "I've lived, worked, on the street since you were sucking milk out of a bottle, Jarrat. Bill Dupre's a good guy, but it's been twenty years since he put on a hardsuit and jumped out of a gunship. Like Gil just said, the view looks different from where Dupre's at." He shook his head, and with a nod over his shoulder indicated the conference room. "Too much politics. They *make* it complicated." He was moving now. "Let me get out of the damn uniform. What about you, Gil?"

"I don't mind." One thick finger tapped the sergeant's chevrons. "These open doors. Venice is a military town. But a Tac uniform?"

"Just gets doors slammed in your face," Stone said wryly. "Voice of experience, Kevin. You got a car, Vic?"

The infrakey to a rental was already jingling in Duggan's palm. "I'm on Maddigan's buck, so I checked out a Viper. Who's driving? Not me, kids. I'm going to be so shit-faced, you'll pour me back into the car."

The man was so furious, Jarrat realized, only a lot of booze would let him

wind down and rest. He had taken the Elysium Consort's hunt for damages personally, and impotent, self-destructive rage was burning him out. Stone had volunteered, and held out his hand for the key. It was tossed to him, and Cronin and Duggan went ahead to an electric blue Rand Viper which stood among the executive cars and planes. Jarrat said softly, under the wind and constant engine noise, "He's on a short fuse."

"Vic always was." Stone was watching his old instructor cut a line between the vehicles. He had left the Rand in a parking slot by the west cargo bay. "He drives his people hard, but he drives himself much harder. Elysium's been his town for a long time. Vic was the one who busted the Angel smuggling racket wide open. The whole city was begging for NARC to get in there, and we watched it turn political, get complicated, dirty." He paused to aim the infrakey at the Viper. "Vic hates politics."

"Yet he's cozied up with Maddigan," Jarrat mused.

They were close enough for Duggan to hear, and he said over his shoulder, "Cozied up out of necessity, Jarrat. Doesn't mean I gotta like it. Strange bedfellows and all that shit." The gullwings were going up, and he squeezed into the back of the Viper. Somehow Cronin managed to fit himself into the other side, and the car bellied down on its repulsion field. "So you drew the Aurora job, Stoney." Duggan whistled through his teeth. "Jesus, you get all the fun."

"Fun?" Stone slid in under the wheel and pulled on a headset. The jets in the tail exploded into life as the Viper's rudimentary nav deck called Flight Control with its intention to depart. "Fun's not quite the word I'd have used." He was listening for takeoff advice. "Still, we'll have a few friends in high places there, which makes a change."

He was thinking about Elysium, Jarrat knew without asking. A city where the civvy government was a sham, its strings pulled by Equinox Industries ... and Equinox was also the puppeteer behind the Angel syndicate which was gutting the population at street level. There, NARC had no allies save Tactical, and Tac was hamstrung on every level.

"Cassius Brand." Duggan rolled the name on his tongue. "Now, there's power politics for you. Him and Pete Denehy."

Now, Jarrat was surprised. Anyone who followed the newsvids would have known the name of Brand, since Aurora had been headlines for months, but Denehy was barely a shadow behind PharmaTech, too wealthy and influential to be visible until or unless he wanted to be, which was not often.

"What do you know about Denehy?" Jarrat asked as he ran up the harness. The Rand Viper was at hover, ten meters up, riding repulsion while Stone listened to Flight Control.

"Only what any shareholder knows," Duggan said unconcernedly. "I'm invested in PharmaTech. They're trying to track down a treatment for Angel addiction. You gotta like that."

"They're certainly on the trail of a few billion credits," Jarrat said acerbically. "According to Harry, Primax is damned dangerous —"

"And it only drags out a guy's death agonies. It isn't actually a cure," Stone added as he took the Viper up vertically, right into the air traffic lanes.

"But it's going to make another fortune for Denehy." He paused, "And PharmaTech's shareholders."

"Hey, not guilty," Duggan protested. "I bought in three years ago, on the strength of preliminary data. Okay, I got a good deal on PharmaTech, and I'm starting to see returns. Primax turns out to be crap, maybe even a big, fat fraud? Del's looked at it, he smells the stink? Fine. So I ditch PharmaTech, take a vacation on the profits, get out before the marketing campaign gets rolling. They're still in trial stages. Besides, I'm not a medic, I wouldn't know herbals from horseshit."

"Relax, Duggan," Jarrat said over his shoulder. "Like Dupre tells me, take a deep breath. Nobody said you were implicated. Just tell us what you know about Pietro Denehy."

"You suspect Denehy? The name Dupre just gave you," Duggan argued, "was Michiko."

"Right now, I'm suspicious of everyone and his uncle," Jarrat said tartly. "Denehy's listed as Cass Brand's business partner? That puts him at the apex of Thule society, right where the money's thickest on the ground. And in any colony where you can practically smell the Angel when you step off the clipper, you get suspicious of that much wealth."

The city rolled out beneath the Rand, checkered with late afternoon shadows as Stone angled away from the NARC compound. "Randolph Dorne," he mused. "Skycity. Where you want to go, Vic?"

"Hotel Santorini," Duggan told him. "Give me an hour to grab a shower, put on something normal, and we're gone. And as for Denehy, you know as much as I do. Probably more. He's homeworld stock, 'old money' right out of Chryse. He inherited one fortune, made another one in cutting-edge pharmaceuticals. Primax is shaping up as a cynical fraud? If Del says so, that's good enough for me. I'll call my broker, soon as I get into Elysium." He paused to watch the Kruger sector resolve with proximity, out of the grid-pattern of Venice. "I'd like to see Colonel Janssen's data. Professional curiosity."

Jarrat and Stone shared a look. The data was classified, but Duggan had the clearance, even if he were not assigned to Aurora, and Cronin would be on the *Persephone* with them. "Why not?" Jarrat decided as the Viper began to lose altitude and Stone turned its nose toward the white chrome and glass spire of the Santorini.

On Maddigan's buck, Duggan had put himself into an executive suite high in the building, with its own private garage. The Viper rotated to fit the tight space, and as the jets howled down into silence the Tactical man invited them into an elegant apartment. He was shedding the 'Zeus emerald' uniform as he went, jacket, shirt and slacks strewn across the floor on the way to the bathroom. Jarrat caught a glimpse of pale, tight buns, wide back, sturdy legs, before Duggan hit the taps and was engulfed by a fog bank.

The city view was arresting. On one side of the Kruger sector, Venice ran up into the Caerleon National Park, which darkened the low hills with tropical forest. On the other, the suburbs ran right down to the white beaches and green water of Mandingo Bay.

Ignoring the view, Cronin was searching Duggan's wet bar, looking for

bourbon and ice, while Stone sprawled on the couch. Jarrat looked his fill of the five-star view outside the plate armorglass and turned back to a five-star sight of a different kind. Stone held out a hand. Jarrat took it and subsided into the overstuffed cushions beside him.

"Drink, Cap?" Cronin offered from the bar.

"Thanks." Jarrat leaned into Stone's shoulder and plucked the cube Dupre had given him from his inside pocket. "Want to run it?"

"No." Stone snaked an arm around Jarrat. "But we will anyway."

The cube dropped into the reader in the knee table before them, and a holodisplay shimmered against the windows. The glass darkened automatically, and Stone lifted his booted feet onto the table to watch as the data package ran. Cronin was behind them, both big forearms on the bar, and Duggan leaned out of the bathroom, comfortably naked and streaming on the Santorini's gray-blue carpets.

Vid footage from a private funeral; a file report on several young officers killed in line of duty; panoramic overviews of Thule borrowed from a travelog which made the NARC dossier look dust-dry. Jarrat whistled as the visuals panned and dove over a fantasy cityscape, where buildings seemed to defy any law of gravity he understood.

The uptown sectors of Thule seemed to be composed of modules: crystal spheres literally floating in the frozen air of Aurora, and containing many thousands of buildings. The frost-pale spheres were hermetically sealed, shutting out the stunning cold and the insubstantial air, and the city modules, adrift on repulsion, were tractor-anchored in gorgeous, not-quite-random patterns, like bunches of exotic fruit. Elsewhere, between the spheres, spires soared to kilometers in height and defied physics — bigger, heavier at the apexes, with slender limbs stretching out and up, supporting pod-like landing fields and dome-platform parks.

The audio track was a woman's voice, almost as deep as a man, and whiskey-hoarse. "Thule is the city designed by a marriage of art and science, and it's still one of a kind. You won't see anything like this back in the homeworlds. Not yet. And not in any colony that counts its credits. If you have to ask what it costs, you can't afford it. Thule is the home of three million human souls, floating on grav-resist like a bunch of feathers in a winter sky. Where does art end and science begin? Ask Leo Michiko that question, and you'll get the same two-hour lecture he's been delivering to the media for the past dozen years."

"Michiko," Stone murmured.

Jarrat made some affirmative sound, engrossed in the data as the display put up a file picture and a scrolling column of text. The audio track continued without pause. "Michiko is one of the wealthiest men in the Aurora colony. He's an industrialist, but his area of expertise is one of the rare fields. A moment ago you were looking at it. Thule is his baby, from concept to design and engineering. Grav-resist architecture."

"Skycity," Jarrat said quietly. "Same principle."

"Take Skycity and add the fantasy trip of a lifetime." Stone reached back an empty hand toward Cronin. "Can I get juice and ice?"

"Coming up," Cronin told him. "Sweet Jesus, will you look at the place. You know what that had to cost?"

"So you know how much money's floating around in Thule," Jarrat added. "And you just have to wonder."

"Michiko," the audio track went on, "has become enormously wealthy on this technology. But a recent tax audit showed several of his recent projects ran at vast losses which would have ruined another developer. Leo Michiko appeared to shrug them off, while the audit also showed private donations to his company of billions of colonial dollars. These donations appear, under colonial tax law, as valid income ... but when Tactical tried to trace the donations their sources don't seem to have what the accountants apparently term 'fiscal substance.' Translated into people-speak: no one really knows where the donations originated, and the deeper the investigation, the more elusive the sources become."

"Remember, until or unless a formal audit was performed, none of this would have become evident. And the audit was required by investigators from Mars. Specifically, the city of Chryse, where Michiko is heavily invested, and where the legitimacy of a number of business deals was questioned. Nothing Michiko could do would stop the audit, and it was deliberately sprung on him with no lead time to speak of."

A glass of juice slid into Stone's hand, and Jarrat tried the bourbon. "If I were Janssen, I'd be on Michiko's tail."

"She is." Duggan appeared beside them, a towel wrapped loosely about his hips, a razor buzzing in one hand, a vodka and orange in the other. "That's Kris Janssen you're listening to. Last generation of one of the founding families. Pioneer stock, and such crap." He swallowed the vodka in one swig and handed the glass back to Cronin for a refill.

"You know her?" Stone wondered.

"Not personally, but I know her by rep." Duggan swiped the towel from his hips and began to rub his hair with it.

"She any good?" Jarrat surveyed the Tactical colonel and turned a dark, sultry look on Stone. Blue eyes glittered in amusement.

"You mean, as a commander of city Tactical?" Duggan paused, towel draped over his head, and took his refill from Cronin. It went down as fast as the first, and roughened his voice. "As a matter of fact, she's bloody good. Run her file. She's got a fine record and, professionally speaking, she's straight as a die."

"And socially speaking?" Stone prompted.

But Duggan only shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Never met her."

"We'll find out." Jarrat stood, and gave Stone his hand to pull him up too. "Dupre said she's waiting for us."

The audio track was still running, setting out Michiko's personal information, but until the file turned to Tac business Jarrat was no longer listening. He and Stone stood at the darkened windows, waiting for Duggan to dress. They turned back to the holo only when Janssen said, "Five weeks ago we received information from an anonymous caller who claimed to be a servant in Michiko's household. The man overheard business talk. Vidphone confer-

ences, involving dates and places, large amounts of money in a very liquid form ... and the word Angel."

"Dangerous," Stone groaned. "How many anonymous calls have we had turn out to be grudge mischief?"

"And some turn out to be solid gold," Jarrat mused.

"Tactical," Janssen said bitterly, "tried to investigate. Unsubstantiated testimony won't hold up in a legal court anywhere." She paused and was hoarse as she went on, backing file footage of Leo Michiko at a public function in Thule. "I've lost four of my best people. I've got no more officers to risk. It's NARC business now, or it's nothing ... and if it's nothing, Aurora can have my resignation. Earlier today we buried Officer Patrice Carrera. He'd been missing for three days, since we infiltrated him into Michiko's business offices in Thule." The visual returned to wide shots of the funeral, with which the data package had begun. "Carrera turned up dead in a lousy, city bottom den called Ko Hsien, half the world away from Thule. He wasn't just overdosed on Angel, he was fucking *drenched* in it."

Jarrat thumbed the remote to turn off the holo, and the shimmering display dissipated like motes of metallic dust. "Enough, Stoney. We'll be there in three days." He took Stone's hand, laced their fingers. "Take what you can get, while you got the chance. Yes?"

"Yes." Stone was still frowning at the space where the vids had run. What he was thinking, Jarrat could not know, but the emotion churning through him was powerful, dark, turbulent as a river in flood. Jarrat tightened his grip on Stone's fingers till the blue eyes cleared. Stone seemed to return to the present with a small start, and forced a smile. "I always wanted to see Jesse Lawrence dance. Ever since that night on Skycity when we saw him in the courtyard with a bunch of other uptown Companions. Remember?"

"I remember." Jarrat was sure Stone's words had nothing to do with what he was thinking, but he was content to let Stone cover for the moment. "You ready to go, Vic?"

The colonel's voice issued from the bedroom. "Ready to get laid? I was born ready, Jarrat. Tell him, Stoney."

"He was?" Jarrat asked of Stone as they drifted toward the door, the private garage and the Rand Viper.

"Why ask me?" Stone demanded. "He was just my instructor at Tac school, and in those days he used to tell me, and I quote, I'd 'never amount to shit.' I didn't see him again till the Equinox bust. And as for shagging the instructors at Tac school —"

"You'd be bounced out on your ass," Cronin said glibly with a glance at Stone's butt. "No matter how cute it was. Vic, we're leaving!" And he disappeared into the garage before Duggan answered.

Stone managed a creditable chuckle, leaned over and landed a kiss off-center of Jarrat's mouth. "He's right. Gil's known a lot of guys who transferred over, Tac to NARC. A few landed in his unit ... Vic we're bloody leaving!" He had the keys in his hand.

"All right, Christ, where's your rush?" Duggan demanded, pulling on his jacket as he left the bedroom. His hair was still damp, his cheeks ruddy with

vodka and the quick shave. "So where's this nookie shop?"

Sensations was an uptown club. In city bottom the same establishment would have been called a den, and Tactical would have sent a patrol through every couple of hours, but in the Alvarez sector, in the foothills of the Caerleon Range, it was an elite club with a select clientele, and Tac kept a profile so low, they were invisible.

The top two floors of the Chubb-Carleton Building belonged to Sensations. A casino opened right off the skypark; the restaurant flanked the gaming tables, with two stages, and as they strode into the club a band was already performing on one podium, a conjurer on the other. The accommodations were one level down, and Sensations had a reputation: leather and lace, recreational 'treats' and VR visors, iced champagne and satin sheets. Companions, performers, steelrock or Mozart ... or peace and quiet, a bottle of wine, a soft bed and a cab home in the morning.

Deep in the club, beyond the glamor of the casino, lasers danced across the high, fluted ceiling. Gold and purple strobes winked in dim, smoky corners where half-seen bodies writhed in rhythm to the grinding bass of the steelrock. The deeper into Sensations one delved, the more familiar it became. Jarrat had visited many a city bottom den that felt, smelt, no different.

He studied Stone, watched the pageant of expression on his partner's face. Cronin had dropped behind, slid into a vacant place at a blackjack table, and Duggan already had a long drink in one hand, a house Companion of indeterminate gender in the other. In an hour he would be laid and spent, in two hours, comatose, and in the morning perhaps he could set aside the anger which consumed him.

The thud of the steelrock found its way into every bone in a man's body, thrummed in his marrow, vibrated in his pelvis. It was the subetheric track, Jarrat knew. The ears could not even hear it, but it worked its magic. He felt his nerves enliven after the stultifying session before the tribunal, felt the blood begin to pulse into every extremity. He moved closer to Stone as they made their way around the vast, threshing dance floor. Companions, performers and clients were entangled, indistinguishable, and the air was already thick with dream smoke.

Gold strobes scurried at foot level and lasers dueled just overhead, visible in the pall of mild narcotic smoke. Jarrat's ears had begun to buzz pleasantly when he heard a voice he knew. "Hey, Jarrat, is that you? Stoney!"

"Who in hell knows we're here?" Stone groaned, but when they turned toward the voice they saw Tim Kwei, and a quick smile replaced the grimace. "Tim, you look good ... considering."

In fact, Tim Kwei looked a little thin, a little pinched. The Angel was still in his system, making him feel under par, as if he were trying to throw off a virus. Harry would have given him vitamins, immune boosters, antioxidants, but the Angel toxin would have to cycle out in its own good time. He was in loose, flimsy oyster silk, a lot of platinum jewelry and the peasant sandals that were chic this year. He was tanned, as he had never been in the perpetual shadow of Zeus.

"I'm okay," Kwei told Stone as he gave his hand to Jarrat. "When did

you guys get in? Will you be here long? Jack had to work, he couldn't get here, but I know he'll want to catch up with you."

The young men came as a threesome: Jesse Lawrence, Tim Kwei and Jack Spiteri, three unlikely survivors of the Equinox bust.

"We got in late yesterday," Jarrat told him. "Dupre wants us on a courier tomorrow evening, but we have a day."

Kwei's eyes narrowed as the lasers lanced toward him. "You're back on assignment ... it's Thule, isn't it?"

"How did you guess?" Stone asked in arid tones.

"Didn't have to." Kwei nodded in the general direction of the NARC compound. "Jack's working for NARC now, doing what he does best. Project design. Dupre's had him modeling grav-resist structures in low temperatures and skinny air pressure. Doesn't take too many brain cells to work out where NARC's deploying next." He paused and rubbed his nose, which would have become a habit since he inhaled the Angel. His sinuses would have been blocked for days, irritated for days longer. "I just had an offer from your R&D office," he added. "Doctor McKinnen's team, in fact. Biocyber development."

"You?" Jarrat waved for a drink waiter and appropriated a glass of something pale blue and effervescent. "The last I heard, you were writing VR games."

"I was. I still am." Kwei's face darkened. "I'm the best in Venice, so it didn't take long for NARC to notice me, and they know as well as Randy Dorne did, game algorithms double as battlefield sim." His teeth worried at his lip. "I'm already kind of connected with NARC, so I probably look like a safe bet. I agreed to do the *thing* with Doc Del." He squeezed his eyes shut and shuddered animatedly. "If I go to work with McKinnen, they want me to develop battlefield models." He looked owlishly at Jarrat and Stone. "Skinny air pressure, low temperatures, grav-resist structures. If that's not Thule, Stoney, where is it?"

"It's Thule," Stone affirmed. "So where's Jesse?"

"Getting into costume. If you can call it a costume." Tim grinned widely. "He's doing a whole new routine, s'why I'm here tonight." He peered at his chrono in the weird half-light. "You want to watch? We have our own table. Have you eaten?"

The table was recessed into a deep alcove, away from the strobes and lasers but with a good view of the stage. A troupe was finishing as they looked over the menu. The five dancers were all part gymnast, part acrobat, with an odd routine, at once martial and seductive. Jarrat was impressed. Any of the performers and Companions here could have worked on Skycity. For Jesse Lawrence to be one of them was an accolade in a demanding business.

They had lost track of Cronin and Duggan, and were still waiting for dinner when the music changed gear. The subetherics deepened, the stage lighting dimmed and shifted to thick reds and golds. A heavy bass drumbeat set up a primitive rhythm, and Jarrat felt the sharp edge of Stone's intrigue as they turned toward the stage.

The 'costume' was mostly paint, so cleverly applied, it might have been tattooed. Jesse wore an eagle with widespread wings across his chest, raven

and wolf faces about his calves, serpents coiled about his thighs, eagle feathers draped artfully about his arms, all in paint which fluoresced in the odd lights, green, blue, mauve, the colors never the same for two consecutive seconds. The tiny posing pouch was chameleon skin, a rainbow of shifting, restless hues. It did more to accentuate than conceal. His hair was braided with strands of the same chameleon fiber, and eagle feathers. He might have been made of light and color, woven out of sheer imagination, inspired by dream smoke, animated by the hypnotic, barbarian cadence of the drums. There was no melody, no vocal, just a range of bass tomtoms which Jarrat suspected were synthetic. It would have taken at least three drummers to handle the instruments, and the precision was inhuman.

Not so the dancer, nor the dance. Jesse Lawrence was the consummate professional. Where his partners, Tim and Jack, worked in virtual worlds, manipulating algorithms, massaging supercomputers, Jesse worked in a realm of the senses, a world of energy, perception of every kind, and unabashed eroticism. While he danced, the crowd near the stage silenced, swiveled to watch. Tim Kwei could have taken out a patent on his smug look. Tonight Jesse was sinuous, sensuous. Lithe as a panther, wanton, half-savage, yet sophisticated as a geisha. The combination of contradictions was stunning. Jarrat had expected steelrock, bump-and-grind, but as soon as it began, he knew he was wrong.

Eyes on the performer, he let down his empath's shields to show Stone the naked heart of himself, and the wild freshet of Stone's emotions sparkled through him. Stone was hot, already powerfully turned on before Jarrat touched him, caressed him deep down, where the empath's neural channels reverberated. The touch was liquid fire and they both gasped. For a moment the stage and Jesse blurred. The dim corner of Sensations brightened, and Jarrat realized his eyes had dilated. His leg lay warmly against Stone's, and Stone's hand palmed the curve of his thigh.

The choreography was fluid, liquid, with an acrobatic finale. Jesse was rewarded with a patter of spontaneous applause. It was difficult to impress the clients who frequented clubs like Sensations, but Jesse Lawrence was among the elite of his kind.

A gold satin robe was tossed to him as he stepped out of the lights. He draped it about his shoulders and was still catching his breath as he retired to Kwei's table. Tim handed him a tall glass of water without ice, and he drank deeply. The last, most difficult part of the routine was anaerobic: he was fish-breathing for some moments, but he recovered so fast, Jarrat was impressed.

"They liked it." Jesse still had the accent of Avalon, Elysium, while Kwei was cultivating the sound of Darwin's world. He gave Jarrat a smile which did not diminish as his eyes passed on to Stone. "I didn't know you guys were in town."

"They're not," Kwei said wryly. "Just passing through on their way to ... points colder, dryer and a lot more dangerous." He chuckled and batted his eyelashes at Jarrat. "What? Did I come out and say it? It's classified, I know."

"The assignment'll be classified till we can't keep the carrier 'dark' any

longer,” Stone told Jesse, who wore a perplexed look. “The first time our gunships deploy and the Ravens jump into the street, you got nothing left to hide.”

“Right.” Jesse sat back. The robe slithered off his shoulders, leaving him tantalizingly close to naked, adorned with body art which, on closer inspection, showed astonishing detail. Jarrat leaned over to see in the half-light. Jesse arched his back, extended one long leg. “It takes two hours to get into costume, but it’s worth it.”

“Costume?” Stone angled an appreciative glance at the flimsy scrap of chameleon skin stretched over Jesse’s groin.

Jesse plucked an ice cube out of the water pitcher and flicked it at him. “You know what I mean. The paint. You like?”

“I like.” Stone smiled sidelong at Jarrat. “I always had a ... a taste for a bit of the exotic.”

“Like him?” Jesse set back, cradled a glass of some ruby-red liquid and cocked his head at Jarrat. “Now, there’s exotic.”

“Me?” Jarrat laughed aloud. “Don’t con me. I’m about as exotic as a Shekley city bottom kid can get. Or ‘Army trash,’ as they call it in the base towns.”

“Army trash? I don’t see that. I see ... cougar,” Jesse argued. “Kind of golden and still half-wild, with fangs, claws. Dangerous even when he sleeps.” He nodded at Stone. “Ask him. He knows what I mean.”

The flashfire of Stone’s feelings hit Jarrat like a physical blow. Stone pushed back his chair and was on his feet. “Oh, he knows,” he said, rich and dark as old wine. He extended one hand to Jarrat. “It’s our last night ground-side, together and on our own time.”

“Don’t waste it, Stoney,” Jesse advised, mock-solemnly. “Tim?”

“Here.” From his shirt pocket Kwei produced a key. “I booked 822 as usual. We’re going to have dinner, dance, drop a few bucks at the tables. Jack might get in.”

Stone caught the key as it was tossed to him. “Thanks. You want the room later?”

“*Much* later,” Jesse purred. “We might join you, or you might play a little roulette and watch the cabaret. Around midnight it gets *weird*.”

“We’ll do that,” Stone decided. “Kevin?” He dropped the key into Jarrat’s hand.

Sensation’s private lifts went down only one level. Beneath, through seven levels down to the street and four basement floors before the service sub-basements, the Chubb-Carleton Building was dominated by offices, apartments, retail malls. This was the zenith of uptown Venice. Jarrat and Stone saw this strata of Darwin’s society once in a year.

The lift was silent and opened onto a maze of halls, all marble, mirrors and artworks of other centuries, other worlds. Companions of both genders, and an option on a third, lounged in the amber light of mobile crystals which drifted where they were beckoned. Bare limbs and jewelry, rings and chains, shimmered. A raven head turned and kohl-eyes gazed at Jarrat. A slender boy with Eurasian features and dark bronze skin stood to display his wares. Jarrat

only smiled and passed on with Stone at his shoulder, the key in his palm, and his nervous system overloading with the inundation of Stone's desire.

822 was an oasis of blue-green quiet. The tub was sunken, the king-sized bed circular, the sheets ivory silk. The ceiling was set with discreet holoprojectors. Venice was a glittering light field beyond the bed; the windows were open and a night wind wandered the room.

"We're in the wrong business," Jarrat observed as he turned into Stone's arms. Lust burned, bright as a flame, reflected back and forth between them, and Jarrat shivered.

"I've been saying that for years." Stone laid his mouth on Jarrat's throat, over the heavy pulse, and when Jarrat would have spoken again he silenced the words adeptly with his tongue.

The wind was a caress, cool across Jarrat's back as Stone stripped him, artless, deliberate. He stretched in unspeakable luxury as Stone's hands roamed over him, restless, searching. The pressure of palms on his breast urged him backward, and he went down on the bed with a murmur of surprise. The holo projectors had come on automatically, casting a vista of wandering stars and hazy nebulae, against which Stone's beautiful face was lit in the room's soft blue-green.

Stoney had been hot since Jesse danced and the subetherics hit him where he was most vulnerable. He needed no encouragement. Jarrat had only to pluck at his shirt, slide a hand into the warmth beneath, seek out the hard-rucked pebbles of his nipples, and Stone was on him. In a moment he was half-bare, kicking away the gray slacks, and the thick, hot rod of him pressed like a sword hilt into Jarrat's belly.

"Slow down," Jarrat gasped as knees spread him wide.

"Why?" Big arms wound about Jarrat's smaller frame and almost lifted him. "We've got half the night."

He made a good point. Some still-lucid part of Jarrat's mind paused only for a moment to consider, then he surrendered to the fierce sensuality with a growl. They were wrestling, fingers leaving transient tattoos, teeth branding in the fleeting marks of ownership. The empathic shields which they had worked so long to perfect were abandoned, and Jarrat felt the cool blue aura of Stone's feelings engulf him.

His head arched back into the ivory silk pillows and a groan seemed to issue right from his balls. Stone had stopped to rest. Sweat gleamed in the azure light like a rime of frost along his arms. Jarrat's tongue lapped it up, savored the salt-sweetness. While Stoney unashamedly wallowed in the pure sensation of two bonded empaths, Jarrat used leverage to tumble him onto the bed.

A glass jar waited at the bedside, well within reach. Jarrat's fingertips discovered a cool, light gel with a faint scent of cedar. It made Stone whimper as it melted on delicate, blood-hot skin. Jarrat closed his fist about the lance of him, urging until Stone was about to beg or warn, but Jarrat did not need the words. The shared sensations blazed along his own nerves, set the pulse hammering in his ears.

He straddled the broader, stronger body, and dark blue eyes watched,

half-closed, as Jarrat lifted himself. Stoney was big in him, not hurting but challenging, and Jarrat rode him carefully until his body relaxed. Stone knew, and waited, feeling everything with him. He also knew the moment when Jarrat was done being careful and was ready to be wild, and then he began to move.

CHAPTER FOUR

From space Aurora looked like a sphere of blue-white ice, and from what Stone had learned of the colony, the impression did not get much warmer with proximity. The courier had dropped out of its hyperflight envelope just short of the Diego Chavez nav beacon. It cast off the hyperdrive module, identified itself to the deep space network as 'Starfleet CF4879,' and darted into the inbound traffic lanes. This time the pilots were on an immediate turn-around. No groundside furlough beckoned, so neither of them was in a hurry to slip into the Aurora geosynch zone. The *Persephone* idled in the company of many other craft.

But they were scanning on one specific frequency. As they acquired the NARC comm band — so densely encrypted, it seemed only gibberish to the casual receiver — the courier dropped out of the inbound lane, swung around the AuraTel comm platform, and vanished into a sensor blind.

The ECM curtain was thick as a bank of thunderheads. Secure behind it, the *Athena* was a shadow, immaterial, invisible to both the groundside radars and the deep space network. Even on the CRT before Jarrat, in the cramped cockpit of the courier, the carrier showed only as an area of vague discontinuity. It might have been a 'ghost' in the equipment.

The reality was a kilometer-long hull with bright sterntubes, a blunt nose and the spines of formidable sensor arrays. The *Athena* had been home, sanctuary, for a long time. Stone was glad to see it. The courier ran in fast, nudged under the flat belly, and his eyes narrowed in the wash of halogen floodlights as a hangar yawned open.

"Starfleet CF4879, this is Carrier Operations," Mischa Petrov's voice said from the comm at Stone's elbow. "Jarrat, Stone?"

"Here," Jarrat told him. "Glad to be back."

"Welcome home," Petrov said, not quite mocking.

With their return, Stone remembered, Petrov was back to directing the ops room. It was a step down from his tenure as the *Athena*'s acting captain. For three weeks, the ship had been running dark, data gathering, under his and Gene Cantrell's wings. But while Cantrell was a very senior officer only waiting for his new command, Petrov was still on his way up the NARC ladder. Itching, Stone knew, for promotion.

Ambition was a harsh taskmaster, but Petrov had served his time, paid his dues. He was due to be kicked up to captain. Right behind him was Curt Gable, who would become the ops room director, on his way to carrier command if he could run the course. Many young hopefuls did not. Many others won the promotion only to become statistics before they had proved themselves on assignment.

Stone was wondering about Janine Cruz, whose new partnership with Scott Auel was controversial. The agreement to take part in the project from which Harry Del had walked away was suicidal. What did Cruz have to prove? Stone wondered where she had screwed up the job, and how. Deep cover was difficult for any agent on the street, regardless of gender. There was no particular advantage in being male or female: assignments were tailored to the individual. Skill was what counted, though most assignments could become a sexual smorgasbord, whether one desired it or not.

"Penny for them," Jarrat said quietly as the *Persephone* rose into the halo of the lights and rotated to fit the docking cradle.

"They're not worth a penny," Stone told him.

"So what's bugging you?" Jarrat met his eyes levelly. "Don't try to con me, loverboy. I'm under your skin, remember?"

"Like I could forget." Stone paused to watch the wide half tocamac cradle swing out to take hold of the slender hull. "Janine Cruz."

"Leave it to Dupre," Jarrat advised. "Right now ..." A deep, steely chime rang through the whole airframe. "Right now, we've got enough to worry about." He laid a hand on Stone's shoulder to urge him back out of the cockpit, and into the chill, cramped body of the courier.

Harry Del and Gil Cronin were pulling their bags out of storage. Del at least looked eager to get to work. Before the *Persephone* left Darwin's, he had messaged both his family and the household of Senator Cassius Brand, and Brand was waiting for him. Cronin was merely stoical, indifferent. Thule was just another assignment, one more city, one more Angelpack. A potential battlefield where he might lose friends and make enemies. Perhaps lose his own life.

The same bleak feelings assaulted Stone as the courier's hatches opened. Jarrat was frowning at him, fully aware of what he was feeling if not thinking. Stone was not about to say a word. Risk was part of the job. Like every other soul aboard this ship, he had embraced it the day he transferred to NARC and applied for carrier assignment. There was no place for misgivings.

Gene Cantrell's face was the first he saw as he and Jarrat stepped through the hatch into the gull-gray lounge, with its gaudy unit badges and the bright CRTs displaying flight schedules and the carrier's status. Cantrell offered his hand, and Stone clasped it. "I saw the Oromon report," the older man said by way of greeting. "Doctor Del ... Harry, welcome to Aurora. How was the flight?"

"Just don't ask me to go back on a courier." Del took Cantrell's hand for a moment. "How are you, Gene?"

"It's been peaceful until this moment! With the rankers aboard we'll have people in the field soon, and you know what that means. Doubtlessly I shall

survive,” Cantrell added, mocking himself. He studied Jarrat and Stone with a faint frown. “You did damned fine work on Oromon. Even if Starfleet is squealing about it.”

“Squealing?” Jarrat echoed as he too clasped Cantrell’s hand. He appropriated a trolley and dumped his bag. “What the hell about?”

“Apparently we under-briefed them.” Cantrell wore a pained face, but he also shrugged. “They went into Oromon expecting a pushover, and they got a standup fight.”

“They had the same goddamned briefing we all had!” Jarrat’s temper had shortened during the long flight in cramped conditions. Stone was intimately aware of it. Kevin wanted a shower, a decent meal, a few hours’ sleep and a chance to review the carrier’s routine business, play catch-up, before he and Stone had to get back in the responsibility seat. All ten fingers dragged backwards through the unruly, tawny hair and massaged the tension from his scalp. “We were all under-briefed,” he said tersely. “We ran with what we had, while we had any chance at all to bust the Oromon facility. If we’d spun our wheels, waiting for better Intel, we’d have bounced the rubble on a bloody empty building!”

“Starfleet doesn’t like the way we do business?” The voice belonged to Gil Cronin. He had just stepped out of the courier’s hatch, carrying his own bag and Del’s. Harry was grim-faced as his empathic channels buzzed with the annoyance of others. Cronin had joined them in time to get the gist of what Jarrat had said. “Starfleet,” he growled, “can go screw itself.” He gave Cantrell a nod of greeting. “Cap Cantrell.” Del had beckoned a trolley closer, and the Blue Raven dumped the bags down hard enough to rock it on its light repulsion cushion. “I saw the assignment report on the way over, Cap. It was a clean bust: right in, right out. A few fireworks along the way for fun. What Starfleet wanted was some fucking surgical strike from orbit, so they didn’t have to work up an honest sweat.”

He was right, and Cantrell appreciated the straight talking. “That was my impression, Gil. 903 Intercept Squadron took two casualties. No one died, but a couple of VM 104s were blown away, and the squadron, ‘Bad Company,’ are turning in a lousy report on the aircraft. I’d appreciate your perspective, Kevin, Stoney.”

Stone shared a glance with his partner. “There’s nothing wrong with the aircraft. It performed just fine. Kevin and I were jumped as well, you know. In fact, he was shot down. If you saw the report, you know he took out a construction tractor. Who filed the protest? It wouldn’t be a butt-head, name of Jack Brogan, would it?”

“As a matter of fact, it would,” Cantrell said acerbically. “What’s this about, Stoney, some bad blood between the three of you?” His eyes moved on to Jarrat.

“Of a kind,” Stone allowed. “Ol’ Jack would like to knock Kevin on his ass, for no good reason, and ...” He chuckled. “I *did* knock Jack flat on his can one day, a long time ago.” Cantrell’s brows were going up. “Just old fashioned college buck angst, Gene. The type of rivalry that jumps up and bites you ten or fifteen years later.”

"I see." Cantrell turned away toward the elevators. "Personalities getting in the way of professional performance."

Jarrat thumbed for the lift. "Brogan," he said darkly, "has no love for NARC. Which has to make you wonder, when he's riding the short end of his Starfleet career and the next rung up the ladder is politics." He gave Stone a brash grin. "He probably hates our guts because we put him out there in harm's way, getting shot at with live ammo, when he's got maybe twelve months left before retirement."

"Ouch." Stone stepped into the lift ahead of Jarrat and Cantrell. Harry had stopped to check a flight schedule board, but Stone called back to him, "There won't be any scheduled flights between the carrier and Thule while we're running dark."

"We'll shuttle you down," Jarrat offered. "Stoney and I have to make the Thule run anyway. Colonel Janssen is getting impatient."

"It's six months," Cantrell said thoughtfully.

"Six —?" Del was searching for his wallet and had lost the gist of the erratic conversation. He stepped into the lift and made space for the trolley to follow. Cronin had been waylaid by a group of Blue Ravens, and made negative gestures: he would follow later.

The lift closed over and Stone said slowly, "Six months before Jack Brogan retires as a full colonel, squadron leader, with battle honors. Damn, I'd lost track of the time. It's the end of the routine twelve-year hitch." He lifted both brows at Jarrat. "After college I went to Tactical and he went right into Starfleet. Squadron command is as high as he could go in the field."

"Another reason he has no love for you and Kevin," Harry guessed. "You're in command of a carrier yet you fly every assignment God sends, and you have space to grow, years to grow in. Brogan's reached the end of his rope."

"So tell him to transfer to NARC," Jarrat suggested.

But Cantrell looked doubtful. "He'd go from being top of the heap in one service to a rookie in the other. Unless he'd come over to NARC as a pilot, pure and simple. And there's not much glory in that. Ask Curt Gable! When I heard Brogan's bitching I ran his file. From what I saw, he wouldn't, *couldn't*, accept a rookie year with us. And without that year, you can forget carrier command. Not too many skills he'll have learned in an intercept squadron are transferable to the street."

The lift opened onto a long-familiar deck. The ops room was on standby to their left and they heard the background buzz of the comm loop. Engineers, pilots, descant troops on routine exercises, were crosstalking on the air. A bank of CRTs displayed a labyrinth of data from Aurora, from the carrier itself, and from a gunship about to launch. The Green Ravens were testing weapons systems, engines. Thule still did not suspect NARC's presence. Stone was content to keep it that way.

In the ops room, apparently chain smoking, was Mischa Petrov. The Russian's thick features first grimaced as he saw Jarrat and Stone in the passage beyond the wide, open doors, then he allowed a smile. Ambition drove him, as Stone had always been aware, and Petrov would get his chance. Scott

Auel was younger, but the man had more intrinsic talent, and Petrov knew it. Auel's chance had come in the partnership with Janine Cruz, while Petrov continued to wait. But Stone had to wonder how long Auel and Cruz would last, and if they would even survive the project Harry Del had protested.

"You want to call Brand, Harry?" Jarrat was asking as the lift closed over and Cantrell strolled on, into the ops room. "Call from here. Let him think you're at Thule Field, the spaceport, and you have your own transport into the city. Set up a place to meet. We'll drop you there."

"Thanks." Del gestured at the trolley. "I guess I won't be here long enough to unpack."

Stone dropped a hand on the healer's shoulder. "Get the job done, relax later. Dupre gave you a NARC-band R/T?"

With a slightly pained expression, Del thrust a hand into one breast pocket of the usual loud shirt and produced a gold-cased cigarette lighter. "I told Bill, I don't smoke. I said, won't it look odd if a guy who doesn't smoke carries a lighter?"

"The cover story is," Jarrat said with desert-dry humor, "it's a lucky piece like a rabbit's foot. You won't leave home without it."

"So he told me." Del flicked the top of the lighter and produced a steady yellow flame. Then he flicked the bottom and produced the triple antennae of a powerful high-band R/T.

"Keep in touch, Harry," Stone told him. "You're not likely to have access to top-line lab facilities at Cass Brand's place."

"And aside from Janssen," Jarrat added, "you should be the only one on Aurora who knows we're here. You need something, you call."

Del looked perplexed. "Bill Dupre gave you authorization for this? I was so pissed at the R&D project, I practically took my agreement with NARC, tore it to shreds and threw it in his face."

"Dupre would approve." Stone was thinking about the long, invisible strings attached to Del, and was a little surprised the empath had not yet detected them. "Besides, the *Athena's* under our command." He gave Jarrat a crooked smile. "Any authorization gets issued right here. Darwin's is two days away by goddamned courier, and Earth Central is almost two weeks further into the home colonies. We don't have time to wait for permission to go out and play."

At last Harry chuckled. "Okay, I'll give Brand a call. I have his private line, so I'll at least get a personal secretary or the office AI if not the man himself. You're going down to Thule?"

Gene Cantrell had been listening in on the comm bands, giving Petrov a break. As the Russian poured coffee, Cantrell leaned toward Jarrat and Stone. "You're going down to Thule right now," he said in a terse voice which reflected his face's angry lines. "Colonel Janssen knows you just got in. There's a message for you, Jarrat, Stone, and a meet's already been set up." His dark eyes glittered with anger. "Sweet Christ, how does Janssen know the courier brought you in?"

"She has a source in Starfleet," Stone guessed. "Somebody reported in ... Tactical sure as hell can't see us here."

"Star-bloody-fleet," Cantrell muttered. He fixed Stone with a glare. "Nip *that* in the bud, soon as you nail Janssen down."

"Her source may be legit," Jarrat mused. "Intelligence."

"Legit or not, smother it." Cantrell gestured at the comm officer's workstation. "You want to take the call? It came in on level five encryption, and at least they had the sense to bounce it off every satellite at geosynch. Jesus! Tactical." Then he gave Stone an apologetic look. "Sorry, Stoney. I know you have a lot of respect for your old mob."

"I respect them, but there are times I don't like them," Stone admitted. "And yes, we'll take the call. Have someone dump our bags, will you." He lifted a brow at Jarrat. "Home again, home again."

A Tactical AI was on passive monitoring, and as Jarrat accepted the call Janssen was priority paged. She might have been waiting. The tradeoff for high levels of encryption was signal degradation, and the video component was badly broken up. Stone pieced together the impression of a mature face with gunmetal hair, framed in the CRT. The voice he knew already from the audio track of the supplementary dossier: the funeral of Officer Patrice Carrera, who died in a rancid city bottom Angel den on the other side of the world.

"Captain Jarrat, Captain Stone, welcome to Aurora. I hope your courier flight was not too uncomfortable. I've piggybacked a data package on this transmission. Are you getting it?"

Stone's lips compressed. He looked up at Cantrell and Petrov, who were glaring at the same image on a comm relay terminal in the dim bay by the coffee machine. "Mischa?"

"Receiving," Petrov growled.

"It's coming in," Stone told the colonel. "What's Tactical's status?"

The video track dissolved into blocks of color and danced off the side of the screen. Janssen's voice continued without pause. "I have eight squads active on the street, Captain Stone. We've deployed five times in the last ninety-six hours."

"Packwar?" Jarrat asked sharply.

The pickup stabilized for a moment. Janssen's eyes shifted to Jarrat and her frown deepened as she studied an image on her CRT that would be no better than theirs. "Street war, at least. There's no Angel component in it yet, that we can demonstrate."

"Yet?" Stone's ears pricked. He and Jarrat shared a grim glance. "You're trying to prove an Angel connection, but you've got a street war rolling already?"

Colored blocks replaced her face, and a moment later the vid component of the transmission shut off altogether. Streaming data replaced Janssen's face while her voice went on, "It's been rolling since before you shipped out of Darwin's, Captain." The subtext was icily clear in the words: *you should have been here sooner*.

For the moment Stone chose to ignore it. "Your street war is no concern of NARC's, Colonel. Your Angel dossier is our business, and we already ran it. Our own investigation is about to launch, and all we need from you is

additional data, bringing us up to speed since the dispatch covering Carrera's funeral."

"Then run the package I piggybacked on this," Janssen said tartly. "We need to meet, Stone. Face to fucking face. There's more ... and I wouldn't trust it to level *nine* encryption. You want me to come up to the carrier?"

"Hold," Jarrat said in a curt tone. He leaned over and touched a toggle to mute the audio pickup. "Harry?"

Del had been speaking in rapid undertones, four meters along the ops room, on the other side of a large-scale vid-grid map of Thule. The city was a blend of the linear and the organic, and without a threedee coordinate, made little sense. Because of the harsh climate, the original Thule had been an underground — the home of the pioneering 'first families' who now lived in the glorious grav-resist spheres, floating like soap bubbles over the tangle of the middle-aged, ground-level city. The underground was still thriving, but it had become Thule's city bottom, and Stone could imagine the baffling, inaccessible warren Janssen was trying to deal with. The Tactical combat pilot buried deep inside himself shuddered.

"You got a meet, Harry?" Jarrat was asking.

"How about 14:00, Thule time? That's four in the pm on Aurora," Del mused. "It's a twenty-hour day here."

And the current time in Thule was 11:20. Early afternoon, according to the digits ticking over in the corner of the vid-grid map. "Can do, Harry. Hold on," Jarrat told him. "Stoney?"

"We'll be there, 15:00, your time," Stone said to the audio pickup. Video had dropped out completely, but Janssen's datafiles were flagged as received and unencrypted, ready to roll.

"It's a date," Janssen said, with the brittle consonants and swallowed vowels of the local accent, and cut out of the comm loop.

A chair rumbled over the deck plates as Jarrat drew it closer. "Get me a coffee, will you, Mischa? I want to see Janssen's data."

As the Russian swiped up two empty mugs in each thick hand, Harry withdrew to the door. "I want to grab a shower, something to eat, some fresh clothes."

"Use our cabins," Stone invited. "You know the way?"

"I'll find them," Del said ruefully. "I recorded Brand's call. It was ... interesting. You might want to watch it."

Jarrat angled a glance at him, but made no comment. The Tactical data had begun to run, and Stone was engrossed in the scenes from Thule. The city was scarred already. The street army was shooting, and they were obviously well armed. A number of ground-level buildings in the Kansai sector were burned out to black shells; a public skypark was closed, yawning dangerously, awaiting demolition. The old city hall building was so perforated by grenades, though it was still standing, it had been evacuated. This was the damage exacted in one battle, and Kansai had been specifically targeted.

The location made sense, Stone thought cynically. The street army wouldn't choose to fight in the warren of city bottom, where their own lair would take the beating, and it was a safe bet Tactical would mobilize to the

limits of its capacity to keep the war out of Thule's uptown sectors, where the floating crystal spheres were outrageously delicate. So the street army picked its place of engagement, and Tactical had no option but to take the bait.

"Who the hell is fighting?" Jarrat murmured as they reviewed the video, the casualty stats, the damage assessment in both credits and colonial dollars. "If it's not the Angel pack, the syndicate, who is it?" He ignored the video track for the moment and rummaged deeper into the data, pulling up comm eavesdropping, phone taps, tipoffs.

Hard data was thin. Public allegation in the blizzard of newsvids was probably dead accurate, but *proof* was something else. A series of subtexts hived off the main datastream, and Jarrat delved into them. First, an overview of battlefield telemetry, and the analysts' best assessment of the weapons 'wild' in the city. At this point, Janssen had no clue as to where the street army was getting its weapons, but a brief list of the most likely sources was appended, in both the Aurora system and as far afield as Rethan. And the abandoned colony of Oromon.

Which added up to smugglers, working out of the ruins of the corporate war, and they were a law unto themselves. Jarrat and Stone shared a hard look over the CRT, and Stone pushed back his seat to stretch limbs that were still cramped after the days aboard the courier. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Maybe." Jarrat frowned at the screen, where columns of data streamed endlessly. "The civvy army *looks* like the Angel pack on the rampage, but they've buried themselves deep in other elements. You've got a real, genuine shooting war, and if Janssen has no idea where the weapons are coming from, even if you're *not* looking at Angel shipping out of Oromon, you're looking at weapons smuggling instead."

"And you might have been looking at Angel smuggling a week ago," Stone mused. "Aurora's source was probably the Oromon facility. Makes a degree of sense to smuggle your weapons right along with your Angel. Run the official gantlet *once*, so long as you're sure you can beat it."

"Right." Jarrat's fingertips drummed a rhythm on the bright face of the monitor. "Oromon. Christ knows, if they're packing Avenger and Paladin missiles ... Steyr, Colt, HK, the works ... 'hot' weapons should be easy enough to track back to a major munitions hijack. Remember Vincent Morello. Janssen would have tried to trace the source locally. If it's not on Aurora, I'd sure as hell be looking at Oromon. It's your safe bet. After we were done, Rethan security was tight as a drum."

"You want to call Pete Stacy's office?" Stone wondered. "Get a report from Vincent Morello and Black Mountain Engineers. Be sure."

"Yeah ... I also want to lock down Oromon," Jarrat pushed the chair back and stood. "I'd have Dupre send a NARC squad there, but with the Equinox component trouble we're spread too thin on the ground right now." He paused. "Do we know where the *Olympic* is?" He looked up over Stone's head at Cantrell and Petrov, who had been watching the data on another CRT.

Petrov clattered down his mug and pulled on a headset. "I can find out."

He angled a frown at Jarrat and Stone. "You want to see if we can get the carrier on station at Oromon?"

But after a moment Stone made negative noises. "Overkill. A squadron transporter should cover it. I'd like to have them pop up a bunch of satellites, get the whole planet under comprehensive surveillance, see what's moving ... and shut it down." He gave Jarrat a grim smile. "That is, if they don't mind working up a sweat."

"The NARC observer squad that located the Oromon Angel lab," Jarrat mused, "didn't pinpoint a weapons smuggling operation."

"Doesn't mean it's not there." Cantrell leaned one elbow on the hood of the CRT. "We're not talking about a street storefront. One subbasement would do it, five levels under Montevideo, stocked by a freighter from the far side of the frontier, a year ago."

"Then the weapons go out side by side with the Angel," Stone agreed, "aboard the same couriers. Small ships coming and going is exactly what our observers saw."

"The Angel lab's certainly closed for business since your flying visit," Cantrell added, "but I doubt we touched the arms bazaar. It doesn't make sense to keep the two in the same location, for obvious reasons."

"Too many eggs in one basket." Jarrat drained his mug to the dregs and set it down. "I'll buy it, Gene. So let's get some surveillance on Oromon. Mischa?"

"The *Olympic's* coming here, to Aurora," Petrov informed him, "and I can't say I'm surprised. You probably noticed, this colony's in a tough position: they're up to their balls in money, buried in the Cygnus Colonies on the way to the frontier, which was always a great place to get rich ... and they had enough homegrown problems to give Tactical a hernia even before Angel got in here."

"Speaking of which, exactly when *did* Angel get into Thule?" Stone leaned over and rummaged through Janssen's data. "The NARC dossier dated it for the colony as a whole. I'm just interested in Thule right now ..." And there it was. Thule's real Angel trouble went back twenty-five years, though the drug had always been circulating in the gaudy, smoky shadows of city bottom.

"So what happened twenty-five years ago," Jarrat wondered, "to warm up the Angel market?" He stroked his jaw thoughtfully, intent on the scrolling data. "What gave Thule the push over the line?"

"Ask Janssen." Stone turned his back on the CRT. "We don't have time to take Avalon Social History 101. Kevin?"

"Right. Message the *Olympic*, Mischa. Get a squadron transport on standby at Oromon ... popups, the lot, like Stoney said. When's the carrier due? And who routed them here?"

"Tomorrow, pm, Thule time," Petrov said dryly, "and as for who routed them — bug Janssen about it. We've been data-gathering for two weeks but all I can tell you is, they've got at least *four* factions that, between 'em, are starting to make hamburger of the city. And uptown Thule is not a town you want to be putting through a meat grinder."

At that moment Stone was looking at a wide shot of the gorgeous grav-

assist spheres, afloat like frosted bubbles in the blue arctic air of Aurora. If a street war, much less an Angel packwar, erupted amid the architectural phantasm the result would go far beyond carnage. And the four factions at war in Thule knew it.

Tactical and the colonial militia were ranged on one side, and on the other were at least two civvy factions. According to the newsvids — and they must get their information somewhere, Stone allowed — the front lines of the street battles were driven by the People of Aurora Coalition, but PAC spokesmen swore they were purely political, with no connection to any militant group. The burden of proof lay on Janssen's shoulders, and she was still working on it.

And beneath the surface veneer, like a great lizard drowsing in murky water, was a second faction, only hinted-at by the data. The weapons were the same but the targets were different; the comm hardware was identical, but the frequencies were higher and the encryption much more complex. Militant PAC comm signals were brief and lightweight squirts; the others were dense, massive. Terabytes of data were transferred at one time. Receiving points vanished before Tac could land a squad on top of them. Other signals, far above the PAC frequencies, were bounced off DeepNet 17, the comm platform at geosynch, and a millisecond later were lost in the morass of the civvy tachyon band, where a single hyperspace signal was so difficult to pluck from the billions of others, no city Tac had the resources to even attempt the task.

NARC did.

Jarrat and Stone were moving as Janssen's files closed down. "You want a ride?" Petrov offered. "Gable's your standby pilot."

"I'll prep the Apogee," Jarrat decided, one brow raised at Stone, who nodded. "We'll have Harry with us ... and we don't want to attract attention to our presence here. Not yet."

"Then, I'll let Doc Del know." Petrov paused to listen to the loop and added, "You're going in blind, so your callsign will be Wildcard 505. I'll crank up the ops room to monitor you, Jarrat, Stone. You want a ringside seat at Janssen's event?"

"Tac just deployed?" Stone guessed.

The Russian was listening intently to the comm. "Kansai sector again. If it was up to me, I'd launch a freakin' gunship, not the Apogee! Watch your asses. Tac's a target. Link up with them, and you turn yourselves into targets right alongside 'em." He gave the carrier's ranking officers a hard look. "Tac Command is the top of the tallest building in Kansai. A blind man could pick it out of the cityscape."

Which issued an invitation to any civvy shooter to test his aim. "Thanks," Jarrat said darkly, and followed Stone out of the ops room.

As they left, Cantrell was talking to the *Olympic*. The Starfleet carrier was close enough to Aurora to permit realtime comm on the tachyon band, and they heard the squadron transport assignment before they entered the lift, headed for the hangar deck.

CHAPTER FIVE

For four decades the robot terraformers had labored over Aurora, and the result was a habitable globe, well within acceptable parameters for a human population, but far from conditions Stone would have optioned. Aurora was cold. It was always going to be cold. It was on the outside envelope of the band in which a hard-surface planet could orbit, and support an atmosphere. The core was mostly iron, superheavy, giving the world almost Earth-normal gravity, but the globe was not much larger than Mars. And not much warmer.

The atmosphere had been pumped in during the first five years of terraforming. Massive water-ice asteroids were pitched into the small existing oceans. The liberated gases were captured by Aurora's gravity, and while the inundations settled down a chain of live volcanoes in the equatorial ocean were stimulated. Twenty-two eruptions in five years helped to thicken the atmosphere and start a greenhouse effect, which for five more years warmed the surface. Robot airships the size of planetoids, little more than semi-aware funnels, pumped and cycled the atmosphere to scrub out toxic gases, and twenty years after terraforming began, with Aurora's glaciers in retreat and the surface temperature holding firm at an average 3 C, wide scale planting began.

Spruce, fir and pine forests sprang up across the northern hills and Icelandic grasses colonized the plains, all genetically redesigned for vastly accelerated growth. With five years left before the first human foot would be set on Aurora, the city building began in the warmest zones on the equator, and animal species were introduced.

The sleeper fleet departed the homeworlds with a human cargo in cryogen, colonists drawn from the lands which circled the Earth's Arctic Ocean. Two centuries later, the map of Aurora still reflected the pioneer heritage. Trondheim sector nestled against Rasmussen, and the Thule skyline was dominated by the Sverdlovsk and Oslo and Valdez Buildings.

Earthlike worlds, and worlds with the capacity to be rebuilt, were comparatively rare. Location was more important than surface conditions, and Aurora was prime celestial real estate. It straddled the direct route from Darwin's, through the Cygnus Colonies to the mines on the frontier, and beyond.

The ice-blue globe expanded fast before the darkened canopy of the Yamazake Apogee. Stone had already called Thule Field, identifying as Wild-card 505 and informing Thule Control that he was not headed for the spaceport, and did not need landing advice.

In the back, Harry Del was a silent passenger, perhaps eavesdropping on the tension which flared between the two younger men, or watching the hyp-

notic display as Aurora morphed from a sphere in space to a landscape below. Or perhaps he was haunted by memories of the last time he had been a passenger in the Apogee. The same ghosts troubled Stone for some moments as the plane bucked through a repulsion-cushioned reentry and turned its nose toward Thule.

"What bothers you, Stoney?" Jarrat's voice was quiet.

"Nothing," Stone said more or less honestly. "I was just thinking about the night we shot it out with that little snot, Assante."

"Little snot," Jarrat echoed. "The bastard was almost good enough to take me, there and at Skinny Dick's, outside Ballyntyre."

"Almost," Stone said levelly, "was never good enough in anybody's league. Life ain't a game of horseshoes, kiddo ... I'm reading Thule Tac. Voice comm, telemetry, acquisition beams, the works. Time?"

"We're early for Harry's meet," Jarrat judged. Del was headed for Hiro-saki Park, the restaurant at the tropical house, where he would shake the hand of Senator Cassius Brand and vanish into the increasingly dangerous chaos of Thule.

Most of the city brooded under a high haze. A light snow was falling in the west, where clouds were banked like mountain ranges. Ground temperature was five below, with a cruel wind chill, and Stone might have assumed this was the dead of winter. He knew better. It was early summer, and a tolerably pleasant day for Thule.

The Tac frequencies were blistering with callsigns, warnings, desperate pleas for help. Jarrat glanced at Stone's intent profile as the Apogee leveled out and he threaded into the air traffic lanes high over the city. "You want to go take a look at Janssen's war?"

"A careful look." Stone dropped down through the east-west lanes and fed into the southbound traffic, a hundred meters below. He engaged the Apogee's sensors and scanners, which were far in excess of anything the civvy version of this aircraft possessed, and on a whim he armed the weapons.

Not nearly enough weapons, he thought, nor enough armor to be significant if they got too close to Janssen's battlefield. Kansai was expanding below, and even from this distance they could see both the damage, and the current conflict. Tac had deployed in the malls and thoroughfares around the Valdez Commerce Center. Flyers were in the air, whining like angry gnats between the towering structures, and missile flaretails chased up at them, and at the buildings themselves. Tac HQ was no more than three k's away, northwest.

Air traffic was being routed around Kansai, right into Rasmussen. Stone braked down on repulsion and dropped out of the lanes. He gave away a lot of altitude, and as he began to ride the contours of the city's skyline Harry leaned forward between him and Jarrat.

"What the hell are you doing? They're shooting down there!"

"Not shooting our way, Harry. Relax," Jarrat told him. "We know where Tac's deployed, and they'll be drawing the majority of the fire."

"The majority of it?" Harry's voice rose. "What about the rest?"

With one fingertip Stone indicated a glowing red structure on the vid-

grid, on the CRT before him. "There's the Tac building. If they're going to take a potshot at anything that's not shooting back, you can put your money on the target."

"Shit," Harry swore softly. "It's the Angelpack, is it?" He was watching long-range video as Stone wove and danced around the buildings, using them as cover while he stole glimpses of the battle zone.

"We don't know yet," Jarrat admitted. "Colonel Janssen has some critical data ... the Angelpack and the People of Aurora Coalition could be one and the same, or two different animals, one using the other, or even unaware of each other. Christ!" His voice sharpened as the CRT burned out with a sudden magnesium-bright flare.

It was a Tac flyer, tearing itself into a million shards of windmilling shrapnel, and Stone's throat tightened. In the weeks before he had made the transfer over to NARC, he might easily have been flying just such an aircraft. The skies of London and Chicago, Paris, Barcelona, were seldom so violent, so angry, but Stone had flown missions where return was far from certain. Covert Tactical assignments, even on Mars itself, where an aircraft was shot out from under him and it was over a week before he could reach a safe pickup point, and dared call out.

A column of gray-purple smoke shot directly up from the well of Zabriski Mall, and Jarrat was tracking it the instant it appeared. "Watch yourself, Stoney. It's a popup video drone ... deploying at three hundred meters. They can see us, and we probably look like a Tac battlefield observer. Inviting. Delicious," he added tersely, "if you were a civvy shooter with a grenade launcher over your shoulder."

"Time," Stone decided, "to get the hell out. We've seen enough. There's a lot of very pissed off civvies in this town." He jinked the Apogee around the Chevrolet-Meyer Building, pointed its nose toward the Rasmussen sector, Hirosaki Park, and nudged the throttles forward a notch.

Like all Yamazake airframes, the Apogee answered fast. As they raced out of Kansai, Jarrat was monitoring the aft scan platform and an edge sharpened his voice. "Stand on it, Stoney: missile away. One track, locked on our exhaust."

"What's it ID as?" Stone lifted the nose ten degrees and threw the throttles wide. "Maverick, Avenger?"

"Nope. Too slow, too dumb," Jarrat guessed. "Harry, are you strapped down? Run the harness up tight and put the helmet on."

"What the hell is going on?" Del demanded.

"Helmet, right now!" Jarrat barked, and as he spoke he was reaching into the compartment under the seat, pulling out his own and Stone's helmets.

"I'm doing it, goddamn it!" Del was out of his depth, as surely as he had been the last time he rode as a passenger in this Apogee.

The same images taunted Stone: Kinnon Hill Road in the highlands above Ballyntyre and Chandler. A robot logging site clear-cutting the tropical forest ... comm pylons, aerals and lightning conductors crowning Mount Madison and its rural airfield, with the skeletal gantries and the run-down fueling complex. Stone knew exactly what the Apogee had to give, and she

did not belong in an air combat zone. He had begun to view this detour as rash when Jarrat growled,

"Jesus Christ, the missile reads as a Paladin." His voice was thin and raspy over the helmet audio. "The stupid sods."

Harry had jacked into the loop. "We can outrun it, can't we?" The G-force of acceleration was pressing him hard into the seat.

"Sure," Stone said bitterly. "That's the problem. It's so slow, we can easily outrun it, and so dumb, as soon as it gets a fuel-out, it'll fall in the city." Behind the faceless visor he glared at the CRT. "We're losing it right now. You got the down-arc, Kevin?"

The plot had just come up. "It'll hit on the sector line where Kansai meets Rasmussen. I'm reading a light industrial zone ... looks like factories, warehousing. Could be worse."

"Could be residential," Stone muttered. Then, "Tac 101, this is Wildcard." The mobile command position was a heavy aircraft riding repulsion a thousand meters over Zabrisky Mall. I am a Yamazake Apogee, outbound over your battle zone. I have picked up a ..." He hesitated. They were masquerading as a civvy bus, and no such Apogee would be running a sensor platform good enough to tell a Paladin from any other brand of missile. "I've picked up somebody's rocket, right on my tail," he said quickly. "I've got the legs to get away from it, but you should be tracking it."

"Roger that, Wildcard." A woman's voice, frayed around the edges with stress, or fear. "Get out of the zone. What the hell were you doing, airborne in Kansai? Sightseeing?"

"Ticket me," Stone said acidly. "You got a missile to worry about, lady. Get busy, while you can give a two-minute warning."

"Damn it, who is this? Identify your—"

He switched up from the Tactical band, and as he rejoined the NARC radio traffic Petrov was shouting, "Jarrat! You're under fire!"

"A missile out of Tac's little war," Jarrat told him, terse, harsh, as he watched the Paladin hit the fuel-out point and begin its descent, right into the heart of the city. "It's just rubbish, Petrov, but it's going to hit hard. You reading the impact coordinates? Monitor them ... and monitor Tactical while you're doing it. See how well they perform in the field. We already lost the missile. We're headed for Hirosaki Park. Get back to me, Mischa. Wildcard out."

Stone divided his attention between the Apogee and the scene on the sector line. He had no visual, but the Tactical radio traffic was furious. A flyer was bellowing a warning at rooftop level, promising two minutes of clear air before the impact. Civilians in the zone were on their own, but most had access to some kind of nuke bunker, or at least a hardened structure. In any city with a dense population and a spaceport, they were mandatory.

Under the one minute warning, the Tac flyer pulled out. Fire Control was already on the way in, four heavy lifters, bright yellow with blue and red chevrons, as visually obnoxious as they were earsplitting. Stone braked down and held position, two clicks out. The Apogee rotated on repulsion. Cameras were running as the missile plowed in.

A fireball rolled out over the rooftops of warehouses and factories. Secondary explosions rolled over Kansai and Rasmussen like thunderclaps, and somewhere a tank ruptured. "They've got a 'blevee'," Stone whispered to the audio recorders. "It's getting nasty."

The boiling-liquid-expanding-vapor explosion billowed out and up, an unhappy marriage between napalm and plasma. Two of the Fire Control heavy lifters were enveloped by the cloud, but they were designed and built to take the punishment. They were dumping retardant in a crimson sandstorm before the boiling gas hit them, and the dump did not pause, though the 'blevee' caught the retardant and flung it into wild, surreal convection patterns.

"Shoot," Jarrat whispered, "will you take a look at that. Cameras, Stoney?"

"Running." Stone checked the view angle. "If Tac needs the kind of hard-evidence testimony we needed in Elysium, we've got it."

"I doubt they'll need it." Jarrat paused to watch the Fire Control craft dousing spot-fires. "This city's at war with itself, mate."

"What worries me," Stone said thoughtfully, "is how easy it would be to get caught in the crossfire."

The Apogee turned its nose toward the broad, frost-green area of Hiro-saki Park, and he shunted up the speed to the limit of civilian constraints. He did not thread back into the traffic lanes, but hopped rooftops until he saw the parking lot serving the restaurant. A vast blue neon sign proclaimed, The Jacaranda. The name meant nothing to Stone, but beside it was a graphic of a tree with improbable blue flowers. He spared it a glance as he dropped into the parking lot.

Jarrat had stowed the helmets while Del organized his bags. He was traveling light, as if he had no intention of lingering here. The Apogee's jets were still idling as the canopy whined up. Harry shouted into the storm of engine noise, but his words were blasted away. Then he was gone, hurrying through the striking cold of afternoon, toward the restaurant's fluted doorway, at the side of the tropical house.

Repulsion kicked the Rand gently upward. Stone locked down the canopy and rotated the aircraft to get an overview of the whole sector. Even from here, in mid-Rasmussen, the Tac Command building was visible, but it showed no battle scars yet. So the building had to be defended, Stone thought, because the Tac building would be one of the first casualties of any street war.

The sky was blue-gray, like molten silver, and snow was falling as the Apogee joined the crosstown traffic lanes. Jarrat divided his attention between the curiously beautiful cityscape and the ranging data. Clearance to approach was a long time coming, and Jarrat's temper was on a short leash when hangar space was offered at last. Stone nosed into a neon-bright cavern high in the Tac building. A beam beckoned him to a vacant space by the service elevators.

The jets shimmered with heat as the canopy rose, but ten paces away from them the hangar felt like a meat locker. Stone's skin prickled, his sinuses smarted. As he thumbed for the lift he reminded himself, this was summer in Thule.

One Tactical building was the same as any other. Thule Tac was similar in every important feature to Elysium, Chryse, London. He and Jarrat gave Kris Janssen's domain one cursory glance and deliberately ignored it. An officer, 75876/Malyashev, was waiting for them at reception, just inside the lift bay. She was a tiny blonde, with stringy hair, pumped-up muscles, callused knuckles, and a paranoid sense of suspicion. A hand scanner ran over the NARC men before Malyashev would show them to Janssen's office.

The room was the usual clutter of computers, printers, stacks of hardcopies, spent coffee cups. Nothing changed. Jarrat gave Stone an almost amused look, before Kris Janssen appeared out of the adjacent bathroom. The impression Stone had pieced together from the broken-up CRT image was not far from the truth: she was somewhere in her late middle years, as tall as Jarrat and not much under his weight, with gunmetal hair in a service crop. The uniform fit tightly, suggesting good muscles under porcelain skin. The eyes were sharp, pale, cold, some shade between blue-gray and mauve, not at all like Jarrat's warm slate-gray. Stone gave his partner a speculative look, and Jarrat shook his head minutely: he was not about to make quick impressions.

"Good afternoon, Captain Stone. Captain Jarrat." Janssen's eyes rested on each of them briefly. "I don't imagine you take any pleasure in being here, so we'll get right to business. You ran my current data?"

"We ran it." Stone slid his hands into his pockets. The office was chill. Janssen did not seem to notice. "We also took a look at your battle zone on the way in."

"The violence is regrettable." Janssen gazed out over the city toward the mall, from which a column of smoke was rising. "But it's also predictable, and I would even say, unavoidable."

"It's time we took class. Aurora Social History 101," Jarrat said evenly. "We're listening, Colonel."

She angled a glance at him. "What do you need to know?"

He gestured at the snow-veiled city skyline. "Angel's always been available in city bottom. Thule's no different from any other place, and Angel's insidious, like cockroaches. It gets everywhere. But our Intel says your real Angel trouble in Thule didn't start to roll till about twenty-five years ago. True?"

"True." Janssen collected a bottle of brandy and three shot glasses from the top of a datastore cabinet, dumped them on a bare corner of the desk, and pulled up a chair. "Help yourselves, and pour me a double while you're there. Sure, the real Angel problem goes back to the winter of '78. I could almost mark the date on a calendar for you."

The amber spirit brimmed one glass, half-filled the other two, and Jarrat passed them around. "The trigger?"

"There's usually a trigger," Stone added. "Affluence, boredom, envy, population density that makes people go nuts, even depression. NARC can't get too involved in the social evolution, but there's almost always a reason for an Angel crisis."

The pale eyes studied the much younger men keenly. "You don't know much about Aurora, do you?"

"Only what we've been told." Jarrat sampled the brandy. It roughened his voice. "It takes more bucks than the average working stiff ever sees to live halfway comfortably here. And it's *cold*."

Janssen swallowed half the brandy in one slug. "All very true, and all very superficial, Captain. If people don't like the conditions here, they can go someplace else. But they stay, and then they whine." She leaned forward toward them. "You know why they stay?"

"I could make a guess." Stone gestured with his glass at the city beyond the wide windows. "It costs an arm and a leg to live here, so wages are big. Take a lease on a heated packing crate, save your pay. Ship out when you've stashed enough to live well someplace else."

"Good guess." Janssen's lips compressed. "But you and I both know, Stone, it never works out quite like you planned. Shit happens, and it happens frequently. Things get complicated, your resources fly away like little birds. A five year tour of duty in this frozen hole turns into ten years, and fifteen ... and then the rot sets in. Like you said, people get depressed and a little crazy. Ninety percent of them are just looking to escape. There's your victims. VR palaces and city bottom dream dens are roadhouses on the way to Angel. Then there's the sharks. The dealers, smugglers, money men. Those bastards are looking to escape physically, right out of city bottom. Maybe right off Aurora, but sure to God, out of city bottom into *that*." And Janssen was glaring out across the city into the north, where uptown Thule was almost invisible through the curtain of snow.

"You don't approve of grav-resist architecture," Jarrat observed.

She turned the glare on him. "And you do?"

He shrugged. "I'm indifferent to it. Don't know enough about it to care, one way or another."

The pale eyes narrowed. "If you were bred and born here, you'd care. If you'd grown up in a — a heated packing crate because your parents came here fifteen years ago looking for fast bucks, and struck out, you'd care, Jarrat, because your whole youth was spent cold and bored and hungry, while your eyes were fixed on *that*."

Uptown Thule was an artist's fantasy of glass castles riding gossamer arches, bridges of woven smoke, spheres like pearls on a necklace, domes and tracery, delicate as ice crystals. At the vast window, Stone followed the line of Janssen's eyes. He put himself in the position of the kid from city bottom, for whom mere survival was a challenge and the only future was in hustling, or military enlistment. He felt a flare of something very like anger from Jarrat, and did not need to be telepathic to know what was racing through Kevin's mind. To the kid from Sheckley, the rage on the street in Thule, and the Angel abuse which shadowed it, were close to home.

"Twenty-five years ago," Janssen said sourly, "the soap bubbles started to appear. Each of the small spheres houses around twenty thousand people. The domes take twice that, and the big spheres, who even knows? That's uptown. It started about a generation ago, when Leo Michiko developed the first one. Inside, the soap bubbles are at an even twenty-five degrees, with deciduous trees and real, live flowers, and ponds that're not iced-over. It

doesn't snow there." She looked suddenly tired. "If you were a local and you had money, where would you live?"

"Where do *you* live?" Jarrat asked quietly.

The question did not faze her. "In Argyll, groundside, not far from Hiro-saki Park. It's not city bottom, by any means. My family have been in Argyll for a century and a half. We were in the first generation to leave the original city, the underground." She swallowed the rest of the brandy and said hoarsely, "No way in hell would I live in a soap bubble! I leave that to the bastards who've gotten so rich, they don't know what a credit's worth anymore."

Aurora Social History 101, Stone thought wryly, turned out to be an emotional subject. "People like Leo Michiko?"

"There's one. He patented the grav-resist architecture, and you can use it as a time-stamp for the troubles in Thule. Local industry took off, went berserk, but there were supply problems, market difficulties. Somebody somewhere decided he wasn't getting rich fast enough. Prices started to hike ... Run- away inflation, wide-scale unemployment, galloping poverty at the ass-end, while the rich got way richer. The gap between the gots and the nots turned into a freakin' chasm. There's your Angel crisis." Janssen's fingers drummed a tattoo on the gloss black cover of a stuffed folder. "You saw the data?"

"We ran it." Jarrat cocked his head at the colonel. "You also said there's more, too delicate to be transmitted."

"Which means you worry about eavesdropping," Stone added.

Janssen sat back, studying him rudely. "I've buried four of my kids. The Tac kids who work for me. My car blew the insides out of itself, in my garage at two in the morning. And I had an official cease-and-desist order to get off Michiko's case or be charged with abuse of Tac powers, and jailed. You wouldn't be just a tad-bit fucking worried, Stone?"

He was looking at four framed holo pictures on the wall opposite the desk. He only knew one name, Patrice Carrera, but he knew all four young people were dead. The best and brightest were always the first to go. "I'd be worried," he allowed. "Who issued the desist order?"

"City hall," Janssen said sourly. "No individual. Michiko's lawyers just filed a formal protest and the wheels of injustice got rolling."

"And did you?" Jarrat pressed. "Did you abuse Tac powers?"

Her wide shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Depends on your perspective, and what year this happens to be. Five years ago, no problem. A phone tap, a probe into various bank accounts, it was well within Tac's legal repertoire. But legislation went through during the last election, and we were hamstrung, Jarrat. Castrated. Tactical's powers to perform any kind of in-depth investigation were cut so far back, we'd do better with a pack of Tarot cards."

"Damn." Stone met Jarrat's eyes with the frown. "Who the hell would want to hamstring Tactical, with an Angel war coming on?"

"The *who* is easy," Janssen barked. "The *why* is something else, and I don't have the authority to dig into that particular pile of horse shit." She stood and shoved the chair away so hard, it rolled into the corner of the data-store cabinet. "Senator Cassius Brand floated the legislation, and lobbied it till

it was passed, but it's common knowledge he did it as a favor to a friend. His business partner."

"Denehy." Jarrat's brows arched. "Now, why would Pete Denehy want to castrate Tactical?"

"All we ever had was the scuttlebutt, and by the time the bill went through it was too late to investigate." Janssen was pacing now, stretching stiffness out of her left side. "Don't mind me. I took a bunch of shrapnel a couple weeks ago. They cut it out, but I still feel like crap." She gestured at the brandy bottle. "Better than pain killers. Doesn't put me to sleep." She glared at Jarrat, and then at Stone. "The scuttlebutt was, Denehy was involved with something not-quite-kosher. Something that wouldn't bear close examination, but something *mostly* harmless. The kind of crapola one old friend would help another to hide, while he gets his house in order. Or maybe cleans out the fridge."

"Primax?" Stone wondered.

"The Angel therapy?" Janssen stopped dead, turned toward them. "They're in clinical trials right now, at hospice level in Thule and Inquanoc. What's wrong with Primax? It's a major earner for Aurora. Denehy moved the research here from Chryse, so the money lands here instead of back on Mars." She made a face and resumed pacing.

"NARC does a lot of its own research, Colonel," Jarrat said evasively. "It's early days, I know, but PharmaTech's new wonder drug looks a little bit *off* to our specialists." He held up his hands to stall her protests. "I'm no biochemist, I'm not invested in Denehy's company, and my only interest in Aurora is professional." He looked sidelong at Stone. "We came here to shut down your Angel trade. The rest of this ..." He gestured with a nod toward Zabrisky Mall. "Your war is not NARC's fight. It can't be. If you've got a people's revolution brewing — you said it yourself. It's regrettable but predictable and unavoidable."

Her face was thunderous. "God help me, I took the NARC option to clean out my sewers. You just do the bloody job they pay you for. Leave the colony to me."

The words were heavy with meaning. Janssen spoke as if she owned Aurora, as if it were her property. She was, Stone remembered, the last generation of one of the pioneer families, and she was watching the colony destroy itself. "You had the *Olympic* routed here," he guessed. "She's due in tomorrow."

"Somebody," Janssen said darkly, "has to make the children play nice before they kill each other. I want the bastards at the conference table, all of them, uptown and city bottom, before it's too late. I don't care if they crate the soap bubbles and sell them for hydroponics to Mars or Sheckley, or some hellhole that needs them. I want the Angel out of city bottom, and I want the people, the real people, not the PAC, talking ... while there's somebody left alive to talk." The pale eyes closed. "You can't imagine the mess that could be made here."

"We just came over from Oromon," Jarrat said soberly. "We know exactly what could happen to Aurora." He stirred restlessly. "Look, we can't

deploy NARC forces to participate in your people's revolution —”

“I didn't ask you to, don't want you to,” Janssen said tartly. “Like your partner just said, I pulled some strings and got the *Olympic* here. If it takes a company of Starfleet peacecorps goons to lock the street down, so be it. At least we'll still *have* a street, when I drag their asses to the conference table!” She glared at Jarrat. “You get the Angel out of city bottom. That's what I asked NARC to do ... because there's sweet fuck-all I can do to make it happen. Brand, and Denehy and God knows who else have stripped my powers to investigate, and every time I cross the line and go covert, I bury one of my kids.”

She turned away fast, but Stone had seen the rush of tears. He looked from the back of her head to the framed pictures of four young officers. “All right,” he said levelly. “We're all on the same page, Colonel. Forgive us if we're wary. You'd be surprised what's often asked of us.” He lifted a brow at Jarrat in a moment's silent, intense conference.

And Jarrat nodded. “You want authorization to carve your way through the colony's red tape? NARC can give you that.”

The tears were gone when Janssen turned back. Her face was hard as granite. “You can authorize me to launch a probe into Michiko and the rest of them? Be sure, Jarrat. And give it to me in writing. You can get me fried alive.”

“We're sure, and you can have it in triplicate.” Stone allowed a smile. “Use whatever means you need to, but understand: the evidence you present to NARC has to be solid. Nothing anonymous, no tipoffs or dope-testimonies. If it won't stand up in court in the homeworlds, throw it out and start over. Get something we can use.”

“You got a deal.” Janssen's eyes gleamed with an unholy light.

The last time Stone had seen such a light, it was in the eyes of Vic Dugan, more than ten years before, when Vic was still riding the tail-end of a righteous crusade. Idealism and fervor did not usually last long, but Janssen was better than halfway through any normal Tac career, and the crusade still lit her up.

“You had data,” Jarrat reminded her. “Stuff you said you wouldn't transmit. Time to lay the cards on the table, Colonel.”

“All right.” Janssen subsided back into the chair and lifted the stiff left leg onto the desk. “Before the desist order was slapped on me, I'd already run a couple of probes. I had long-range audio pickups, a robot drone listening in on conversations that should have been private. The terrace of Michiko's mansion in Argentia.”

“Argentia's one of your soap bubbles?” Stone wondered.

“The first, the oldest. Thule's richest, the really old money, moved there about the same time as Angel started rotting the city at the core. Cassius Brand was one of the first to ‘go up,’ as they put it. He still lives in Argentia, across town from Michiko.” Janssen rubbed the injury thoughtfully. “I managed to retrieve my drone. Michiko's house guards had taken a few potshots at it. His shooters are lousy, but they hit it with two rounds, enough to do it some damage.”

"You salvaged the audio?" Jarrat pulled up a chair and rested his elbows on his knees.

"Most of it." Janssen took a deep breath. "Michiko's guest for cocktails that afternoon was Pete Denehy. They talked for the better part of an hour. Business. Large amounts of money." She slapped the injured thigh hard. "Denehy was one of the only sources we could ever trace, of those donations to Michiko's business. Donations dumping Leo back in the black, when the real-life business had gotten him screwed."

Jarrat's face was set into thoughtful lines. "You know which deals cost Michiko big money? Something here on Aurora?"

But Janssen's gray head shook. "Offworld business. One of the frontier mines wanted a habitation sphere, somewhere the miners could get away from the two-hundred-k per hour winds, the airborne talc and the fifty-degree temperatures. Michiko built it for them, but his costs blew out. Freight on the materials doubled during the two-year project, there were industrial disputes, mechanicals on the construction robots, the works. Lousy luck. He also took a beating when he tried to put hab-spheres on Oromon, about fifteen months ago. God knows, Oromon's climate is a hell of a lot better than Aurora's! The terraformers had more to work with. If the corporate war hadn't reduced Montevideo to stinking cinders ... oh, what the hell."

"Michiko made a bid for Oromon land packages?" If Stone had been a cat his ears would have swiveled around. He shot a glance at Jarrat and saw the spark of interest in the remarkable gray eyes.

"He filed the application to buy," Janssen corrected, "but it was turned down at government level, as far back as Earth. I don't know the details, but it seemed to be a clause buried in the Celestial Territories Act. Oromon belongs to the whole of Mankind, or some such bull." She gave the NARC men a cynical half-grin. "Trouble was, Michiko was so complacent, by the time he got the no-go from Earth, he'd already put several billion into surveying and sensor-mapping, he had a whole satellite system in place. He'd thought he could buy his way around the government, but even he reaches his limits eventually."

"His limits?" Jarrat prompted.

"Connections." The colonel made a face. "He told me, deadpan and in words of one syllable, if I harass him with a data probe up the ass, and he comes up smelling of roses, his connections on Earth and Mars can make so much trouble for me, I'd wish I was never born." She paused. "If there's anything more to the threat than piss-and-wind, he could make the same kind of trouble for NARC."

The warning was naked. The threat was very real. Jarrat and Stone were silent for some moments before Jarrat said slowly, "Brand's new legislation made the audio-drone evidence legally invalid?"

Janssen knuckled her eyes. "You got it. It's pretty easy to fake recordings, but this one was a beaut."

"Did they talk about Angel deals?" Stone wanted to know.

"Not ... as such." Janssen hesitated. "It was all about power. Grasp this, Stone: Pete Denehy is one of the most powerful people in the colony. First,

he's got a senator in his pocket. Second, he's got the PharmaTech corporate army right behind him. And they," she added bitterly, "are a force to be reckoned with. Understand me: if I shove too hard, I can confetti my career, put myself in a hole in the ground and spark a corporate war in my own city."

Sheal was surely on Jarrat's mind, Stone thought. When he wore a haunted look, battlefield ghosts were often behind it. "You've got evidence that Michiko and Denehy are in bed together," Kevin said slowly, "but you've no proof of the Angel connection. Have you?"

"Hard evidence? No," Janssen admitted. "Five weeks ago an anonymous source contacted us. A servant of Michiko's. He'd eavesdropped on vidphone conferences, heard dates, places, sums of money named. And the word Angel."

Now, Jarrat groaned. "Colonel, anonymous tipoffs can get you taken out and hung. It could be somebody with a score to settle, making mischief for Michiko."

Her face might have been carved from ice. "I bloody know that, *Captain*. I had my audio lab go over the recording a hundred ways. It originated in Argentina, which is Michiko's neck of the woods, and according to the computers, the speaker was stressed, scared, angry, desperate. I'm not fool enough to take anything on face value. I put surveillance on Michiko's mansion. A vidphone tap, specifically."

"Which is the point where the desist-order fell on you from a great height," Stone guessed.

Her lips compressed. "They shut me down and confiscated everything I'd put together, faster than I could copy it. I can't even give you the cubes, Stone. I don't have them. But I can tell you this: I *heard* a call come in, placed by an office AI which my own system recognized. It was Denehy's. The call originated inside PharmaTech. Michiko was paged but before they started talking, high-level encryption cut in. Military encryption. The exact same pattern we've intercepted in our street war zones, and headed out on the tachyon band."

It was food for thought, but it was far from proof of anything to do with Angel. Michiko and Denehy were up to their eyeballs in it, but if it was politics, dirty money, even arms smuggling, NARC could become only peripherally involved. This, Stone was sure, was the fourth faction at work in Thule's violent troubles. Tactical and the Colonial Militia were ranged against the militant wing of PAC, the People of Aurora Coalition, which would have been enough.

But another power coalesced out of the data, took shape like a phantom out of the analysis, and both Jarrat and Stone believed they had recognized at least the footprint of an Angel syndicate, if not the syndicate itself. Janssen could be right, but with Tactical chained down and blindfolded and herself under the gun, she had already gone further than she could, or should.

"Go ahead," Jarrat said slowly, "launch your probe into Michiko and his business. You'll have your NARC sanction as soon as we get back to the carrier. Use it, and kick the legalities right back to us. Whoever squeals first will be top of our suspect list. Stoney?"

"Do it," Stone agreed. "You've made no progress in tracking down where the PAC army's getting its weapons?"

She forced herself to her feet and pushed both hands into the hip pockets of the uniform pants. "No source on Aurora has lost anything approximating those weapons in the last five years, which means we're down to smuggling. The most likely *source* would be Rethan, but the theft itself could still be several years ago. I want to say the marketplace is Oromon, but I can't prove a damned thing."

"But you know Michiko pumped several billion dollars into Oromon on a whim, and was bankrolled by Denehy," Jarrat reasoned, "your audio drone placed Michiko and Denehy in business, if not in bed, together, and their comm encryption's a match for the ghost in your street war. If this isn't your Angel syndicate, I don't know what it is." He gave Stone a challenging look. "It's good enough for me."

"Good enough," Stone agreed. "Launch your probe, Colonel."

"Right up Michiko's ass," Janssen promised, "as soon as I have the NARC sanction to do it with. In other words, get out of here."

They were at the door when Jarrat turned back. "Keep us informed, and kick the legalities our way, but remember: if you get Denehy stirred up, NARC can't deploy to protect either you or Tactical. Not unless you've made your Angel connection, and Denehy's involved."

Janssen was reaching for the brandy bottle. Pain had begun to etch her face, till Stone wondered if the surgical repairs had been botched, or were incomplete. "I know exactly how far I can and can't push NARC," she said between clenched teeth, "but the *Olympic* gets here tomorrow, and they *do* have the authority to stomp a corporate army right into the dirt." She saluted them with the bottle. "I intend to shove Leo Michiko and Pete Denehy until one of them makes a move. I've had the ability to do this for weeks, but not the authority, and my head was on the block. Now? Let's give it a spin. If I'm right, you'll have your Angel connection on a plate."

CHAPTER SIX

The buzz from the comm was so quiet Stone did not stir, but Jarrat had been awake for almost an hour. By shiptime it was late morning. His hair was still shower-damp, he was comfortably naked, the coffee welcome on his tongue as he sat in the swivel chair by the terminal, opposite the wide bunk, watching his partner sleep. Stoney was always a sound sleeper, and there were times when Jarrat envied him. This morning he lay on his belly, face half-buried in a pillow, the sheet formed about the contours of his legs and buttocks. Jarrat was seduced by the image, as always, preoccupied with memories of the night, and many other nights.

And Stone was dreaming. Jarrat was usually 'open' while they were asleep. The nightmares still troubled Stoney occasionally, and if there was no cure for them, at least they could be interrupted, cut short, banished by warm arms or whiskey, or whatever it took. But this time Stone was dreaming something good. Jarrat felt curiosity, excitement, a little flicker of something like anger, and then a draft of amusement.

It was odd, and Jarrat often thought it must be easier to be a true telepath, and have access to the thoughts, the images and words which conjured emotions. He was intent on Stone, sharing the rich pageant of feelings, until the comm intruded.

He touched it quickly before it could buzz again, selecting voice-only. He had no desire to see Petrov's face right now. "Jarrat." As the Russian answered he glanced at the chrono. He had been asleep for five hours. In Thule, it would be three in the morning of a twenty-hour day. His body felt rested, but his mind was still freewheeling. He shoved it into gear deliberately as Petrov said,

"Routine crew briefing in thirty minutes, Jarrat. I thought you'd want a wakeup call." Jarrat had turned down the audio, and Petrov's normally strident tones were too soft to wake Stone.

"Thanks," he said quietly. He drained his mug, reached over and punched for another. "We'll be there. Anything new out of Thule?"

"Shit-loads of radio traffic on the high Tac frequencies," Petrov informed him. "They just stirred up the both of 'em, PharmaTech and Michiko Aurora, Incorporated."

"Stirred them up how?" Jarrat reached for the fresh coffee, and watched as Stone stirred at last. He rolled over, sat up with a deep yawn, and Jarrat turned up the audio.

"From what we saw," Petrov said aridly, "Jan's hacked her way into the mainbrains, at least far enough to plant an AI without it getting caught and fried by the firewall."

"Not a virus?" Stone yawned. "She said she'd had the ability to get inside for a while, but no way could she get clearance before we arrived." Janssen would never have gone this far without NARC sanction.

Petrov would have heard him as a disembodied voice. "It's something like a cross between an AI and a virus, maybe. Too smart to *look* like a virus or get caught like one. Smart enough to leave subtle messages in maybe ten, fifteen percent of the user accounts. Whatever else it's doing, God knows. This is where we picked up on the action."

"Michiko's firewall actually let it in?" Jarrat pressed.

"The systems clamped down fast. Almost fast *enough*. They shut down the whole mainframe, but not before a bunch of messages were delivered and read. Enough to cause a furor on the factory floor. Now, Pete Denehy's techs can't afford to shut down the mainframe. They're caught in the middle of some serious data processing, and shitting bricks. They'll lose the lot if they scam the system. So they're fighting it like it's a virus, chasing their tails and getting stomped by a kick-ass AI that's probably interrogating their database even as we speak."

"So a lot of messages got delivered before Michiko could stop them," Jarrat mused. "It's ... interesting. Do we know the content?"

Petrov's voice barked a chuckle. "I called Janssen when all this started to hit the fan. She's offering an unconditional amnesty, witness protection and a pretty good bounty, solid cash, for anyone in either company delivering genuine Intel on Scorpio. And she specifically named the syndicate."

"Christ." Stone rubbed his face, raked his fingernails through a day's accumulation of beard stubble, and swung his legs off the bed. "She's going to get every kind of bull."

"So she'll sift wheat from chaff," Jarrat guessed, "and when she finds who's lying through their teeth, she'll slam the buggers into a cell or hand them back to Scorpio on a plate ... in which case, who'd be dumb enough to try lying?"

"Point." Stone yawned again, leaned over to drop a wet kiss on the side of Jarrat's neck, and stepped into the shower.

"She could have broadcast the offer on the newsvids," Jarrat said thoughtfully. "GlobalNet would have made a feast of it."

They would also have zeroed-in on the informants, he knew. Security would have been a fiasco, people would have died. Most news services possessed surveillance systems so sophisticated, they could hack Starfleet or Tactical, and only legal constraints stopped them.

Stone's thoughts were headed along similar lines. "Making the offer via GlobalNet would have taken time," he reasoned, "and gotten complicated. This way is so immediate, you're not wearing the media like a rash. Janssen never made the amnesty offer before?"

It was a good question, and Jarrat kicked it through to Petrov. "She made the same offer a year ago," the Russian said acidly. "And the informants showed up dead before they could squeal. A year ago the offer was made publicly, which gave the company shooters enough lead time to get nasty. Janssen stood in the snow at five funerals. The rest of the potential informants went to ground real fast."

"Same thing could happen this time," Jarrat mused.

"It might ... and everyone knows it," Stone said from the shower stall, where billows of steam enveloped him and the scent of cedar wafted into the cabin. "She'll be betting someone, somewhere is desperate enough to run the risk. One informant is all it'll take: somebody who wants the bounty or the amnesty badly enough to try it on ... and who thinks he, or she, is smarter than the bozos who got caught last time." He leaned out of the fog bank with a brash grin. "Someone who stayed silent last time, and has spent a whole year lying awake nights, thinking of ways to beat crap out of Michiko or Den-ehy, and not get caught."

The Russian had heard. "That's Janssen's game as I second-guessed it, Stoney."

"Results?" Jarrat asked of Petrov, while his eyes followed Stone, lingering on the long, clean lines of his back, the curve of buttocks as he stepped back into the shower stall and swiped up his razor.

"Not yet," Petrov reported. "Give it time to percolate. Remember, your

potential whistle-blower saw five workmates get cremated. Give 'em time to screw up their courage and set something up." He paused, obviously to listen to the comm loop, then, "Briefing in fifteen, guys."

"We'll be there," Jarrat told him. "And get breakfast in."

"It's lunch," Petrov began.

"Not according to my stomach," Stone said loudly.

"Breakfast he wants, breakfast he gets," Petrov said acerbically, and shut down.

It always took a couple of days to reintegrate with routine carrier life. Courier flight times were so short, no sense of shiptime was possible, and Jarrat's own system was still attuned to the *Olympic*, where he and Stoney had spent two weeks. The Starfleet carrier was due insystem in a matter of hours, and he wondered how pleased Jack Brogan would be with his current assignment. It was dangerous, and there was precious little glory in it: Bad Company would be flying topcover for a regiment-sized unit of military police, charged with the duty of protecting a fragile, perilously balanced city which could easily become another Oromon. Another Sheal.

The water shut off and Stone dropped the razor back into the drawer. He draped a towel over his shoulders and watched Jarrat rummage for clothes through a closet that had been closed up for weeks. Their traveling bags were still packed, dumped in the foot-space under the workstation.

One long, wet arm draped over Jarrat's shoulders and teeth nipped into the skin at the back of his neck. Stone marked him there, careful to put the brand in a place no one but himself would see it. Jarrat chuckled and turned into his arms.

"Mine," Stone said, low as a growl.

"Idiot," Jarrat accused, hearing his own voice, soft with affection.

"And you love me for it," Stone challenged.

"And I love you for it, God help me," Jarrat confessed. "All that means, Stoney, is, I'm just as bloody certifiable."

"So we deserve each other." Stone leaned over, kissed him soundly and gave him a push. "Put something on, gorgeous. Or we may never get out of here."

"Breakfast," Jarrat decided as he pulled a pair of bluejeans from the closet, a pale green linen shirt, and a pair of track shoes which had seen much better days and fit like gloves.

Adjacent to the ops room, the briefing room was bright, quiet, with plot board facilities showing the Thule region, and a crescent-shaped table already littered with hardcopies, datacubes and mugs as the carrier's command rank officers entered.

The meeting was a routine necessity. Petrov could easily have overseen it, even if Cantrell had been busy. In fact, both were present, along with Curt Gable and the chiefs from the four descant units, plus the carrier pilot, the CMO and the Chief of Engineering. Jarrat nodded a greeting to Colonel Helen Archer, pulled two chairs up to the end of the table where Kip Reardon sat, and beckoned Karl Budweisser closer.

"I didn't know you were aboard, Bud. When did you get in?"

"While you were catching up on your zees." Budweisser's Canadian accent seemed to have thickened. "We got a ride over on the *Selena*."

"She's a tender," Stone observed as he slid into the chair between Jarrat and Reardon.

"She came to meet the *Olympic*." Budweisser gestured at the flight status boards at the far of the ops room. "Routine reactor maintenance, rotate the fuel cores, whatever. The *Selena* was headed in the right direction, and we were the first ones to stick our hands up."

"We?" Jarrat echoed.

"McKinnen," Kip Reardon told him. "She's got better things to do than attend one of these time-wasting sessions."

"Like sleeping," Bud said acidly, "which is where I should be." He knuckled his eyes, which Jarrat had noticed were baggy and bloodshot. "Good Christ, Cap, they've had us running our asses off!"

The task of winking the Equinox components out of every 'infected' ship in three fleets was daunting. "But you're back," Stone observed in fatuous tones. "Finished already?"

The engineer gave him a look that seemed to question Stone's sanity. Jarrat hid a chuckle as Bud said, "We just got through training the master tech unit. Now they can train everybody else. It'll take months, Cap. I'll tell you this: if Randolph Dorne wasn't already dead, there's about two hundred techs from Starfleet, the Army and NARC, who'd line up to volunteer to stake him out on an ant heap!"

"Red ants. The kind that're 'bout as long as your thumb nail and chew out a good chunk every time they bite." Gil Cronin growled. He was leaning on the plot board, studying the three-level formation of Thule with a grimace. His men would be the first into and last out of the zone, and Cronin did not like what he was seeing. He looked up from the grid-vid, his face lit from below in pale blues and greens, and nailed Jarrat with oddly catlike eyes. "You taken a good look at Thule, Cap?"

"Yep." Jarrat reached up to take a platter of croissants, bacon strips and grapefruit jelly from Petrov, who was working the autochef, apparently at random. Reardon looked at the food and shuddered, but Stone was already eating. "It's Starfleet's problem for the moment." Jarrat split a croissant and filled it with jelly. "We're at square one ourselves: it's all allegation. Colonel Janssen doesn't have word *one* of solid evidence. Yet," he added, and bit down on the food.

Stone sat back and gestured to Petrov. "Go ahead, Mischa."

The briefing offered nothing extraordinary. The engine techs were asking for a tender, following an inspecific ignition problem with one of the reactors, in Budweisser's absence. Bud put the job at the top of his priorities list and promised a report before the day was out. The Gold Raven gunship was 'in dock' following a meteor strike during a training exercise in the outer system. The Gold Ravens had been redistributed around the other three descant units for training purposes, but their gunship was due back 'in the air' in two days. The fifteen descant troops were only bitching because they couldn't get a furlough down in Thule or Inquanoc while their ship was out of commission.

The carrier pilot, Helen Archer, had reviewed the routine crew reassignments, and the transfers were listed. Four new flightcrew staffers from Starfleet were coming in, plus two from Chryse and Elysium Tac, another three from various Army units, and one from Military Airlift Reserve, via Eldorado. As the name appeared, right on the bottom of Archer's list, Jarrat murmured in pleasant surprise.

Archer looked up from her notes. "Captain?"

"One of your replacement staffers. The Military Airlift pilot ... damn, she did it." He gave Stone a crooked grin. "I almost dared her to reactivate her enlistment and transfer. Told her to call us, or Dupre, if she was game, make sure NARC enlistment didn't jack her around."

"Lang, E.K., Flight Lieutenant," Stone read off the list, and chuckled. "Maybe she pulled strings, got Harry to twist Dupre's arm, get her assigned to the *Athena*. Good for her."

"She's an associate of yours?" Archer had pulled up the file. Evelyn Lang's face appeared in a recent mugshot ID image, and her service record scrolled beside it. "She should be good," Archer hazarded.

"She is." Jarrat helped himself to another croissant. "She's the main reason Stoney and I are still here. She's good in the field, and a fine pilot. Where do you need her?"

"Ravens need a gunship pilot." Cronin leaned over the table, the better to see the Lang file. "I got people screaming about needing leave of absence, domestic shit back home. Lang's qualified?"

"To fly a gunship?" Archer was skimming through the file.

"She flew heavy lifters with Military Airlift," Jarrat told Cronin.

"And she just requalified on gunships, over a hundred hours in sim and twenty real," Archer read off. "Good enough, Gil?"

"She'll do, Colonel." Cronin got up for coffee, reached for Archer's mug and refilled it too. "When do the newbies get in?"

"Depends if we option the carrier tender." Petrov was running the flight schedules at high speed. "If Bud gets the tender over here from Darwin's, our newbies can get a ride, otherwise the next scheduled flight over is eight days. That suits you, Gil?"

"It should. I'll talk to my people, let you know." Cronin sat back.

"Doc Reardon?" Petrov invited.

Kip Reardon thumbed the remote to take control of the display and his crew stats came up: the numbers of people who had reported sick, minor injuries, a few major altercations. A fistfight on the hangar deck resulting in some serious collateral damage; a mild virus that came in on a routine Starfleet courier and wreaked havoc on the engine deck.

As he finished, Reardon gave Jarrat and Stone an odd grin. "You know, when you guys are not aboard, this ship is quiet and peaceful."

"And we should bugger off and leave you to enjoy it." Stone shared Reardon's humor. "Seriously, Kip, we're headed into a rough zone. If there's any element in the Infirmary needing a tweak, do it now, don't wait. You got enough cryogen tanks?"

The CMO's eyes narrowed on him. "Enough for what? And how many

should be enough? Even *one* tank is too many, if you were asking me.”

“Amen to that,” Cronin muttered.

Jarrat took a deep breath and framed the words carefully. “You’ll all have been watching the newsvids from Thule, so you know the city’s at war with itself. Colonel Janssen has Starfleet contacts, as we suspected, Gene.” He gave Cantrell a glance. “She’s placed high in Thule’s society, but not high enough to bust Scorpio or protect her own neck. She’s under the gun: somebody blew up her car, in her own garage, and that’s where it starts to get personal. However, Janssen does have contacts out of the system, influential enough to get the carrier *Olympic* assigned here for ‘civil protection.’ For which read, ‘keep an armed mob from reducing Thule to smoking rubble.’”

“And the mob’s pissed off enough, and well enough armed,” Cantrell added. “to give Starfleet a serious fight.” He had been standing back, by the autochef. Now he pulled a chair up, across the table from Reardon. “You’ve seen the Thule schematics, Kip. When the fight starts — and it soon will — it has the makings of a bloodbath, no matter what we or Janssen’s crew or the *Olympic* try to do.”

“Christ,” Reardon said bitterly, “you make it sound like we’re sitting on top of another corporate war like Equinox.”

“We might be,” Stone said carefully, “but if it touches off, we’ll be guilty of setting the fuse ourselves.” Reardon looked blankly at him, and Stone sighed. Politics was not Kip’s game. Stone reached for another croissant and said carefully, “Equinox was the government of Avalon in all but name. It was an empire built on, and with, Angel dollars. In Thule, it’s different.”

“Nobody here wants to control the colony,” Jarrat went on. “But there’s two, maybe three individuals who are already wickedly rich, and they’re determined to get even richer. Which means you start looking around for the corporate army protecting the seven-headed monster. Colonel Janssen pinpoints the PharmaTech army.” He looked along the table into Cronin’s flinty eyes. It was Cronin’s men who would meet the force head-on, if Janssen’s suspicions proved out.

“According to Janssen,” Stone explained for the benefit of Archer, Reardon and Budweisser, among others who had not seen the data yet and might have no cause to see it, “the PharmaTech army makes Pietro Denehy the most powerful individual in this system. But remember, he’s got a senator in his back pocket. Cass Brand is a good enough friend for him to get colonial legislation changed to benefit Denehy.”

“And Leo Michiko makes it a threesome,” Jarrat added. “Michiko’s design work is in the process of putting Aurora on the map all over again, but Denehy, or PharmaTech, bailed him out of big financial trouble ... if you buy into the story.” He swiveled the chair and looked at Stone. “So what the hell were those two really doing on Oromon?”

Kip Reardon threw up his hands. “You lost me. Okay, I surrender. I’ll leave the political triple-think to you people who have the twisted brains to handle it. I’ll just beef up the Infirmary.”

“Do that, Kip,” Stone agreed soberly. “I don’t believe any of the threesome wants a corporate war in this colony. First, Brand’s already a senator

with such a long-term rep, if he ran for Colonial Governor, he'd get the job. Leo Michiko wouldn't want a war: it'd only level his best work, and he has to be using Thule as a showcase. Which leaves Denehy, and although he wouldn't lose too much in a war, he's also got nothing to gain. Aurora is in the perfect place for deep space trade to go berserk as the frontier opens up." He shook his head slowly. "The *capacity* for a corporate war is so real, we better not forget it. But if it starts, we and Starfleet will be the ones who made it happen."

An uneasy silence settled around the littered table. Gene Cantrell broke it at last. "Then we'll be careful. We don't move until or unless we're dead-certain we've nailed Scorpio with enough hard evidence to convince a jury of dreamheads."

"That's a given," Jarrat said acidly. "But Janssen's determined to push and shove. And you've got your random factor arriving insystem this afternoon: the *Olympic*." He lifted one speculative brow at Stone. "Janssen wants to use Starfleet as a shield, a buffer, between Thule and the street war. The truth us, nobody knows how the PAC army is going to respond to 'Fleet corpsmen in the street and intercept squadrons in their airspace." He paused. "Or how Scorpio will react."

"You want me to call Dupre, get the *Olympic* moved on?" Cantrell prompted. His face was set into grave lines. "If she's going to get in the way of a syndicate bust, Starfleet'll move over. When we go, if Starfleet wants to brawl, they do it on Tac's mandate, not ours."

Two chairs swiveled as Jarrat and Stone turned toward each other, and for some time they frowned at one another, churning through the pros and cons one by one, working their way toward a command rank decision which, in this case, could only be equal parts intuition and logic. At last Stone said slowly, "Starfleet sticking its nose in here could flush Scorpio out for us. Petrov, what's our surveillance status?"

The ops room director pushed back his chair and stood to stretch out his spine. He had been on-shift all night, and looked it. "We're focused tight on Michiko Aurora and PharmaTech ... we're also monitoring Tactical itself, and Cassius Brand's establishment." He made a face. "Brand calls himself Aurora Investment Management. AIM. He has an office, top of the Delgado Building, Thule. But he lives in one of the grav-resist spheres, something out of la-la land, name of Argentina."

"All right." Jarrat's fingertips beat out a staccato rhythm on the surface of the table. "Listen for encrypted signals, especially radio traffic on the hyperspace band. Record what you can, and see if you can dent the encryption. Janssen doesn't have the resources, which is no surprise. And Mischa ..." He glanced at Stone, and Stoney nodded: he was thinking the same thing. "When the *Olympic* gets in, some of the rats may decide to get the hell out before their ship sinks. Find out who's running, and where to."

"Will do." Petrov was making notes for his understudy, who would be on-shift for the next ten hours. "And if they don't run?"

"If they stay put," Stone said dryly, on his way to his feet, "it means Starfleet is probably going to get a pretty good fight." He permitted himself a

wicked chuckle. "And I'd love to see Jack Brogan's face when he finds out he's going to have to get his hands dirty."

Jarrat followed him up. "Anyone else?" He looked around the table, but most of the assembly were gathering cubes and papers, finishing up cold coffee, or looking bleakly at the grid-vid of Thule. "Then we're done," Jarrat decided. "Anybody wants me, I'll be in the gym. Stoney?"

"Same here," Stone seconded. "Anything comes in from Tactical, yell, Gene, especially if their AI manages to call home."

Like Cronin, Budweisser and Reardon, Cantrell was intent on the three-dee plot of Thule, and his expression was no less frosty. The city made Elysium and Chell, Eldorado and anything on Mars look like a playground. City bottom was not just one layer of underground streets, malls, transit tunnels, generator bunkers and exhaust vents for heat and waste gas, it was ten layers. Not long ago, the underground had *been* Thule. Even then, with nothing else complicating the picture, NARC's job would have been what Bill Dupre categorized as a ball-breaker.

Groundside, the more normal city was a warren of the old and the new: conventional buildings stood cheek by jowl with structures right out of dreams. Or was it nightmares? It all depended on your perspective, Jarrat thought as he and Stone went down two decks and forward, past the machine shops. If you were a tourist, the vision of gleaming white buildings half-floating in an arctic-blue sky would be a fantasy. If you were a member of a descant unit, fully expecting to fight in that delicate, unspeakably dangerous zone, the view did not look so good.

The gym was nestled up against the rad- and flare-shielded bell-chamber housing the computer core. The *Athena's* brains, her memory, the AI at the heart of her autonomous systems, lived there. If the ship were utterly destroyed, the chamber would be the last part to survive, and even if the engines detonated, enough might survive for the carrier to write her own epitaph.

The gym was sparsely populated. A volleyball game was in progress at the far end, away from the weights and aerobic machines. A couple of Green Ravens were wrestling, mostly naked and gleaming like animated bronzes under the lights in the high ceiling. Jarrat stopped to watch while Stone went on into the locker rooms, but his mind was elsewhere, preoccupied with the riddle of Thule.

He knew what he needed, and fretting was not it. Aurora's secrets were not going to be discovered via speculation. Stone was already changed into dark blue shorts and soft-soled shoes. He was bracing his wrists as Jarrat joined him and punched the code into his own locker. Stone made no comment.

He knew well enough, Jarrat was tight-wound. He also knew it was in Kevin's nature to be tight-wound when an assignment was difficult, complex or dangerous. Jarrat gave him a faint smile, watched the blue eyes warm by degrees. His own eyes drifted on over Stone's powerful physique, lingering on the slabs of his pecs until Stone threw a towel at him and snatched up his water bottle.

Intense physical effort and mindless repetition had a way of purging anger, fetching a man's thoughts back into perspective. Jarrat had placed his faith

on the doctrine since his first days on the crew deck of an Army carrier, and Stone told the same stories of the barracks where Tac students were confined.

Eyes closed, intent on the interplay of his own body, he listened to his heart, his pulse, Stone's breathing, the rhythmic pull and fall of the machinery around and beside him. On a whim he opened the empathic channels, which had been sealed since they stepped out of their cabin.

"Don't," Stone said softly. He was not out of breath yet, though Jarrat knew the weight of iron he was pumping, and how hard he was working.

"Don't?" Jarrat's eyes remained shut. He was working arms and legs alternately, reclining in a device the crew kids called 'the rack,' and which could easily kill a man if it were misprogrammed. He was 'open' a fraction, and felt a lick of concern. Fear, anxiety? "Stoney?"

"Nothing," Stone told him.

"Don't con me," Jarrat warned.

"Nothing we can do anything about," Stone allowed. His machine rasped into stillness and he sat up on the bench. Sweat glistened on him as he reached for the water bottle, but he was still not out of breath. "I'm an old Tac man, Kevin. You know what Thule looks like to me?"

"A bloody deathtrap," Jarrat said harshly, and threw his weight against the device which seemed to be fighting him, tooth and claw. He could never defeat it, but there was satisfaction in the trying. "You don't have to be Tac to recognize a deathtrap!"

"And the Starfleet factor?" Stone set the grav-assist weights a notch higher and began again.

"I don't know," Jarrat admitted.

"You drew this duty, didn't you? In the Army." Stone paused to work. "Corporate war ... civvies in the middle, mad enough to kill, two armies a lot like Equinox and PharmaTech ripping each other to tatters. So they deployed the Army into Sheal to stop it, get the civvies out. You were there. Eve Lang was there."

"So?" Jarrat threw his weight even harder against the machine in a vain attempt to block the images.

The toxic wasteland of Sheal haunted his dreams too often. Oromon was not nearly so bad. The elements had reduced Montevideo to rubble, whereas Sheal's vast, sprawling spaceport city of Bangor was gutted by missiles, some of which were launched by its own defense batteries. Aerodyne Techtronics and CyberWorld ignored the Army utterly, continued to slug it out for months, and Sheal never recovered. Jarrat forced himself to follow what Stone was saying.

"So, how did the people on the street in Bangor take to having an Army carrier parked in orbit?" Stone was breathing heavily now.

Jarrat stopped. His muscles would do no more until they had taken a break. "Sheal was different," he panted. "By the time we got there, the place was already ruined. The people were so desperate, they were ready to turn anywhere for help. They expected miracles, magic. What they got was a bigger, nastier, filthier war than they'd had before. I wish I could tell you it was over fast, but it wasn't."

The other machine worked steadily to the rhythm of quiet servos and a faint whine of grav-resist. "Damn," Stone rasped.

"You were hoping for a quick-fix?" Jarrat sat up, dragged the towel over his face and drank deeply. "It's not going to happen, Stoney. It'd take some smart-ass analyst to predict which way this colony's going to jump. You want my best guess? They'll jump in every direction. Some'll freak as soon as the *Olympic* gets here and the peacecorps hits the zone. They could be the boot-end of the Angel trade, dealers and pimps right off the street. If we're quick enough, we'll pick some of them up before they can vanish into the cracks. Others, the PAC contingent, will take the *Olympic* as sheer interference, and a lot of kids in Starfleet uniforms will be paying for it with their lives. There's going to be a lot of pushing and shoving in the middle, but at the top ..." He drank again, emptying the water bottle. "If you were in the position of Brand or Denehy or Michiko, and you watched a Starfleet carrier swing into orbit, what would you do, Stoney?"

His fourth set was finished and Stone paused to rest. "If I were one of those buggers?" He was flat on the bench under the weights, knuckling sweat out of his eyes. "First, I'd be resentful, and I'd sure as hell want to settle with the one who brought Starfleet in. Janssen better watch out, and I expect she knows it. Second, I'd be PO'd enough to rise to the challenge. Throw a corporate army at Starfleet and see who screamed first. One thing's for sure: I'd play chicken. Janssen wouldn't see me flinch just because she parked Starfleet overhead."

"Exactly." Jarrat set up the machine for his next set.

He was watching the tendons rope in Stone's torso, seeing the veins stand out in his neck as he began to work his body to the limit. The black hair was flat to his skull with sweat, his face clenched in concentration. Everything about him was superb, Jarrat thought, but beneath the routine, driving it, was a storm of emotion.

"Stoney, enough." His voice was rough-soft. "Enough with the iron ... talk to me."

Two, three more stubborn, defiant pulls at a bar which far outmassed him, and Stone stopped. He was fish-breathing, catching his breath in long gulps of the gym's clean, cool air. Jarrat gave him a chance to get his lungs and thoughts into gear, and at last Stone said, "You know the saying. I have a goddamned lousy feeling about this."

"I know it." Jarrat clambered out of the machine. The bars and pads folded themselves away automatically. Down the cavernous gym, the volleyball game erupted with shouting. "You're an empath, not clairvoyant," Jarrat said under the noise. "We don't have any gift of premonition. Ask Harry."

But Stone turned away and got steadily to his feet. "You asked me, I told you. I got a bad feeling, Kevin. Something's not right." And he was walking away, headed for the showers.

With unblinking eyes Jarrat watched the wide back retreat, and before Stone could vanish into the spa, he caught him up. The sweat-sodden shorts and shoes were dumped on the side of the blue-white spa, and Stone slid right into the water until his head was under. Jarrat was naked by the time he re-

surfaced, and Stone blinked up at him, watched him slide in on the other side of the spa.

The water was wonderful, but he was intent on Stone, watching him lounge back into the curved corner, stretch his neck, big arms spread out along each side. And in this exact instant, it hit Jarrat hard: a clear-as-glass sense of everything he had to lose.

Everything he had ever wanted was lounging in the spa's opposite corner, magnificently human ... flesh and blood, and terrifyingly vulnerable. A knot of white-hot emotion raveled up in Jarrat's gut, and before he could slam up the empathic shields, Stone had it.

"Kevin?" The dark blue eyes brooded on him. Knowing. He held out his hand toward Jarrat.

There was so much to say, and yet no need to say a word of it. For some moments they shared the empathic bond in silence, let it reverberate, singing through them. Outside of an intimate scene they seldom dared indulge in it, and sometimes it could be as painful as pleasurable.

"Like you said," Jarrat growled at last, "there's damn-all to be done about it, is there?" And he dove beneath the surface.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I'll tell you this much," Yvette McKinnen said in a Paris accent which always seemed to congeal when she was absorbed in her work, "whoever Janssen's tech-head is, he or she is among the best in the business ... in fact, he or she probably ought to be locked in a cell!"

The business she referred to was hacking mainbrains, creating, destroying, manipulating the AIs at the cores of the most powerful computer systems, where life and mechanism, living tissue and holograph crystal fused into an indistinguishable mass. Biocyber systems were her specialty, but the field was so wide, Stone had never been sure where it began or ended.

He rubbed the knot of bone behind his right ear. Before Central became obsessed with Harry Del's work, they were working with Yvette McKinnen and eager to put biocyber implants into the brains of field agents. Janine Cruz might have volunteered for it, Stone thought darkly as he watched McKinnen work in the surreal three-dimensional environment suspended in the meter-wide bowl of a holoprojector.

The fibrous tangle of logic-routing was depicted in fluorescent rainbow colors. Stone had no idea what any one of them meant, or did. They tangled like spiderwebs, or the structures which held up monstrous bridges.

A vacant lab opposite the Infirmary had been powered up for McKinnen's work. Since Janssen seeded the mainframes at Michiko Aurora and

PharmaTech with offers of amnesty and a bounty, the jump in tachyon band traffic headed out of Aurora was impressive. The intention was to 'stir them up,' as Petrov put it. See what came to the surface. Janssen had done it, and the *Athena* had captured more than a hundred subspace message squirts.

The problem lay in the encryption. It was not *quite* military, not *quite* anything for which the keys were accessible. The cipher keys for every level of military encryption were already in the NARC database, but this was something new, and different enough to make vertical lines appear between Yvette McKinnen's brows.

The signals she was working with had issued from Michiko Aurora, and she had compared their encryption at once with signals originating in and around the battle zones which had begun to pockmark Thule like a virulent disease. The encryption pattern was identical, as unique and distinctive as a fingerprint.

"Janssen's tech-head managed to get an AI through the firewalls at Michiko Aurora and PharmaTech," McKinnen mused. "It's quite the feat. Almost a conjuring trick, in fact, to fool the AI that developed this encryption. I'd like to shake the little brat by the hand."

In the shadows on the other side of the lab, Jarrat was reviewing routine carrier data, appending a command rank signature where necessary. His own, Stone's or even Cantrell's, it made no difference. "The little brat?"

The holo projector's bowl turned toward him. McKinnen gestured into its depths. "First, no human brain designed this Gordian knot. This whole firewall was designed and executed by a machine. And given that ..." She stepped back and shrugged. "No adult brain is going to give it a run for its money, but a nasty-minded juvenile might give it a shot." Then she allowed a dry chuckle to escape. "And maybe we should hire ourselves a nasty-minded juvenile to take a crack at the encryption!"

"You can't jink your way around it?" Jarrat set aside the carrier data and stepped into the instrument lights around the work bench.

Coming from Jarrat or Stone, who had never worked comfortably with her since the research project, the question might have been an indictment, but McKinnen only shrugged. She was golden-blond this season, the hair clipped short around the ears, almost the same shade as the ivory-varnished talons of the predator. Too much white-gold jewelry clattered as she moved. The bronze satin slacks and loose white sweater were chic on Mars and Earth. McKinnen never forgot where home was. The Paris accent and the home-worlds dress sense were a constant reminder: she was headed 'back in' when this work was done. "I can try," she said, preoccupied with something she had seen in the holo display, "but I'll make no promises. You want my advice? Janssen's people have already hacked their way in. Use their backdoor, take the cipher keys and whatever other data you want."

The suggestion was not entirely farcical, but Stone was making negative noises. "The backdoor will be bricked up by now. You won't get in that way again. And as for the AI, Michiko shut his mainframe down before it could do anything more than seed the messages into the system. Denehy's crew took it on like a virus. The chances of it getting out and calling home are not good."

The holo image was twisted into skeins like silk yarn, and then the skeins raveled, doubled-back, looped. Stone looked away, while Yvette McKinnen leaned closer, trying to see what, he could not imagine. "But if Janssen's nasty-minded brat did it once, he can do it again. If she's banged him up in a Juvie cell, get him out. If he traded for his freedom and bolted through, find him, get him back." She tapped her blonde head with one ivory talon. "Brilliant, I am. A juvenile brain, I am not."

"We'll talk to Janssen," Jarrat said aridly, on his way to the door of her lab, which stood wide open. Opposite were the medevac lifts leading right up from the hangar levels, the emergency transit tubes from the engine deck, and the Infirmary itself. Through the wide triage area at the fore, Jarrat could see Kip Reardon, apparently directing traffic: four extra cryotanks were being delivered over from the *Olympic*, as per the CMO's requisition.

The sight of a cryogen tank, anywhere, any time, sent a shiver through Jarrat's bone marrow, though he owed his life to the technology, and he knew he should be grateful. These tanks were the latest design, from Intel-Scan's development labs in Shanghai. They were slender, with the gull-gray hue of a spaceplane, and they were almost as indestructible. The tanks were less than half the weight of the unit Harry Del had bought when a wrecker in Eldorado broke up an old sleeper ship, and yet tougher, more durable. The Starfleet tanks were molded kevlex-titanium, not unlike the NARC riot armor. It was possible for the *Olympic* to be blown out of space while the cryotanks holding her wounded drifted in the wreckage, unscathed.

He was moving, intent on the incoming tanks, when Stone said, "Get back to us, Doc, when you've got something."

The woman made a cynical sound. "You mean, if."

"Get back to us anyway," Jarrat said over his shoulder as he left the cyber lab, headed for the Infirmary. "Keep us up to date." It was an order, and the civilian inside McKinnen's peremptory exterior could get annoyed if she wanted to. He had never seen anything ruffle her feathers for long. He had also never seen her declare anything associated with cyber systems to be out of her league. If he told the truth, the concept was disturbing.

The triage area was ten meters wide and ten deep. It could be busy when a battle was underway, but only in exercises had Jarrat ever seen it filled. The four cryotanks floated in on a soft whine of repulsion while a Starfleet med-tech stood back with a remote in his hand, parking them where Reardon wanted them, out of the way of doors and desks. The tech was an early-twenties 'chicken,' right out of college, with more zits than insignia. Behind him was the pilot who had shuttled the tanks over from the *Olympic*.

The carrier was at the massive Stavanger Dock, at geostationery, coupled to the tender *Selena* in some outlandish mating ritual. She had been on station in this system for a little under four hours, and already squads of 'peacepolice,' as the MPs had long been known, were on the streets of Thule, Inquanoc and several other cites. Her arrival was the biggest news in Global-Net's headlines, and Petrov was monitoring the vidcasts, piecing together an impression of public reaction.

The med-tech and his pilot took a signature for the consignment and

sauntered back toward the docking rings. The pilot sketched something approximating a salute at Jarrat and Stone, but the tech was intent on his documents.

"Four tanks?" Jarrat asked as they joined their CMO.

"Four *extra* tanks," Kip Reardon corrected. He had retreated to his own office, where he made space for the two younger men and perched on the corner of his desk. "Harry called." He gestured at the comm. "My private line. We've been comparing notes since Chell, you know."

"He wanted to compare some more notes?" Stone straddled a chair and watched the data scrolling through Reardon's CRT. A gunship was in the outer system, testing engines, and the specialist technicians were out on the hull, in armor. Stone was looking at their telemetry.

The *Athena's* Chief Medical Officer wore a pensive look. "Harry was picking my brains about cryogen technology. Not that I know much about it, from the mechanical point of view. Everything I know is about the process. The patient, and the retrieval."

A faint frown creased Jarrat's brow. "Harry was looking for somebody's brains to pick about the tank itself?"

"The tank," Reardon affirmed. "Turns out, the only tank available to Cassius Brand twenty-five years ago, when his son was scraped off the ground — in a *hell* of a lot worse shape than you were, Kevin, when Eve Lang found you, and a whole dimension worse than you Stoney, when we got you back from Death's Head — was an old Escada 2000, salvaged from the colony sleeper ship *Tsilkovsky*."

"I don't know it," Jarrat admitted. "History was never my subject."

"One of the third fleet to settle Aurora," Reardon informed him, "something like a hundred-fifty years ago. So it's a damned old tank, and it's been sealed for a long, long time."

"Harry's tank is even older." Stone looked up from the Green Raven telemetry. "It's not the age of the tank, it's how good it is."

"As Budweisser told me not an hour ago," Reardon agreed. "Harry got himself a bargain. His tank may be old, but it was well serviced and he hasn't abused it."

"And Brand bought the lemon?" Jarrat guessed.

"Maybe not a lemon," Reardon said musingly, "but a persnickety mechanism that doesn't want to be interfered with. It could function just fine for another twenty years, or it could collapse as soon as Harry hits the 'retrieve' button. In which case, Senator Brand's son will be dead before he can be hauled out of there."

"Damn. So Harry's trip out here was a goose chase. That's too bad." Stone stood, flexing his supple spine.

But Reardon was not so sure. "Maybe, maybe not. I've asked Budweisser to call him. If anyone can work the magic, it'll be Bud. But one thing's almost certain: there's no facility groundside in Thule where you could even try to retrieve the patient. Anything goes wrong with the tank, Harry'll lose the Brand kid before he could get help. And the help he'd be yelling for is a mechanic, not a surgeon!"

Jarrat shared a glance with Stone. "We owe Harry a whole bundle of favors. Even if Dupre hadn't promised him the carrier's services if he needed them, we'd have offered."

"I think you can expect company," Stone said dryly.

"I do." Reardon sounded intrigued. "I only hope we can get it squared away before your war begins."

"If it begins," Jarrat said quickly. "We came here to bust an Angel syndicate, not start a corporate war."

"You're thinking of PharmaTech?" Stone lifted a brow at Reardon.

The older man studied the palms of his big, square hands for a long moment. "Dupre asked me to take a look at their drug, Primax. NARC couldn't even get a test sample. Under colonial law, nothing compels them to deliver, or share data. Our request was turned down flat. Now, Harry was able to get his hands on a sample through private channels, and as you know we've shared data for months. I ran his data."

"He wasn't too impressed," Jarrat remembered.

And neither was Reardon. "Do you know PharmaTech killed four men a few months ago? The inquiry was a two-hour affair. The 'insurgents' were shot dead trying to steal material from the lab, and they had the video to 'prove' it." His voice drooled sarcasm. "They're guarding Primax as if it's the most precious substance in the cosmos."

"Or," Stone added, "as if they want everyone to think it is. Harry's impression was, it's not much more than a conventional narco 'treat,' a mix of ups and downs with a heavy load of vitamins and minerals on the side. God knows, it's can't hurt. It's addictive, but the blocker is easy enough, and your Angel user's a terminal case anyway. But it's not going to cure anybody."

"That about sums it up," Reardon agreed. "What pisses me right off, as a professional, is the pain they're causing. You've got a whole generation of Angelheads and their friends, family, hanging out for this, holding on for it, hoping and praying for a cure. And there's zip for them, Stoney. Just desperate hope, and then nothing."

"While investors everywhere are buying PharmaTech stock at any price," Jarrat added. He was thinking about Vic Duggan as he dropped a hand on Reardon's shoulder. "And yes, we smell the rat. Denehy's under surveillance, ours and Janssen's. If Starfleet will just keep the hell out of the way, we might put a wrap on this fast."

They were on their way out of the Infirmary when the comm buzzed. "Ops room, looking for Cap Jarrat or Cap Stone." It was close to the end of Curt Gable's shift, but his voice had an edge.

They turned back to the first desk just inside the triage area, and Jarrat touched the comm. "Right here. What's cooking, Curt?"

The pilot was a good looking kid, and he knew it, but Jarrat was seeing the differences in him since he had transferred from Starfleet just five months before. He alternated as the carrier's ops room director and standby shuttle pilot, rotating shifts with Petrov and Cantrell, and Gable was feeling the weight of responsibility. Like Petrov, he had ambitions for carrier command, but Jarrat wondered if he might be happier remaining with the flightcrew —

which would be the map of Evelyn Lang's NARC career. The Military Airlift Reserve pilot would find herself flying a gunship, and from there she would eventually be promoted to NARC's 'heavies,' the tenders and carriers themselves. The new NARC Lieutenant E.K. Lang could easily find herself in Helen Archer's seat, wearing colonel's insignia and looking forward to a retirement to Administration, a desk job at Central.

How far ahead was Curt Gable thinking, Jarrat wondered as he saw the crease in Gable's forehead, the quirk of his mouth, and Gable said, "Call for you, Cap. Priority, heavy-duty encryption."

"Tactical?" Stone guessed.

It was a safe bet. The pushing and shoving at the boot-end of both Michiko Aurora and PharmaTech, and the frenzy at the top, had begun the moment Janssen's hacker wormed the AI through the firewalls. It had only been a matter of time before they got results, and Janssen must be wearing a fat smile.

"Tac," Gable affirmed, "and they won't release the call to me! I've alerted Petrov and Cantrell, but you want to get up here, guys."

"On our way," Jarrat told him, and thumbed off the comm. He gave Stone a look full of rueful amusement. "Be careful what you wish for, kiddo. I think we got it."

The ops room was cranking up as they entered. The lights were dim, the wall-wide bank of CRTs displaying everything from the Green Ravens' telemetry to the GlobalNet newscast from Thule. Jarrat stopped to watch the newsvid while Stone took the call, and sure enough, Janssen's voice barked from the comm. The scene on the street in Thule was dire: at least a section of the public was running berserk in response to the arrival of peacepolice in the city. The peacecorps troops had no option but to defend themselves, and three firefights erupted fast across Kansai and Rasmussen. GlobalNet cut away to a wide shot of the Stavanger Dock, where the *Olympic* and its tender were surrounded by a buzzing storm of angry hornets.

A whisper of audio accompanied the pictures. Jarrat could just hear the voice-over: "This fleet of protest craft launched from every part of Aurora and many of the orbital platforms, including HighView itself, which is the home of some of our colony's most influential industrialists. The *Olympic* and her tender, the *Selena*, are in no danger, but spokesmen for the protest fleet say they hope to complicate the launch of the squadron transporters carrying the so-called 'peacepolice,' making it quite obvious, this official intervention, though invoked by Tactical, is unwelcome on Aurora. When GlobalNet tried to contact Colonel Janssen she was unavailable for comment, but —"

"Kevin."

As Stone's voice cut through the audio, Jarrat stopped listening. "What you got, Stoney?"

The glitter was back in Stone's dark blue eyes. He had caught some scent, Jarrat thought. The CRT was frozen on the last frame of the call he had taken, and recorded. Janssen's face was grim, and filled with some vulpine quality. She was hunting, and like Stone she had scented the prey, perhaps even caught sight of it.

"They took four calls," Stone told him, "and Janssen's analysts subjected

them to every test they know before they bumped them on to us. I've got McKinnen confirming the results. Two calls sound like malicious mischief: they issued from private lines, background trace noise sounds like a couple of apartments, voice-stress analysis says the subjects are mildly drunk or stoned, also lying, and they seem to think it's amusing, though they're trying hard not to laugh."

"The predictable bullshit quota," Jarrat observed. "The other two?"

"One's definitely a setup." Stone pulled up a screen of data. "The call came in from a public vidphone in Inquanoc, so it's impossible to trace the caller ... but the call itself is a fake."

"A fake?" Jarrat looked closer at the data.

The time of the call was made from AuraTel's 1454 booth, at 18:22 Inquanoc time, and the recorded call showed background trace noise consistent with a public mall, which would be correct for 1454. But the lab paid at least as much attention to the background sound as the foreground voice, and they heard an outbound rimrunner. There was no mistaking the big rimrunners. Nothing else in the air sounded or recorded like them. And, loud as they were, they would only record at this level within a thirty-k range. Jarrat saw the incongruity at a glance. Inquanoc Field was domestic only, like a hundred others scattered across Aurora. The only spaceport set up to land rimrunners was Thule. So the background audio track had been recorded within close earshot of Thule Field, while the call was made from a public vidphone booth on the other side of the ocean.

It was a clever fake, but not clever enough. "Janssen's got good people," Jarrat said quietly.

"Tac people *are* good people," Stone said in the same quiet tone.

"And the cream of them land in NARC," Jarrat added, with a wink at his partner which did not mock. "It's got to be Michiko or PharmaTech throwing in a baited hook. They'd be hoping to draw Janssen, finish what they started when they blew up her car. They'd have been hoping to catch her in it, but she broke routine, didn't go out that night." He tapped the CRT. "This one was damned good."

The speaker was a man, but Janssen's specialist had already established that the audio was an amalgamation of three separate voices, each voice print overlapping the others till it was as impossible to get one single print as it was to get fingerprints from a hand wearing gloves.

"Tells us one thing, doesn't it?" Stone said thoughtfully. "Janssen nailed it. Her Scorpio connection just got twisted all out of shape when she hacked Michiko and PharmaTech with the amnesty offer. Twisted far enough out of shape to set up a Tac squad for murder."

The deep, smooth composite voice spoke slowly, with clear, perfect enunciation, a middle-of-the-road Thule accent, and a barbed message: information was on offer, but only if Kris Janssen herself showed up at a rendezvous place to be named later by the caller. Janssen was allowed two officers in her squad, no more. A pilot and some poor kid in a flak jacket riding shotgun on the suicidal enterprise. All three would die on landing, if the aircraft was even allowed to approach unmolested.

"The fourth call is the genuine one," Jarrat guessed.

Stone's dark head nodded. "They ran it through the same analysis and it came up clean. We've got a live one, Kevin. Listen to this."

It was a man's voice, and he sounded young. The recording had been sharpened and cleaned up, and in the background a bar was clearly audible. Steelrock throbbed from one direction outside the booth — it was another public phone — and a game announcer prattled on in the other direction. A syllable stress chart spiked and danced on the CRT before Jarrat, and the Tac analysts had already identified the time of the call from the game on live vid-feed.

It showed as 16:41, Thule time, as the caller said, "This is the number for — for the amnesty?"

The phone ID'd as AuraTel 173, which put it in *down*-downtown Thule: the underground, city bottom. The unit was listed as one of three in a bar called El Picador. Voice analysis data began to stream in the side of the screen while the syllable stress chart spiked again.

"I — I got information," the young man said.

"You are being recorded," The Tactical AI was surreally calm. "Go ahead in your own time."

"I want to meet somebody."

"You have a preference regarding your rendezvous?" The AI was smooth, with all the arranged prompts.

The caller coughed, cleared his throat. In the background, crowd noise erupted as if a goal had been scored. The young man leaned into the booth, so close to the audio pickup that his breath recorded. "Yeah. I ... I can be in The Cockpit right after midnight, tonight. You got that? I can be there, but I'm not going to wait. You get somebody in, or I'm out of there, man. Under-stand?"

"Understood," the AI said smoothly. "The Cockpit, immediately after midnight, tonight."

"Someone'll be there?" The voice faltered and then burst out in anger: "You just make it fuckin' happen!"

The call ended abruptly, leaving Jarrat and Stone frowning at one another. It was their live one, no doubt about it. "Do we know what in hell The Cockpit is?" Jarrat wondered.

Stone made a face. "What 'in hell' is about right. It's a dive, a dumpster with purple lights and trash music, according to Janssen. The kind of place where the cover price includes a free tetanus jab."

"Oh, nice." Jarrat looked at his chrono, and then over at Gable, who had been watching a CRT since Stone accepted Janssen's call. His face was grim. "What is it, Curt?"

"I've tracked your meeting place down to the east-end of Thule's underground. It's way out, and down, five levels under the Mostov sector. Ground-side, it's all industrial crap, robot factories. Most of the fuel elements and haz-mat containment vessels in Aurora come out of Mostov. Then there's city bottom, and I do mean bottom." He made a face. "People still live down there. It's cheap, and it's warm, if you don't mind living like a rat."

"It's a sewer?" Stone puffed out his cheeks. "Why am I not surprised. It's the perfect place for Angel to get in like the plague, and then fester where no one can see it."

"It's also the perfect place for a meet," Jarrat hazarded. "I'll give you odds, Stoney, there's no such thing as an accurate map of city bottom in Mostov. The locals'll know the warren the way rabbits know their own burrow, and outsiders — Tac, even Scorpio, and us — are at a real disadvantage. Hand it to the kid, he picked it right."

"And The Cockpit?" Curt Gable was scrolling through a directory of Thule's venues. "Oh, sweet."

His information appeared on the other comm relay terminal, and Jarrat allowed a dark chuckle. The Cockpit was a men's club, open 'late till dawn,' ID required for entry. The resident band was an animal called Solitaire, and the club advertised its 'crash techs' right after its musicians, which meant The Cockpit was inclined to get rough.

"Time?" Stone growled.

"You better hustle," Gable judged. "I'll call Colonel Janssen, tell her you got it covered."

Stone was already moving, and Jarrat was a pace behind him as they shouldered into the lift with a gaggle of crewboys and a couple of girls from Budweisser's department. Jarrat held his silence until they were alone again, and Stone was obviously waiting for him to speak, since he was uncomfortably aware of Jarrat's stormy feelings.

"You saw the feed from GlobalNet?" The lights flicked on as the door to Jarrat's cabin opened.

The other cabin was adjacent, the connecting door open as usual. Stone paused on his way to choose clothes that would pass in a city bottom badboys' club. "I took a look. Groundside, it's mayhem. A real shooting war. You want to launch a gunship?"

"I've thought about it." Jarrat threw open his closet. "But we'll blow the carrier's cover sky-high to buy ourselves the topcover, and when push comes to shove we'll still be there — buried in city bottom, fifty meters under Mostov, in a warren that hasn't been accurately mapped in a hundred bloody years!" His voice rose steadily as he spoke, and at last he mocked himself with a crooked grin for the anger. "We go in armed, but not armored ... and I'd like to have Curt Gable in the air, and a gunship on standby. How's that?"

"I want the gunship riding in low orbit, downrange of Thule, and if we're going in looking like civvies —"

"Which you know we are!"

"— I want the Apogee armed to the gills, and stealthed so she doesn't trip every hazard alarm in the parking garage!"

"Right." Jarrat gestured over his shoulder with one thumb. "Gable was cranking up the ops room. Put Blue Raven on standby?"

"To launch when we do," Stone agreed, "but hold up on the edge of the atmosphere and vanish if we don't need them."

Jarrat thumbed the comm. "Gil Cronin's spoiling for a fight. It's like he takes the ground plan of Thule as a personal insult. Ops room?"

Not surprisingly, Petrov answered. "Online and ready to roll."

"Put the Blue Ravens on launch alert, and prep the Apogee," Jarrat told him. "We're out of here in twenty minutes, Mischa."

"I heard. Gable told me before he went to climb into a hardsuit," Petrov barked. "I don't like it, Jarrat. You got a fucking street war in progress, two k's from Mostov, and you're going in naked!"

"You also have *how* many squads from the *Olympic* covering the situation?" Jarrat was pulling clothes out of the closet, tossing them on the bed, matching, discarding, pulling out more. "The Ravens are still running dark along with the rest of us," he said, more harshly than he had intended. "Be grateful. Beggars can't be choosers."

But Petrov was not about to be put off. "You're putting both command rank officers in danger's way, same time, same place. I want one of you on the carrier!"

He made a good point, but Jarrat was adamant. "I hear you, Mischa, but not this time. City bottom's such a warren, if I bug out and monitor Stoney, if there's trouble nobody could get to him fast enough to save his ass. And I sure as hell can't cover his back from here."

"Then let some other bastard cover his back," Petrov said in the same harsh tone. "I'll go in with him."

The suggestion took Jarrat by surprise. He backed off long enough to look speculatively at Stone, who had appeared in the doorway, clothes in both hands. Stone shook his head slowly. "Another day, Mischa, when we've had more time to set something up. This is so damn *ad hoc*, I want somebody behind me I know as a partner in the field, and trust down to the last tenth of a second. You follow?"

"We never worked together," Petrov said tersely. "Okay, Stoney, I hear what you're saying, but I don't have to like it. I'll have them prep the Apogee, and I'll bring Gene up to speed. I'll tell you now, he won't be smiling."

"Brief him right after you put the Blue Ravens on bloody launch alert," Stone barked.

"You guys," Petrov said sourly, the Russian accent thickening with every word, "are breaking every rule in the book."

The comm returned to the routine buzz of the loop, but Petrov's unspoken subtext was plain. Stone slung a long arm across Jarrat's shoulders. "He doesn't know how we get away with it."

"I do." Jarrat ducked out from under the arm, dealt him a kiss that was nearer to a bite, and snatched up the clothes. "They need us, and they'll give us all the rope we want until we hang ourselves with it." He held up a black velvet shirt, and the soft black leather pants he rarely wore because they made him sweat heavily. He had pulled out the buckle-boots that made him Stone's height. "Good enough?"

"Good enough," Stone said ruefully, "to get you jumped and humped right inside the doorway."

Jarrat studied him from beneath lowered lashes and said gravely, "Then, I guess I better stay close to you."

"You might think about it." Stone refused to be mocked. "ID?"

For a civvy hole in Thule's city bottom, nothing special was needed. The ID and credit cards they had used in Elysium not long ago, and Sheal the year before, would serve again: they were Crenna, John J., and Landham, Raymond T., with travel papers cleared by colonial immigration, bank accounts on Darwin's World, valid pilot licenses and good credit. Tactical could swipe the cards, they were good enough to pass.

They were dressing when they heard a chime from the comm. It was the Blue Ravens' ten-minute marker. The gunship was prepped and powered up, the fifteen descendant troops were in the riot armor, and the Yamazake Apogee would be shimmering with heat, flight systems alive, weapons already cleared and rotated. Its onboard deck would be loaded with every particle of data regarding city bottom they had been able to glean since the *Athena* arrived.

Tall, broad, arresting in a scarlet silk shirt, tight white pants and a weight of gold jewelry, Stone pocketed the ID and cards. Jarrat was loading and checking the Colt AP-60, settling it deliberately into the holster, so totally absorbed in the task that he was surprised when Stone spoke. A little bemused, wholly fascinated, Stone was looking Jarrat up and down, from the sueded buckle boots to the deliberate tousle of his hair. "Jesse Lawrence was right," he said in a rough-soft growl, "dead right, that night in Sensations."

And Jarrat did not remember until much later what Jesse had said of the kid who had somehow been one of Sheckley's survivors.

CHAPTER EIGHT

One corner of Hangar 9 — in the stern of the belly deck, just ahead of the vast engine and reactor housings — glared with blue neon. The black steel deck cast back an eerie gleam, oil-slick, green-purple. In this private bay, which was filled with the motley assortment of craft belonging to the crew, the *Athena*'s lighter looked sleek, deadly.

The canopy was up on the Apogee and a haze of heat danced around the jets. The repulsion was already whining, blasting heat in every direction. To the right was Curt Gable's sportplane, candy-apple red and cheeky; beyond that were Gil Cronin's Rand Skytruck, much battered and patched, parked right beside Yvette McKinnen's Chev Rapier, a vision in gold chameleon paint and blue chrome, easily worth the rest of the lineup.

A headset settled into Jarrat's hair as he lowered himself into the cockpit and cut into the loop. "Wildcard 505 on launch procedures. Give me status on Blue Raven and the shuttle."

The voice answering belonged to Cantrell, and Jarrat heard the strains of disapproval in every word, though Cantrell did not criticize. His job had been made clear from the beginning: he came aboard the *Athena* to observe, not

to judge or interfere. Every carrier command unit had its own unique way of working. It either got results or not, and if it failed, it would not remain in command for long, even if both partners survived, which was unlikely. Most often, NARC deliberately assigned young commanders who were likely to bend rules, find solutions, take risks ... and give their lives with monotonous regularity. If they died or failed at command rank, they were simply replaced. None of which made Cantrell any less disapproving. He had his own way of working, and was as keenly aware of the risks as Petrov; and he had known Jarrat and Stone much longer than Petrov had known them. It was always painful to stand back, monitor, shoot video, while friends put themselves in danger's way.

"Blue Raven and your forward observer are standing by to launch right after you. The shuttle's callsign is designated Blackjack 99. Blue Ravens are running silent. Do not, repeat, do not hail them."

"Unless the whole show goes pear-shaped," Stone growled.

"Deploying the Ravens will be my call, Stoney." Petrov's voice intruded, hard as steel. "You've put yourselves in cover. If you cock it up, you'll be in no position to squeal for help."

He was furious. Jarrat smothered a chuckle as spinners and sirens cut across the hangar. It would purge to partial pressure in under a minute. Jarrat gave Stone a glance as the canopy locked down. "I never knew you cared, Petrov. Copy all that. We are read to launch."

Beside him, Stone was looking at the plot of Thule, and had figured a re-entry solution which would sling the Apogee once around Aurora and slide it into the traffic lanes above Mostov with a minimum of wasted time. The nav deck would never have optioned the trajectory: the angle was steep, speeds high, and the dense Thule air traffic dead ahead. Stone overrode the automatics and Jarrat locked the flightpath into the deck as he lifted the struts.

The Apogee buoyed up on its grav-resist cushion, and before them the deck hatch rumbled open. Then they were out. Jarrat spun the Yamazake and set it on Stone's reentry solution the moment it dropped out of the carrier. The Blue Ravens were right behind them, a big green mark on aft tracking, and riding right above the gunship was a VM-104. Curt Gable had requalified even before Jarrat and Stone in the new fighter-interceptor, and was as approving of the plane as Jack Brogan's Bad Company were scathing.

The blue-white globe of Aurora ballooned as Jarrat accelerated hard. The trajectory took them in from Thule geostationary in a single spiraling dive which would end in Mostov, and Thule passed over the edge of the world. The small, distant sun glared, a hotspot in the darkened canopy, and before they slithered into the upper atmosphere Jarrat was already dodging the civvy lanes. Stone's course took them over, under and around, and they fell like a boulder on the repulsion cushion.

Buffeted, bounced around like a cork in the ocean, Stone was listening to the civvy air authorities. The Apogee was coming in so fast, so hard, civil tracking had pegged them as a headlong crash in progress. Air Rescue and Tactical Fire Control were mobilizing. Stone maintained audio silence, and in the shadow of the Atlas Mountains, where the high, hanging glaciers were as

old as time, Jarrat ducked under the tracking network and went invisible. Emergency services on the equatorial island of Maui would pop up a flock of drones, search in vain for the next hour and then scratch their heads.

Hugging the fir-clad mountains, contour-riding down the ancient, glacial curves of the Haarlem Ranges, they stayed under the tracking network as they shot over the cities of Grenoble, Eureka, Breakaway, headed fast into the night side.

Over the Amundsen Sea, Jarrat tweaked a course correction and crossed the coastline between the towns of Olenek and Shakotan. Now Stone was intent on the civvy air traffic bands, and the Apogee cut speed fast. It had raced into the darkness. Cloud cover was sporadic and the constellations burned in a deep-blue vault. Jarrat had taken a bearing on the transmitters on top of Mount Elias and cut speed again. Thule spread out like a carpet of stars cast underfoot and glittering in straight lines, circles, crescents, loops.

The Mostov sector was industrial, big and dirty. A smog pall hung over it, pierced by few city lights, since the square-kilometers of robot factories were marked only by sporadic beacons. Beneath the surface, the story was different. Many of the waste stacks, gushing heat, steam, gas, were breathers for the old city. As a light snow began to fall over Mostov, Jarrat looped the Apogee around the weird, exoskeletal shapes of gantries, cranes, tank farms, and dropped toward Kastrup Park.

It was a plascrete wasteland between the Rand Aurora plant and the Carmichael-Lo factory, where the colony's communications satellites were built. A thorny hedge of radars, with dish antennae sprouting like deformed mushrooms, marked the west boundary, while the east perimeter of Kastrup Park became a confusion of gray, dirty berms, where the City of Thule, Incorporated, dumped its snow.

No voice challenged the Apogee's right to land, and Jarrat was free to pick the place. He hovered over the parking lot, kicked the floods up to maximum, and looked for the closest place to the bunker shaped entry to city bottom. The chrono showed 9:20, which was forty minutes before midnight on a world with a twenty-hour day.

The cold was shocking. They had been too long inside ships, Jarrat thought, where the environment was artificial, controlled down to the last degree. This summer night on Aurora, the temperature was ten below, with a light wind out of the west and a flurry of powder snow which the locals would not even notice.

Ice dust cast up by the repulsion was still settling, and they hurried away from the Apogee while the canopy was still whining down. Underfoot, the surface was treacherous. The big yellow sodium lights were haloed, misty, across the parking lot. Bright red-and-green signage around the bunker welcomed visitors to 'Historic Thule,' but just a pace inside, the light was dim with two out of five fluoros out. The walls were a mess of graffiti, peeled advertising and drifted debris.

Six service elevators gaped open; three more were closed off, labeled 'out of order,' and the last carried Emergency Only notices. Of the six working elevators, four were cargo platforms, two personnel. Stone was hugging himself

against the cold, which struck right through to the marrow, as he stepped into the nearest iron-gray personnel car and hit the Level 5 button. "We're getting soft, kid," he muttered to Jarrat as an old, creaking mechanism rumbled down on questionable hydraulics.

And yet a humid warmth hit them in the face as the car opened again, and Jarrat might have pointed out that few Aurora locals were inclined to get used to the climate. The robot terraformers excavated the old city, and building was finished, groundside, before the first-fleet colonists came up.

The elevators opened into a transit station which, at this hour, was deserted. A crosstown tube departed from a bay opposite. The decaying ride schedule promised half-hourly service to Kansai, Rasmussen and Argyll from 6:00 till 19:00, but this was the end of the line. All trips began or ended here, at the extreme east-end of a half-forgotten sector, the lowest public level of a part of town the rest of Thule would probably like to forget, or pretend did not exist.

Yet city bottom was a hive, a law unto itself, different from anything they had seen in Thule's midtown level, and a world apart from the uptown spheres. The past lingered down here. The shadows were dense, the light low, the colors rich, clotted, the air saturated with heavy smells, some of them alien, some familiar.

The acid tang of Angel prickled on Jarrat's palate almost as soon as they left the elevator. He turned to his left, peering into the well of darkness beside the dumpsters. Sure enough, a heap of tatters and bones resolved into an old Angelhead, dreaming his life away. He was flying, so far out of his skull, he might not find his way back tonight. Jarrat was uncomfortably aware as Stone's belly turned, and they shared a twist of pity, painfully intense.

They could do nothing for the old dreamhead, and Jarrat turned his back on the scene, following Stone out of the transit station toward the lights, the sounds of people, music, vehicles. They climbed a dozen blue-tiled steps into a crowded mall, and Jarrat took the time to get his bearings. The ceiling was ten meters above, wreathed in a gloom out of which occasional floods gave a grudging light. Most illumination spilled from storefronts on both sides of the six-meter-wide mall, and a warm, humid wind stirred down the street, like the forced draft from a tunnel.

Against the odds, the midnight party crowd was in high spirits and Jarrat reminded himself, this was home to them, the way he himself had roamed the length and breadth of Sheckley as a kid, never suspecting himself to be confined in a thirty-cubic kilometer labyrinth of girder and conduit which had the rep of a gas tank with lights.

They walked west from the breezy mouth of the transit station, and the temperature rose steadily. Heat cannons were built into the ceiling, behind the floods, and they walked into warm, damp air as they made their way up the mall. Gyrobikes and tiny cars zipped this way and that; hazard lights blinked as a truck backed up to a loading dock buried in a side alley between stores, to offload a stack of crates.

Fresh sweat drizzled down Jarrat's sides. He had begun to wish he had not worn the leather pants when he saw the tall, phallic sign off to their right.

The Cockpit was a den even by the standards of city bottom, and like dead meat, it drew flies. A crowd was milling about in front, shouldering and hustling, trying to get in, in time for the midnight show. Steel rock throbbed from within, where Solitaire would be getting into costume and makeup.

"Very salubrious," Stone said acidly as his eyes quartered the crowd. He was already looking for any face that might be their informant. He gave Jarrat a sidelong glance. "In this crowd, we're going to stick out like the proverbial couple of sore thumbs."

"But right now," Jarrat said darkly, "it'll work for us."

They were ten years older than the average guy headed into the den, and when the Thule directory had described this den as a badboy club, it was euphemizing. Young-old faces peered at Jarrat and Stone; gaunt faces and rail-thin bodies, worked too hard, punished too hard. Jarrat picked out a dozen kids at least who were in mid-stage Angel dependence. They had a year to live. Others were early-stage, still bright eyed, young, with just the shadow of foreknowledge marring their faces. The prescience of certain death.

All these kids were on the edge, running hard, taking what they could get, while they could get it. They wore a wild mix of tribal leathers and tattoos, tatters and silks, body paint and skin. And a second pack haunted The Cockpit tonight. Jarrat picked them out of the crush at the door, and his lip curled. They were users — not Angel users, but users of people, who came to dens like this to prey on the helpless.

Which face belonged to their informant? Jarrat was visually searching as he and Stone fronted up to the bouncer at the door and presented their cards. Landham and Crenna were scrutinized as rudely as any of the others, and the big Eurasian with the nose rings, facial tattoos and green leathers played a hand scanner over them, head to foot.

"We're not from Tactical," Stone said dryly.

The bouncer was busy with his scanner. "I fuckin' know that, don't I? If you was Tac, you'd look more like *them* than *they* do." He nodded at the assorted Angelheads. "You sure you's got the right place? You jacks is too ass-backwards weird."

The city bottom dialect was difficult, the accent thick as molasses. "We look weird?" Jarrat choked the words back. "We're only visiting, man. Somebody told us this is the best place to go slumming, drop a few bucks, get a cheap thrill."

Blue-black, wary eyes peered up at him. "You's with them, then. The chickenhawks." He gestured with the scanner at the users, hard-eyed men a few years older than the Angelheads, and without the raddled look of the dreamhead. They might have been dressed in a strange uniform of leathers, rags of silk, gunmetal rings pierced among their tattoos, but they were a dimension apart.

The volume of the steel rock cranked up painfully high as someone tested the audio levels. The bouncer raised his voice. "You got licenses for them cannons?" The scanner had identified both Jarrat's AP-60 and Stone's Austin .44. "I can't let no jack by with no unlisted hardware."

The cards were supplied along with the ID, travel clearances and credit

cards. "Like he told you," Stone said, a deep growl under the music, "we're just slumming. Cheap thrills, and out."

The bouncer was convinced, and handed back their cards. "Cheap thrills? Jeezie-chrise, you jacks is just too fuckin' weird." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Downstairs, in back. All the toys you want. And mind your fuckin' manners. Some jack goes dead down there, Tac gets in, screws us over, cleans us out. You hears what I's sayin'?"

"We hear you," Jarrat echoed, and stepped ahead of Stone into the maelstrom of noise, strobes and bodies. If the bouncer had realized he was talking to two NARCs, the scene would have erupted, but Landham and Crenna walked right in.

The Cockpit extended back, and back again. It had been cut out chamber by chamber, headed north and *down*. Already five levels below the robot factories of Mostov, the den sank by stages, darker, hotter, more humid and aromatic, with every flight of ringing steel steps, every downramp. In the shadows house performers writhed and gyrated, body oil gleamed on bare flesh, polished leather and the platinum chains holding young bodies leashed to an anvil, a boulder, a contraption that looked a lot like the aerobic machine in the *Athena's* gym.

They were three levels below the club's foyer, with its bar and stage, when the recorded steelrock shut off, and a much louder noise replaced it. Jarrat felt the protests of his eardrums as Solitaire started their first set in a welter of overdriven synthetic instruments. There was a vocal track, but what language it was howling, Jarrat could not tell. He could not make himself heard over the noise, but shared a look with Stone which spoke volumes.

In fact, Stone was conscious of an odd crawling sensation: he was feeling watched, and he made sure Jarrat picked up on it. The moment Jarrat had it, he felt the same sub-awareness, a ripple in nerve endings a man rarely used. He took a step closer to Stone and his eyes narrowed, hunting among the alcoves, through coagulated shadows where Angelheads were tripping, alone and in groups, and where the users, the hawks, preyed at will on half-oblivious bodies.

Green, gold and purple strobes lit bizarre scenes. It might have been the aftermath of a battle, but the acid tingle of Angel crackled on the air. Human forms were laid bare and spread wide, helpless, rutting in the terrible grip of the drug. Jarrat doubted even one stoned mind was aware of the blood or pain the physical body was suffering, though mouths were open to groan and scream. No sound carried over the noise of Solitaire.

Half-mesmerized by the tableau, Jarrat was watching a young hawk with chiseled muscles, chameleon tattoos and a boner like the haft of a javelin, burying his length over and over in a rail-thin body that had been spread-eagled over a curious saddle and chained down with four white-gold manacles.

He did not hear a word Stone said, but his partner's hand on his arm drew him away from the scene. Stone was talking but his words were drowned and Jarrat followed the line of his pointing arm instead.

A young man was lurking by the open door of an elevator. He had a drink

in one hand, a cigarette in the other, and as the NARC men saw him he took a long, nervous drag on the smoke. He might have been twenty-five, Jarrat thought, still more or less in his office clothes, as if he had come here directly from work, rather than changing into the ragtag fancy dress of the regulars. The business shirt was sweat-stained, open to the pierced navel, sleeves rolled up in the heat and humidity of this place and revealing Thule chic barbed wire tattoos on both forearms. The jacket was off, tied around his waist. And his eyes were wild.

As they watched, he took a step back into the elevator car and waited. They followed, and by sheer force of habit Jarrat reached under his jacket and slackened the Colt in its holster. The elevator was small, almost dark, but as the doors closed over the noise of Solitaire cut out to just a bass thunder which rumbled through every part of the den.

Their informant was running scared. "You ... I called," he began, barely able to speak.

"You called Tactical, you have information," Stone said smoothly, "something for Colonel Janssen, worth a trade. Amnesty, and anonymity, and a bounty. You want to talk?"

A nerve seemed to relax in the kid. Contact had been made, and he was still alive. He was middle-height, thin without being frail, and when Jarrat looked into his eyes, he did not see the telltale signs of the dreamhead. "I want to talk," the young man muttered. "But not here."

The lift was going up. Jarrat watched the level indicator pass the 5 mark, which would have been The Cockpit's foyer, and keep rising. "Where do you want to go?"

"There's — a place." He gulped the remainder of his drink and dropped the glass. It rolled into the corner. "Janssen sent you?"

"You told the Tactical AI to get someone here," Stone said levelly, "and we were ... available. Where are we going?"

The lift was slowing, coming up to Level 1, the topmost layer of the complex underground. Jarrat's right hand was inside the jacket, the fingertips molded around the butt of the Colt as the car opened, but only a welcome draft of colder, cleaner air greeted them. The light was brighter, bluer, and they stepped out into a restaurant. To the left was the kitchen, smelling rich with Chinese and Mexican food; to the right, a dozen bistro tables extended out into the street with ridiculous colored umbrellas pretending bright sunlight and warm skies.

Muzak trickled out of a subtle speaker system, but after the noise of The Cockpit, Jarrat had no complaints. He and Stone shared a glance and followed their pickup to a table in the back. A wary face looked out from the kitchen, but their man waved and the face was gone again.

They slid in at the table and Stone picked up the menu, looking at the selection of Singapore and Tex-Mex dishes. Over the top of the menu he watched their young man fidget and fret. "Relax. You sent for us. You wanted to talk. We're listening."

In the better light he was very pale with clear skin and red-blond hair caught back in a stub-like ponytail. Brown eyes flickered from Stone to Jarrat

and back again. "I say one word to you guys, and I can't go back. I'm fried if I show my face there again."

"We'll take you out," Jarrat told him. He had slipped a hand into his pocket, and the recorder was running. The companion audio pickup was in Stone's breast pocket and had been running since they left the noise of the den. He looked over at Stone, and Stone nodded. "We'll get you to Tactical, and you'll be safe."

The brown eyes widened. "You're not from Tactical?"

"NARC," Stone corrected, and watched the usual reaction rush over the man's panicked features. "Relax. Janssen promised you amnesty, you get amnesty." He gave the young man a brash grin. "Of course, you have to *talk* first."

"You could start with your name," Jarrat suggested.

"Raoul Petrakis." He was babbling. "I work for PharmaTech."

"Doing what?" Stone turned in the seat to present his recorder.

"I — I'm just a cabler. I work with the mainframe techs, you know? I'm not a tech, I don't know their shit. I just lay cable, tear out walls where they tell me to."

"And you have info," Stone prompted, "that will hand Scorpio to Colonel Janssen, gift wrapped."

"Well, yes ... well — no." Petrakis swallowed hard. "I don't know. I can only tell you what I know. Like, where some of the Angel comes from, and where it goes."

Jarrat met Stone's dark eyes over the table. "And you know this for a fact? Guesswork and accusations won't help, Raoul. You have to be bloody sure, or it's no-go."

Panic was a whisker away. Petrakis was sweating. "I'm sure, all right? I've seen things. I've seen shit happening!"

"And you never called Tac with any of this?" Stone's brows rose.

"Are you kiddin' me?" Petrakis demanded. "There's sweet FA Tactical can do in this system, you oughtta know that. Tac's more chained down and choked than those poor bastards in The Cockpit."

With a sigh, Jarrat sat back. "We know the constraints on Tac, and we saw the den. Angelheads and chickenhawks. What the hell makes the dreamheads go there, hang themselves up on a meatrack?"

The brown eyes blinked owlishly at him. "How long you been in city bottom, man?"

"About an hour." Stone held up a hand for caution as a bored, tired waitress approached. "How about a beer, Raoul?"

"Make it three, cold," Jarrat decided, and when the waitress had drifted back toward the bar he told Petrakis, "We got in with just enough time to make your rendezvous. You didn't exactly give us much time to research it."

"Was the whole point," Petrakis said miserably. "Give Tactical time, they'll wire the place for sound, or some kind of smart shit, and the next thing you know, Scorpio sees the bastards setting up, and they're scraping me off the walls." He sat back and regarded the NARC men with surprising sobriety. "The deal with The Cockpit is dead simple. The dreamheads come in, they

get free stuff ... if they trip on the floor and take it like it comes.”

“The floor?” Stone echoed.

“Like the dance floor or factory floor,” Jarrat hazarded, guessing his way through the dialect. “And they take it like it comes ... whatever the hawks want to do to them. The hawks pay for the Angel?”

“Like, maybe ten times what the shit costs,” Petrakis said bitterly. “But when you’re way down, so broke you can’t even eat, and you got the habit, what else you gonna do?”

Stone’s face was a mask, and Jarrat knew what was uncoiling through his mind. Stoney could have found himself in a den very like The Cockpit, perhaps on Eos, another moon of Zeus, where mines had reduced the planet to an arid, toxic wasteland and the dregs of the colonies went to work. And play. “It’s not legal,” he said harshly. “They’re peddling Angel in that den.”

“No.” Petrakis paused to take his beer from the waitress. “The hawks buy the pops from freelancers, dealers who come in off the street. Big prices, man. More than the Angelheads could ever pay. The hawks come from uptown, they never stop to count the credits. The den never takes money for Angel.”

“But I’ll just bet they take donations from the dealers,” Jarrat guessed. “It’s legit income in the colonies. Like Michiko taking donations from Denehy.”

“Damn,” Stone whispered.

The kid was blinking stupidly at them. “I don’t know nothing about that stuff, your Denehy and your Michiko. I — I just take out ceilings and lay cable. But I hang out with some guys ... some Angel-heads I used to know when they were clean, before they started doing the dope. I’ve seen shit happen.” He was calming, finding his courage. His chin lifted. “The message said, call if you know stuff, and get an amnesty.”

A frown had begun between Jarrat’s brows. “What you know, what you’ve seen, doesn’t involve PharmaTech or Michiko Aurora, does it? You just work at PharmaTech, and you saw the message come in.”

“S’right.” Petrakis took a long draft of beer. “I don’t know crap about PharmaTech, except for its cables ... but I can give you the Thule money man. I’ve seen where they hang out, and I know where Scorpio cuts the Angel, right here, man, right here in city bottom.”

Amused, rueful, Jarrat sat back and regarded Stone over the rim of his beer. “If we were hoping to nail Michiko or Denehy with this, we better not mind work! From here, it’s a long, hard job.”

The money man was only one link in the chain. Like Leo Dressler, the mule serving Rethan’s spaceport area. But just as Dressler had known Hal Mavvik, so would the Thule money man know his mule — and the mule would know the Scorpio controller, even if the money man, being one link too far down the chain, did not.

“It’s somewhere to start,” Stone said wryly. “But I smell a deep cover assignment coming.”

“Yeah ... and it’s my bloody turn,” Jarrat said grimly.

“Maybe. You were a long time buried in Death’s Head. I was in and out of Equinox in a week.” Stone tried the local beer, found it not to his liking,

and made a face. "Maybe I want to stretch my legs in the field again. You want to bug out, Kev?" He nodded at their informant, with whom it would all begin. "We can do this on the carrier."

"Carrier?" Petrakis's eyes widened.

"NARC," Jarrat told him for the second time. "You meet a NARC on the street, Raoul, you have to expect a carrier up there somewhere. And you're right, Stoney. We're out of here."

"Carrier?" Petrakis repeated, halfway to his feet.

One long arm shot out, and Stone grabbed him. "You have your amnesia, Raoul, your witness protection and your bounty. You could be a dealer yourself, and Janssen would trade, look the other way. Relax. You get a ride out, and you can tell the whole story to —"

"Wildcard, this is Blackjack." Curt Gable's voice was so unexpected, Jarrat was aware of both his own crawling sensation and Stone's.

"Wildcard, go ahead," he said very quietly in the direction of his breast pocket, where the tiny R/T lay.

"You got maybe three minutes to get back to the Apogee and out," Gable said grimly. "Trouble, Cap, headed your way, damn fast."

Yet the underground was silent, peaceful. "There's no sign of it here," Stone said softly to his own R/T, though he was on his way to his feet. A few credits fell onto the table to pay for the beer.

"You wouldn't see from city bottom, not yet." Gable's voice was sharp. "Get moving! There's a packwar rolling across Mostov. They already dropped a couple of missiles into the Rand plant, just west of your position. Tac Fire Control squads are trying to get on top of it, but it's a blazer, and there's more coming. They're going to roll right over you if you don't move your asses!"

CHAPTER NINE

The labyrinth of city bottom was their enemy. Locals instinctively knew the ways in and out, but Jarrat and Stone could only return to the transit station, the service elevators, and in the throes of panic Raoul Petrakis simply wanted to run, deeper into the warren of the old city.

They were in the mall outside the restaurant. Stone was hunting for his bearings while Jarrat kept a grip on the informant, and they were drawing attention to themselves. As he wrestled with the panicked Petrakis, Jarrat's jacket inevitably twisted, and the Colt was visible. A voice in the crowd yelled out, and Stone swore as he rode the kick of Jarrat's thin-edged anger. He struggled to slam the shields on the empathic bond before Jarrat's feelings could overwhelm him. It was automatic to fall back on all they had learned from Harry Del. Even here, now, he could *feel* the difference, the green

against the blue, the tones and shades which colored Jarrat, made him different.

"Raoul!" Jarrat shook the kid hard. "Raoul, we don't have time for this! You want to get out? Which way? Raoul!"

"The transit station is this way," Stone said grimly, "but we better find some cover, Kevin. This home town crowd is starting to look a little unfriendly." He and Jarrat must look like a Tac special squad, plain clothed, undercover, making an arrest. No one had much love for Tactical down here, and it was only a matter of time before the shooting started. He cast about fast, saw an alley mouth, and beckoned Jarrat toward it.

They were in the shadows, probably pressed against one of the walls which enclosed the transit tube, when they felt the first shimmies and shudders of the scene groundside. The tube was a hollow resonator, like a sounding box. Explosions up above growled and roared in it with an unearthly sound.

"Blackjack, what the hell is that?" Jarrat demanded as loudly as he dared while he held Petrakis against the wall.

Gable's voice was distorted. "The Rand plant just went up. It took a Fire Control flyer with it, Jarrat, and you're in trouble. You're only three, maybe four hundred meters from ground zero, and Tac just told us there's tank farms and breather pipes all around you. If the fire gets in there, Mostov city bottom's going to either cave in or go up like a bomb. Move!"

"We're moving," Stone told him. He took Petrakis by the shoulders and dug his fingers in hard enough to part sinew from bone. "Listen to me! You're going to get us killed!" Pain reached Petrakis when words would not. His eyes blinked clear, and Stone said between clenched teeth, "You know the fastest way out of this rat's nest of yours. We have a plane, groundside, and maybe two minutes to get to it, if we're lucky. Then we're dog meat. Understand?"

His face was an unhealthy pallor with flushed spots in the cheeks, but he was thinking again. He dragged himself out of Stone's bruising hands. "There's a way. I think it's down here."

"He thinks?" Jarrat echoed. The Colt was in his right hand, and he glanced over his shoulder as Petrakis began to scuttle into the loading zone behind the stores lining the mall.

Another explosion grumbled through the foundations of the underground, louder than the first, closer, and Stone's teeth were on edge. From Jarrat he felt a keen silver vein of alarm, part dread, part terrible excitement. The growl of the last explosion was close enough for the civvies to feel it, like a 'trembler,' a minor quake deep in the rock. From the mall he heard the first stifled screams of panic, and Petrakis spun around like a dervish, looking at the arched ceiling.

"It's the Rand factory," Jarrat told him. "Some idiot dropped a couple of missiles into it. Which way out, Raoul? Fast!"

"This — this way," Petrakis stammered. "It's close, it's got to be close. I remember it."

He was away like a rabbit, cutting a wild, erratic course from corner to trashpack, yard to yard, behind the mall's bright frontage. Stone had a rough idea of where they were, when Petrakis turned into an alley which angled

back to the mall itself, and tried to dive into a wash of too-bright light. The emergency floods had come on, and as Jarrat and Stone slithered to a halt, holding Petrakis back, they heard the bellow of the public address.

City Security was bawling a warning, but for most people trapped in the lower levels it was going to be too little, too late. The irony struck Stone hard. By now, the Cockpit's pathetic Angelheads were too far out of their minds to know what was going on; and the hawks, the uptown sharks who came to prey on the helpless, would probably pay for the indulgence with their lives.

And still Petrakis kept trying to bolt, out into the body of a crowd which had started to stampede. Stone's fingers were like steel claws on his arms. "It's dangerous out there," he rasped, "and you're headed away from the transit station as fast as you can run. You better know where you're going."

"It's close now," Petrakis insisted. "Trust me!"

Stone looked over the kid's head at Jarrat. Kevin had the Colt in both hands and was flattened against the wall, looking out into the fracas of the street. Lights were going out in sections: damage had already been done by the tremblers. A lot of century-old wiring must be starting to fail. "Kevin?" Stone challenged. "You call it."

"We couldn't get back to the transit station if we wanted to," Jarrat raised his voice to get over the crowd noise. "But we're only one level below the surface. There's got to be service shafts, breathers — conduit, and this idiot's a cabler."

"Go," Stone told Petrakis, and released him.

As the man took off, Jarrat and Stone were never more than a pace behind, diving through gaps in the stampeding mob, against the current. A rumble like summer thunder shook the underground hard enough for dust to rain out of the ceiling structures. Voices screamed, and screamed all the louder a moment later as the lights went out, leaving only sporadic red and blue emergency lights set into the floor.

Jarrat made a grab for Petrakis before he could vanish into the gloom and confusion, hauled him back by a handful of his shirt, and Stone heard him yell, "Where? Where is it?"

Perhaps Petrakis had worked here before he took the job with PharmaTech. He knew the warren better even than a local. How many people who lived in city bottom cared to know where the main power lines came in, where the air cyclers were not only housed, but maintained. It was irrelevant information, save to the techs.

He had been looking for a hatch which was hidden behind a rotating billboard for Coke and Volvo and Ibex Computers. Petrakis saw it at last, tucked into a corner behind a sex shop and the overflowing trashpacks of a cheap restaurant.

The hatch was sealed, and the mechanism either rejected every code he tried, or he was hitting wrong numbers in his panic. They were out of the worst of the crowd noise, but another trembler shivered underfoot as Jarrat said, "Get him out of there."

The Colt was aimed tightly on the hatch seals. Stone's big hands lifted their informant out of Jarrat's line of fire. A single big-caliber shot, a shower

of phosphor-bright sparks, a swift smell of burning, and the hatch popped open. Inside was a shaft, three meters wide. It stank with a caustic 'old machinery' smell. Blue emergency lights were on, illuminating a rung ladder set into the plascrete wall, the curves of conduits headed up and down like monstrous organ pipes, a tool locker, and a lift platform which was useless without power.

"Blackjack, this is Wildcard," Stone called loudly. "Do you still have a location on us?"

He had called three times before Gable answered, and the audio was so broken up, one word in four was missing. Gable repeated the message, and the second time around Stone had it: "I'm right above you at eight hundred meters, Stoney. Can't get any closer. The Rand plant's still going up!"

"We hear it," Stone said into the pickup. Even then the floor seemed to be moving, and a pipe somewhere ruptured. The air was suddenly sticky-humid and sweet-rotten. "We have a way out, Curt," he called. "A mechanic's shaft. The power's out, but we can climb it."

"Negative!" Gable yelled. "Do not, repeat *do not* climb up!"

"Jesus," Jarrat panted, "we have a choice? Curt, it's getting nasty down here. Power's out, pipes are open, the air's bad and the flooring isn't going to hold much longer. You get that?"

The assessment of their situation was accurate. Stone's head had begun to swim as amyl-sweet vapors hit his brain, and his sinuses stung as they picked up the first tendrils of smoke. Something was burning and fire alarms were tripping along the mall.

"I hear you," Gable's voice stuttered through the signal breakup, "but you're safer where you are. It's two square k's of chemical fire up here. Stick your heads up, and you're fried. Stay put, Stoney."

"Can't." Stone coughed harshly. "We'll be dead before they get the fire out." He sank his fingers into Petrakis's arm. "Raoul, we need a bunker! There has to be a nuke bunker!"

White noise, powerful ECM from the packwar, sheeted out the comm but Gable was still transmitting, repeating every message. "Blue Raven is on re-entry. Ten minutes, they'll be on top of us!"

Ten minutes? Gable might as well have said ten days. Grimly, Stone met Jarrat's watering eyes. Petrakis had sagged to his knees between them, coughing and dry-retching spasmodically. "Kevin, we have to get out," Stone rasped. "Can't go up, can't go down."

"Air supply," Jarrat coughed. He put out a hand to steady himself as a toxic overload began to dizzy his brain, and then he was moving.

Dogged, stubborn, Stone followed, dragging the useless Petrakis, often half-carrying him. The crowd had thinned. They would be swarming around the transit stations, trampling each other in an attempt to get into cars where a trickle of emergency power was left. Jarrat was headed in the opposite direction, away from the smoke, into the darkness. He was following the dim emergency lamps which winked in the floor, and all at once Stone knew what he was doing.

Kevin had fallen back not on training, but on animal instinct. If Stone

cracked open the empathic shields he felt a strange, almost feral sensation from his partner. Sheckley was like this: labyrinthine, dark, full of confused smells, muffled sounds, often with only running lights for orientation. But the winking lights gave direction and instruction, if anyone cared to see. The stampeded crowd ignored them: it was enough to run to a known exit, no matter if an inferno had exploded just above.

The heat had begun to permeate the whole structure. Mostov city bottom was getting hotter by the moment, and when Stone set his hand on a breather pipe against the wall of any empty, deserted dream shop, the metal was almost hot enough to scorch his palm. "Blackjack," he called. Nothing. "Blackjack, where are you? Gable!"

And then, "Here," Curt Gable shouted. "I've pulled the shuttle out to two thousand meters, Stoney. Fire Control asked me to shove over, and in any case the place is too hot. I've marked your position."

"Blue Ravens," Stone coughed. He felt a retch building in the pit of his belly and choked it off. "Status!"

"Seven minutes," Gable yelled. "Stoney, seven minutes!"

The retch impulse intensified. Stone swallowed hard. "Blackjack, stay on station. We'll get back to you."

Jarrat was casting around with a hot desperation. Stone half-saw him in the dimness, the cumulative glow of the running lights. Petrakis was on hands and knees, heaving, and Stone dragged him along, sticking close to Jarrat while he searched.

And there it was. The squad was gone — the firefighters and medics would have answered the alarms minutes ago, but the emergency station gaped open, and from the back came the thrum of a generator. The vehicle and crew may be gone, but their backup supplies would be stashed, and if they were like any city bottom Tactical squad Stone had ever known, they kept themselves overstocked.

The generator was just ticking over, and Jarrat throttled it up. It began to hum and the wan glow of worklights strengthened, whitened. Even here the air smelt bad, but every wall was a mass of lockers, fridges and freezers, and Jarrat was throwing them open as he came to them, until he had what he wanted. Stone dumped the inert Petrakis with his face by an a/c vent from which streamed a trickle of ice-cold 'medical air,' and joined Jarrat on the hunt.

They were looking for helmets, rebreathers, firegloves, and in the big locker in the back, actually behind the generator, they found the stash. The first breath of clear, cool air was like champagne. Stone's lungs were burning, and he took several more breaths before he hailed Gable. In the locker were a half-dozen helmets and enough rebreather cartridges to last for hours, but the whole structure of Mostov's underground was trembling constantly now. The air temperature was rising so fast, Stone had begun to wonder if part of city bottom had already collapsed, ingesting the Rand Aurora fire. He put his palm flat on the floor by his feet, but everything was so hot now, any difference was indistinguishable.

As Stone called Blackjack, Jarrat was cramming a helmet onto Petrakis,

working the rebreather into his mouth. Petrakis was dry-retching constantly and his lips were blood-flecked, but his hands closed possessively over the rebreather and he gulped the good air. Stone took several deep breaths before he spat out the rebreather and called,

"Blackjack, Blackjack, this is Wildcard, gone to ground. Where the hell are the Blue Ravens!"

"Two minutes, Stoney, I can almost see the gunship!" Gable was shouting over the ECM and still repeated the message three times before it was intelligible. "Stoney!"

"Copy that. You have a location on us?"

"I've got you nailed, give or take five meters," Gable assured him in a welcome lull in the breakup. "Stay put, keep your heads down."

"Standing by," Stone said, and took the rebreather between his teeth. Ten minutes remained in this cartridge, and he shoved a handful of spares into his pockets as he joined his partner.

In the flickering glare of the worklights, Jarrat had dragged Petrakis into the safest part of the emergency station, the buttressed alcove where the squad vehicle was garaged. Overhead, naked spars formed a Saint Andrew's cross. Very little about this hole in the ground was fancy, but it worked. Stone hunkered down under the spars, shoulder pressed against Jarrat's. Petrakis was a semiconscious heap at their feet, and Stone was listening to the pylons, girders, struts, with which the robot terraformers had built this structure two centuries before.

They were flexing. The floor was moving under Stone's boots, rippling slowly like the surface of water. Its survival this long was a tribute to the constructor fleet which primed Aurora for human habitation, but Stone knew it could not last much longer.

"Gable! Blackjack, goddamn it!" Jarrat was shouting.

"One minute," Gable responded. "Hold on, Jarrat. Blue Ravens are at two thousand, fifteen in the jump bay."

"Tell them to hold up!" Jarrat paused to cough. "It's a pod we need, Curt. We have a passenger. Blue Raven 6, do you read? Blue Raven 6!"

Gil Cronin's voice was a harsh bark ... like balm on a wound. "Did you say hold up? Say again, Cap! Say again!"

"Hold at minimum safe distance," Stone yelled into the welter of white noise, ECM and distortion. "Locate on my signal, send down a pod. We have a passenger, Blue Raven 6. Do you read?"

"Roger that," Cronin growled. "Give me a clear signal, I'm not seeing you!"

Reaching into his breast pocket, Stone thumbed the R/T over onto pure carrier wave, maximum output. Jarrat was watching, and hailed Cronin direct. "Got it now, Gil?"

"Got it," Cronin said tersely. "Blackjack just pulled out ... it's getting way too hot and nasty down here. Standby ... standby ..." And then, in a bark, "The pod's away, but we got no way to land it on top of you, Stoney. You guys gotta retrieve it. Understand?" He repeated the whole message before it was through.

"We hear you, Blue Raven 6," Jarrat told him hoarsely. "Get it as close as you can."

He was still speaking when a spatter of shrapnel showered from the roofing, halfway into the mall and thirty meters away. A section of the ceiling collapsed inward and a billow of orange-yellow fire followed, quickly eclipsed by a tide of dark red retardant foam, which flooded the mall right up to the front of the emergency station. And through the wide hole which had been unceremoniously blown through the roofing, the blue-gray, bloated-slug shape of the pod appeared. It may have been the ugliest contraption in the NARC inventory, but it fell like a feather and soft-landed on repulsion.

"Go!" Stone yelled without even taking the rebreather from between his teeth.

He was up, arms flung out for balance as the floor heaved like the deck of a boat. The heat was shocking, and the hole in the roofing was causing a wind-tunnel effect. Tiny whirlwinds spun, lifting anything that was not fastened down. Trash pelted them as they grabbed Petrakis between them, and ran.

The thirty yards might have been a marathon, but Jarrat was yelling at Cronin as they got close. "Clear!" And a hatch in the side of the pod popped open on the Blue Raven's remote signal. Jarrat dove through into the cushion of acceleration couches and the glow of instrument lights, bounced, and reached back for Petrakis. Stone gave the informant a shove that sent him sprawling into the pod, and dove after him. No marks would be awarded for elegance.

His shoulder slammed into the contour of the inner hull and he choked off a curse, but Jarrat's fist had already hit the 'seal' bar control, and the hatch was closing. It was still coming down when red hazard lights winked on across the pod's rudimentary console.

The floor was giving way, the roofing was twisting, shedding structural members, and Stone cranked up the repulsion as spars and beams began to smack into the pod. Petrakis was wedged tight, across both footwells, curled up in a ball right on top of the lockers which stored two suits of riot armor. His arms were over his head and he was whimpering, but he was safe.

The pod's hull chimed, bell-like, but its integrity was the least of their worries. It was kevlex-titanium, identical to the riot armor, and three times the thickness. Despite the repulsion, the pounding of falling debris drove the pod down sharply. Jarrat dragged himself around, fed himself into the cradle of a couch and snatched up the harness. Stone was still loose, tossed about like a doll as the pod pitched and yawed. As soon as he was strapped down himself, Jarrat seized him, pulled him down, held him with desperate strength. "Stone, you okay?"

"I'll live," Stone said through clenched teeth while his shoulder gave a scream. The grunt of pain issued from Jarrat's throat, but Stone said windedly, "Nothing's broken, Kevin, let it be."

"You know best," Jarrat panted as he manhandled the bigger, heavier body around until Stone could get his good hand to the other couch's harness.

Cursing, teeth drawing blood in his own mouth, Stone writhed around

and fed himself into the straps. The repulsion was at max and the pod was moving at random, batted this way and that by falling construction members. As Stone ran up the harness and settled he blinked his eyes to focus on the instruments.

The pod had been forced a long way down into the pit. Their exit point was ninety meters above, and much wider now than the small hole Cronin had opened up to insert the pod. Stone's hands curled around the twin joysticks controlling the pod's attitude and repulsion, and Jarrat pulled on a headset. He cranked the transmission to maximum to punch through the interference.

"Wildcard to Blue Ravens, we are in the pod, ninety meters down and ... holding position. How's it look groundside?"

"Looks like all hell, Cap — literally." The voice belonged to Joe Ramos, Blue Raven 7. "Fire Control wants us to bug out, ASAP. How long? We're only waiting for you guys."

"Stoney?" Jarrat was intent on the CRT, on which was a graphical display of the needle Stone was attempting to thread while a giant threw boulders at him.

"I'll let you know," Stone growled, and stopped listening. Every brain cell he had was invested in the effort, while sweat crawled about his ribs and he listened to the heavy beat of his pulse.

Many a VR game revolved about just this kind of routine, and it could be beaten. The difference was, if Stone screwed it up, the 'game over' message was a funeral invitation. He jinked the pod around on its maneuvering jets, riding maximum repulsion while he ducked and dodged the falling beams and spars. Every one that caught him shoved the pod back down ten meters, spun it around and cost him his orientation for a dangerous split second, while the skin temperature was climbing fast toward furnace heat. The kevlex-titanium would withstand the heat, but past a certain critical threshold, the instruments would lose a few percent of their sensitivity for every extra degree, and Stone's task would become progressively more difficult.

"Thirty meters," Jarrat read off softly. He was intent on the CRT, and when Petrakis began to stir, he planted one boot on him to hold him down. "Stay put! Twenty meters. Blue Raven gunship!"

"Right here, Cap," Ramos responded immediately.

"Give me a report on surface conditions," Jarrat barked.

It was like a weather forecast from Hades. "Temperature bouncing between five and nine hundred degrees," Ramos said levelly, cutting across the ECM like a rip saw. "Convection winds at eighty to ninety k's, no direction, every direction. Fire peaks out at a hundred meters, but the heat cone is up to five hundred ... the gunship's sitting right in it. You got four Fire Control squads working, to your west and north. Expect a retardant dump in ninety seconds. Gunship is at four hundred, right above you. Acquire on our signal, soon as you break free."

"Will do," Jarrat responded. "Fifteen meters."

Stone did not have the time to even breathe, much less speak. Their exit hole had been blown wide but the storm of convection and the monstrous

temperatures were creating a whirlwind of shrapnel. The pod seemed to be under cannon fire, while he ducked and dove to avoid the big, weighty and white-hot spars.

"Five meters." Jarrat's voice was taut as a bow string.

And Stone threw the pod up, and out, through a channel of clear air. Like the eye of a hurricane it was calm, and the pod fell up fast under full repulsion. Hull temperatures soared, red warning lights peppered the boards and an alarm buzzed. Jarrat killed it while Stone cut back the repulsion to slow their ascent and hit the maneuvering jets to send the pod out of the heat cone, the firestorm and gale.

"Wildcard! Wildcard!" Cronin was back on the air. "You got the acquisition beam? Jarrat!"

Who had time to remember rank, much less care about it? Jarrat heard only the concern in Cronin's deep, rough voice, and as the pod broke into free air, skipping out over Mostov groundside, he gave Stone an exhausted, crooked grin. "Pretty good flying, kid."

"Pretty good?" Stone locked in the acquisition beam and released the controls. He slumped back into the cavernously-deep contours of an acceleration couch designed to mold around a hardsuit, and rubbed smoke-sore eyes. "You find me an automatic, some kind of AI that can do what I just did, and I'll retire."

"Not a chance, and we both know it." Jarrat coughed on a throat which sounded sore. He reached over, and as the pod wafted upward into the glare of Blue Raven's floodlights, gave Stone his hand. Stone took it and laced their fingers. "Right now, I just want to know what the hell happened in Mostov!"

The battle had been like one round in a corporate war, and it was the very thing Kris Janssen had been trying to prevent. Stone frowned at his and Jarrat's laced fingers. He was trying to forget how close to disaster they had come, as the gunship's tractors caught the pod and reeled it in like a trout.

It had not been a NARC engagement and the Infirmary was quiet, but the newsvids from Thule were appalling. Stone was sitting on the side of a bed, stripped to his shorts, while Reardon played a buzzbox instrument over his shoulder, breaking up the bone-deep bruising. The joint felt stiff and hot, but Stone could hardly complain. He and Jarrat had escaped from Mostov with only bruises and a couple of gashes between them. They had been lucky, and they knew it.

The CMO's face was a grim mask, but his disapproval had nothing to do with the carrier's captains doing their job. He was watching the newsvids while he worked on Stone's shoulder, and the scenes were some of the worst since Sheal. Much worse than anything Elysium had suffered. In the doorway, Petrov was also watching the newsvid, which played on a monitor over the bed where Stone sat. Jarrat had commandeered Reardon's own desk, and as soon as his lungs had been tested and cleared, he had pulled up a chair to file the mission report.

Not, Stone thought, that it rated as much of a mission. It should have been a milk run. He turned his shoulder, raised the arm, worked it around, to give Reardon better access to the injury. On the screen just over his head, he watched the Fire Control squads struggle to get on top of a blaze which began when three missiles were outrun by their targets and ditched in the worst possible place.

Most of Rand Aurora was gone in under a minute, and Carmichael-Lo survived only minutes more. Fire Control scrambled right across Thule and units came in from as far afield as Shakotan and Eureka, but little could be done to save Mostov's city bottom, or the people trapped there. Stone watched, horrified, as the GlobalNet flyer circled over the zone. Great sinkholes had fallen in as the ground cratered around underground fires. Few people could have gotten out.

The cameras zoomed on the Tac Fire Control squads, two of which had been destroyed; memorial services were scheduled in Thule and Inquanoc, and centers as far away as Maui. And not to Stone's slightest surprise, the GlobalNet cameras closed in on the Blue Raven gunship. The audio track did not speak of it, but the ticker scrolling in the screen's footer read, 'NARC gunship from carrier *Athena* pulls agents from city bottom — predicted Angel crackdown begins.'

"We're blown," Stone said quietly, in case Jarrat had not seen the footage. "Kevin?"

"No surprise there." Jarrat was indifferent. "It had to happen sooner or later, and I was bloody glad to see the Blue Ravens."

"Emergency Services," said a woman's voice on the audio track, "were reduced to sealing off Mostov to save the rest of the city. Dawn will break over a shell-shocked Thule, where we survivors must grasp the fact that the 'east-end,' famous for being the original, oldest part of Thule, the area first settled by humans, has been vaporized. The loss of our colony's history is beyond calculation. The loss of life is beyond the scope of imagination. The real death toll may never be known, but at this time, city officials estimate that between ten and twenty-five thousand people have been killed.

"Two hundred survivors fleeing from the very fringe of the zone were able to get aboard Crosstown 44, which left Mostov's Kincaid Station loaded at six times normal capacity. Fugitives literally climbed on each other to get aboard, but the train had to leave many more at the station. Ten minutes late, 44 arrived in Burnaby, its next scheduled stop, where it offloaded. Before volunteers could take it back on another mercy-run to Kincaid, Emergency Services had sealed the transit tubes to save the sectors of Villiers, Ardennes and Tok."

The cameras closed in mercilessly on faces. People were at the stations up the line and on branch lines in the Tok sector and, beyond, in Kansai, Ras-mussen and Argyll. They were watching out for trains headed up from Mostov, and none arrived. Grief spread like a sickness, virulent as a plague. GlobalNet cut to a wide shot of Mostov, where the ground was pockmarked as a lunar landscape, but Tac Fire Control had begun to win. Broad swathes of Mostov were dark. The fires were out.

Stone looked away from the screen as Mischa Petrov stirred in the Infirmary's wide, open doorway. Jarrat's head lifted from the terminal where he was logging the report, and the gray eyes pierced Petrov, nailed him to the spot before he could utter a word of protest about the two command rank officers being caught in *that*.

"Intel," Jarrat said bluntly. "Even bloody GlobalNet knows the fires started when a couple of warheads were 'outrun by their targets,' unquote, and deadheaded." He looked from Petrov to Stone and back again, and Stone almost gasped as he felt the surge of Jarrat's anger. Kip Readron was close enough, still working on the shoulder, to hear the suppressed gasp. He gave Stone an odd frown as Jarrat went on in tones like broken glass, "Outrun by what targets, exactly?"

The Russian made a face. "Not my fault, Jarrat, ease off. I didn't drag Starfleet in here, I didn't push the button."

"I ... didn't say you did," Jarrat allowed. "I'm sorry if I'm chewing on you, Mischa. It's been a pig of an evening."

"Understatement," Petrov agreed. "And yeah, we got Intel. Some bastard civvy moron fired off a whole rack of Paladins, three missiles. And you can bet your ass the VM-104's going to out-turn, out-climb and outrun those pieces of shit."

"Starfleet topcover got involved," Stone said quietly.

"Had to." Petrov looked resigned. "They had squads on the street, upwards of eight hundred men trying to protect the midtown sectors ... which set up another fat target for the civvy contingent."

"The PAC," Jarrat mused. "The People of Aurora Coalition."

"Not according to them," Petrov argued. "They were on the air even before the roof fell in on Mostov, denying any involvement."

Stone looked sidelong at Jarrat as Reardon turned off the instrument and began to go over the shoulder with his bare hands. "You believe them?"

"Maybe." Jarrat sat back from the terminal and rubbed his eyes. "Fact is, Janssen's never proved anything. She stirs up Michiko and PharmaTech to flush Scorpio out of the woodwork, she brings in the *Olympic* to protect uptown, the 'soap bubbles' as she calls them, and suddenly you've got one of the biggest shooting wars since Sheal. The question is, who's shooting?" He lifted a brow at Petrov.

But the Russian could only shrug. "We don't have enough Intel, Jarrat, and it's getting up everybody's nose, not just yours." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder, back in the vague direction of the ops room. "Gene's been talking to the commander of the *Olympic* on one line, and Janssen on the other. Seems we're going to *liaise*." He made a face on the word.

"We're going to have to," Stone said thoughtfully, "or we'll be tripping over each other."

"Glad you're so thrilled about it," Petrov said sourly. "Gene's set up a command rank conference, 15:00, *Athena* time. You two, Gene himself and Reardon. Colonel Archer, plus Janssen. Colonel Holder from the *Olympic*, and somebody called Brogan, his CAT."

"Oh, Christ." Jarrat swung the chair around to face the wall, doubtlessly

so Petrov would not see his grimace, but Stone felt it in the muscles of his own brow. "That half-wit was in the air over Mostov? We should have known!"

Petrov was surprised. "You know the man?"

"We know the man." Stone hopped down off the bed and reached for the set of pale blue sweats he had set down twenty minutes before. "I've know Jack Brogan for way too long, Mischa. I'm not even surprised he shmoozed his way to the rank. Christ! Commander, Carrier Aerospace Taskforce. Whose screws were loose enough to put Jack in charge? So where's this meeting? Groundside, or over on the *Olympic*?"

"Gene talked 'em into coming over here," Petrov told him. "Holder was easy ... Janssen's breathing fire. If Colonel Holder's CAT had anything to do with starting the Mostov fracas, Janssen will fricassee his balls and feed 'em to him."

"That," Jarrat decided, "I'd like to see." He looked his partner up and down critically. "This partner of mine'll survive, Kip?"

"It was mostly a bone-bruise," Reardon said easily. He hoisted his buttocks onto the bed, where Stone had been sitting. "When you insist on shoulder-charging an escape pod, you usually come off worst."

"Funny, Kip." Stone thrust his legs into the sweat pants, pulled the shirt over his head, and ran all ten fingertips through his hair. "How's the kid doing?"

Their informant was the luckiest soul to have gone partying in east-end Mostov last night. He was out with his life and a whole skin, with only sore lungs and a major headache to show for it. Raoul Petrakis was on the bed in the corner of the Infirmary, groaning intermittently as if he were dying. In fact, he had already taken painkillers and was breathing medical air to heal his lungs, but shock was catching up with him fast. The reality of the scene was hitting him like a physical blow. He had certainly lost friends, perhaps family. The story would be the same right across Thule in the morning.

"Let him rest," Reardon suggested, "till you're through with Janssen and the others. The longer you let him rest, the more sense he's going to make. You won't get much out of him for a while."

"Six hours." Stone glanced at his chrono. "Kevin?"

"Buzz us if you get anything new, Mischa," Jarrat said to the carrier's XO. "Right now, we want to get clean. You may not have noticed, but we stink of ten different chemicals."

"We noticed," Reardon informed him, "but I wanted you in here, no delays. It's more like forty chemicals, and some are toxic." He waved Stone away. "Get lost. Let me see what I can do for Petrakis, and if he starts to make any more sense I'll call you."

"Thanks, Kip." Stone worked the shoulder around experimentally. "It feels good as new."

"Not quite," Reardon said shrewdly, "but if you rest it, it will be."

They were in Stone's cabin, clothes dumped into the chute, water running, when Stone asked, "You finished the report?"

Jarrat ducked his head under. "The skeleton. I tagged it for Gene's attention. He can add Blue Raven's report and Gable's video, and whatever Intel

he could get from Tac and the *Olympic*.” He reached for a bottle and squeezed out a lot of soap. “Janssen didn’t get the results she wanted. Petrakis is useful, but he doesn’t have the dirt on Michiko ... and a battle is the last thing anyone wanted.”

“Leo Michiko,” Stone mused, “should be running scared right now. He scrambled his mainframes so fast, when Janssen’s AI got in, you *know* he’s got plenty to hide.” He paused, watching with absent pleasure as Jarrat soaped his chest and belly. “I want to talk to Michiko, face to face, look him in the eyeballs.”

“Set it up.” Jarrat turned his face to the water for a moment, and then grabbed a towel and stepped out of the stall. “All yours.” He dropped a hot, dripping-wet kiss on the middle of Stone’s chest. “Hungry?”

“I could eat a mule.” Stone stepped under the water, preoccupied with the puzzles of Thule and Scorpio. While he scrubbed off the chemical reek, his eyes followed Jarrat around the cabin.

The autochef had produced chicken and vegetables when he turned off the water. Jarrat was already eating, with a towel draped haphazardly about his hips and his long legs crossed before him, artlessly elegant. Stone took his plate and pulled a chair up to the terminal. He had called the ops room and selected voice-only as Jarrat leaned heavily against him. Like a cat, Kevin rubbed his cheek over the healed shoulder until Gene Cantrell answered. Stone forced his mind to business as Jarrat’s teeth dealt him a little nip.

“Place a call for me, Gene. Person to person ... we’re not running dark any longer. Everybody and their uncle saw a NARC gunship on the GlobalNet newsvids! Get me Leo Michiko.”

Cantrell gave a husky chuckle. “I can give it a try, but you better not hold your breath. Janssen’s been trying to talk to the man for months.”

“He’ll talk to us.” Jarrat was dividing his attention between the remains of his meal and Stone’s broad chest. “Even Randolph Dorne talked to us.” He reached out across Stone and pulled up the Michiko file. A series of images and vidclips played in the right side of the screen while the man’s stats scrolled in the left. “Superficial information,” Jarrat grumbled against Stone’s skin.

“Tactical don’t have the muscle to dig any deeper,” Stone reminded. “Anything more invasive would mean opening confidential records, running restricted data, and Cassius Brand made damned sure it would be beyond Tactical’s powers. Which also works out just fine for Leo Michiko, doesn’t it?”

“Getting suspicious?” Jarrat finished the food and sat back.

“Of everyone,” Stone affirmed. “Present company excepted.”

The only available data was so superficial, it could have been researched from public records. Michiko’s residential address — the mansion in the Argentia sphere where his meeting with Denehy had been captured by Janssen’s drone, just before Brand put his weight behind the changes in the legislature controlling Tactical. Michiko’s licenses — pilot, firearms, industrial, trading, and his visas — he was a citizen of Aurora, but not born insystem; he had current visas to come and go as he pleased in twenty other colonies, plus Earth and Mars. No birth records were available, but his birthdate was quoted on several licenses and applications ... and it varied, over a span of nine years.

Like statistics, typographical errors could be made to say anything. Next came his corporate data — the trading address of Michiko Aurora in Thule; financial interests in this system and several others, and the investment prospectus. No formal marriages were on record, no children, no convictions or hospitalization; a few lawsuits, a degree from UAT. And there, the hard data ended: Colonel Janssen had reached the end of her capacity to intrude into a man's private life. For whatever reason, Cassius Brand had done a thorough job of smothering Tactical.

The remainder of the file was a collage of 'magazine' features: Leo Michiko at a benefit ... and Pietro Denehy appeared in the background. At an art auction ... was that Cassius Brand, just out-of-focus behind him? Raising funds for charity; at the gala opening of a new show, and that was Senator Brand in the party entering the theater just after him, though no shred of evidence said they were arriving together. Then Leo Michiko appeared wearing his most marketable public face, launching an airship, and giving the industry presentation for the new applied technologies which were about to 'Let everyone in this beautiful cosmos of ours know exactly where Aurora is, and what we're about.'

He was not a young man, and Stone suspected that he had either been gene-tweaked, which was increasingly chic among the very wealthy, or had undergone subtle cosmetic work. It was impossible to tell the man's age from the file pictures and footage. He could have been thirty or twice as old. He had a flamboyant dress sense, and features which seemed to shift between Asian or European, depending on the way the light fell on him. He was not tall, but he was well built, and he always seemed to be surrounded by beautiful people of both genders plus the indeterminate zone between.

"No joy, Stoney," Cantrell's voice said from the comm. "I got as far as his office AI, but the best I could do — and I *did* — was leave a message, tell Mister Michiko we want a word, and he should get back to us ASAP if he doesn't want to put himself on our shit list."

"He's already on it," Jarrat said tersely. "Thanks, Gene. Get some rest. We'll see you at this top-brass shown-and-tell of yours."

"Oh, joy," Cantrell groaned. "Bring along a tranquilizer gun, Jarrat. It's going to be fun."

The comm clicked off, leaving Stone frowning at Michiko's face in the screen. Handsome in its own way, and enigmatic, as if a whole flock of secrets lived behind the dark brown eyes, the high cheekbones and the sensual pout of his lips.

An arm slid around Stone's neck, turning his head away from the screen. He looked up into gray eyes that warmed by degrees. "Take a dose of your own medicine, Stoney. Get some rest while we can."

He was right, and Stone was more than content to follow him to the wide bunk. He sat on the side to finish the food while Kevin stretched out. Done, he slid down, delighting in the coolness of skin on skin. He knew he would not sleep, but the lights dimmed, leaving the cabin illuminated in the pale blue from the CRT, where the datafeed never paused. Jarrat's arms pulled him in close, and Stone set his head on the pillow and closed his eyes.

He had expected visions of The Cockpit to haunt him, when his willful imagination put him into the scene: the dreamhead in city bottom, so pathetic, reduced to prostituting himself in the 'club' to get free pops, and lucky if he survived to see another dawn. The churn of his emotions was white-hot, and Kevin knew. Of course he knew. The deceptively slender arms holding Stone tightened. He turned into Jarrat's embrace, grateful when Kevin did not say a word.

Instead, his hands spoke eloquently on Stone's skin, and the caress of his feelings was cool, gentle. Stone opened the channel of their empathic link and invited Jarrat deep into himself on levels that could physically never be reached. He breathed a groan, heard Kevin echo it, and then the maelstrom of sensation banished the nightmare visions. This time lust was no part of it: they lay quietly together, not even moving. But the empathy was a warm current in a buoyant, shallow ocean, and Stone drowned in it without hesitation.

CHAPTER TEN

The briefing room was closed off from the ops room, the lights bright, the CRTs cycling data. Jarrat leaned on the wall by the door, waiting for Stone and surveying the assembly of officers. No one under the rank of captain or colonel was included, and Petrov must be grinding his teeth. Colonel Eric Holder was a tall, gaunt figure in the dark blue Starfleet uniform, with the commander's insignia on his shoulders.

Beside him was the *Olympic's* Carrier Aerospace Taskforce commander, Colonel Jack Brogan. The two had been talking in undertones since they arrived and took first choice of the seating. Colonel Helen Archer, chief of the *Athena's* Starfleet personnel, had arrived minutes after them. She did not know either man personally, Jarrat guessed, and was merely polite, impersonal, neutral.

Gene Cantrell and Kris Janssen arrived together, a little ahead of Jarrat, and now they were only waiting for Stone. Brogan was impatient, but he was out-muscled and holding his silence. Holder and all three NARC officers ranked him, and he knew it. Volcanic blue eyes glared at Jarrat from time to time, but Jarrat's face was a mask. It was Janssen whom the leader of 903 Intercept Squadron, 'Bad Company,' should have been glaring at. If looks could kill, Brogan would have dropped dead at the woman's feet.

The latest damage estimate and death toll was up on the CRTs. Colonel Holder surveyed it indifferently; Brogan ignored it utterly. The figure of two billion credits, or eight billion colonial dollars appeared on the screen, but Jarrat had never been able to grasp numbers so large when they pertained to money.

He looked up with a faint, rueful smile as Stone appeared in company with Surgeon Captain Kip Reardon, and dropped his voice. "You bring the trunk gun, like Gene said?"

"Trunk gun?" Reardon echoed.

"It's going to get hot in here," Stone warned. "The mud will be flying in about thirty seconds. Some of us," he added very softly, "know when to duck. Shall we?" He gestured toward the only remaining seats, and pulled out two of them.

Gene Cantrell had arbitrarily placed himself at the head of the table, and Jarrat was pleased to let him have it. Archer may have been Starfleet, but she had noticeably put herself with the NARC officers, between Reardon and Cantrell. Janssen was very much isolated, while Holder and Brogan sat opposite Jarrat and Stone. Holder wore a carefully neutral face; Brogan looked mad enough to spit.

"Good evening to you all," Cantrell began pleasantly, "and thank you for assembling here. I'm sure it's saved considerable time. It's worth mentioning that the *Athena* is now a public factor: we were seen on the Mostov disaster vidcasts and our covert status is ... blown." He thumbed the remote, and several CRTs began to stream data. "The following briefing was prepared by Colonel Janssen, and should bring us all up to speed regarding Thule's somewhat delicate position." But he was looking darkly at Brogan as he spoke.

"Captain Cantrell, we've already been briefed," Holder interrupted. The dust-dry voice was well suited to the gaunt, dust-dry face. He was ten years older than Cantrell, and carrying his age poorly. "We saw essentially the same briefing on our way over to Aurora. I see no need to view it again."

"You don't?" Janssen leaned forward toward Holder, but she was glaring intently at Brogan. "Then perhaps you'd like to explain, Colonel Holder, just exactly what happened in Mostov. I've got at least nine thousand dead civilians, and a damage bill in ten figures, in anybody's currency."

Holder's pale brown eyes studied her curiously. "It's my understanding that Mostov city bottom should have been closed down and evacuated years ago. It was folly, Colonel Janssen, to leave the old city intact, open for business and densely populated, when industry had taken root above ... or folly to let industry colonize an area where you were determined to perpetuate the old city."

"None of which is down to me," Janssen said tartly. "You don't care for Thule's design? You need to be talking to city hall, not me. I didn't ask Starfleet to lay down rules about how the city should or shouldn't have been planned fifty years ago. I asked you to protect what already exists." Her eyes glittered with anger. "That's your mandate. It's what Starfleet does for its money."

She was right ... and she was wrong, Jarrat thought. For the moment he was content to sit back and observe. If they wanted to carve each other up, so much the better: something useful might be built out of the wreckage. Starfleet's mandate was simple.

According to their own charter, they were 'A force for the protection of human life and interests, and the preservation of individual liberty throughout regions wherever humans may be found; the maintenance of fair and proper

judiciary, and the protection of the rights and privileges of the peoples of Earth in exile.' The charter was specific, easy to invoke, simple to quote. And just as easy to twist into any shape, because the fine print spent nine hundred pages outlining exceptions to, and special conditions for, every syllable.

For the first time Eric Holder allowed a flicker of hot temper to show through. Jarrat leaned closer to Stone. "Here it comes."

"To even begin to safeguard your city," Holder told Janssen in an icy voice, "we put upwards of a thousand peace corps troopers into the zone, which comprises the greater part of our human resources on this assignment. I need hardly point out, the security of Starfleet personnel takes ultimate precedence, because if we go down, you're right back where you started."

"If I were back where I started," Janssen growled, "I'd have nine thousand civvies alive today who are bloody *dead*, and a working city sector instead of a hole in the ground and a ten-figure repair bill!"

Holder looked at her down the length of a high-bridged, bony nose. "Kristyn, are you intimating that forces from the *Olympic* may have caused the Mostov disaster?" He was bristling, defensive.

And Janssen's fists were clenched, the knuckles white. "You might not have caused it, Eric, but you sure as hell didn't stop it, and when it turned nasty, your — your *forces* didn't do diddly-squat to safeguard Thule. If you even bothered to glance at the briefing I sent you two days before you arrived here, you'd know how delicate Thule is. It's not a place for starting any shooting war. And if the fight's started, you better bust your buns to smother it, or shove it in directions where it'll do the least harm, not the most! I'm sorry, Eric, but there it is."

The colonel commanding the *Olympic* sat back, studying Brogan now. The younger man's profile was granite-hewn. "Colonel Brogan?" Holder prompted. "The charges seem to involve culpable negligence. Perhaps my CAT would care to comment. You are, in fact, in command of the airborne facet of the Thule assignment."

"I said it all in my report," Brogan growled, "and Colonel Janssen has already seen it, just as she's seen the NARC mission reports. Anything else I could add here would just waste more time." The emphasis was on the word *more*.

Stone stifled a chuckle, and Jarrat angled a glance at Brogan in time to see the pilot's face flush beet-red. Janssen's fingernails tapped out a complex code on the tabletop. "You screwed up, Colonel, didn't you? You screwed up royally, and I got nine thousand dead civilians."

"And a thousand live peace corps troops," Brogan added. "You know our brief, Janssen. We'll save your asses if we can, but you can bet we save our own first." He gestured angrily at the deck, and by extension, Aurora. "You might start by telling us how in the name of sweet Christ your civvies got armed with every weapons system we'd expect to launch off an Army carrier! We had men on the ground, cut to pieces by phosphor grenades. When they yelled for backup, top-cover, my people flew headfirst into a missile barrage!"

A twist of discomfort shadowed Janssen's face. "I'm still working on that one, Brogan. You know bloody well, Tactical's powers were pruned so far

back, we're deaf and blind. What do you expect me to do about it? I'm on a colonial public service mandate. I don't have the freedom to move like the other services!" And she glared at Jarrat and Stone, as if to divert the wrath of the argument.

Jarrat took the challenge. "Colonel Holder, NARC required you to put a squadron transporter on station at Oromon. You did this?"

"Of course." Holder looked him over critically. "Am I to understand that you pinpoint Oromon as the source of the weapons?"

"More than likely." Jarrat gave Janssen a glance, brows up. "Two of the three principal suspects in our own investigation were involved in deals concerning Oromon, which places Oromon, Scorpio and Thule's packwars on the same page of the same script."

"And, your evidence?" Holder wore a doubtful look, critical of Jarrat and Stone, either for their youth, or the youth of their branch of the service as a whole. Holder would have clear adult memories of the birth pangs of Narcotics And Riot Control. "Your proof?" he insisted.

"Need not concern Starfleet," Stone said sharply, "until your people have gathered the other half of it ... at which point, Colonel Holder, you won't need to have it explained to you."

Both Holder and Brogan bristled, and Cantrell put himself between the antagonists. "Colonel Holder, please keep in mind, your mandate and that of NARC overlap. We're on the same side, if not the same team. You're charged with protecting the people and property of Thule. So are we, but our task is considerably more difficult. We have an obstacle course to run: get into every part of Thule, from the depths of city bottom to this uptown fantasy of theirs ... break Scorpio, without harming Thule or its people."

As he spoke, he had lifted a gold cheroot case from his pocket, opened it and offered it to Holder. He deliberately did not offer Brogan a smoke, but Holder accepted, and Cantrell flicked a silver lighter for him. "Now," he added as the cheroot lit, "we'd like to get down to work with the *aid* of Starfleet and Tactical, not their competition. Enough damage has already been done." He was looking darkly at Brogan as he spoke. "I understand, Colonel Holder, Colonel Brogan, that priority was placed on your own servicemen, and I saw video from your battlefield observers. I know your people walked into unexpected opposition. Military weapons. This ..." He smiled faintly at Holder. "This happens to NARC so frequently, we expect it."

"And to respond in kind," Holder said grimly. "For example, one need only mention the name of Elysium."

"Indeed," Cantrell agreed affably, with a warning glance at Jarrat, who was about to pick up the gauntlet and swing it hard. "But one must also point out, Elysium is a robust environment, compared with Thule. It was perfectly possible for Equinox Industries to choose their own city as their place of engagement —" he emphasized this with the lighter and a hard look at Holder "— and for Elysium to be only mildly damaged, with a relatively small loss of life at the end of it." His head shook as he lit his own cheroot. "The same won't happen here, Colonel. You saw the truth with your own eyes last night."

"I ... saw," Holder said with all due reluctance. He sighed and studied the glowing tip of the cigar, his brow creased deeply. "It was a bad business, Captain Cantrell. As you know, 903 Squadron was assigned to fly topcover for over the peace corps troops who had deployed to prevent the battle Colonel Janssen had predicted. Kris saw it coming, and we tried to stop it. Defuse it." He looked along at Jarrat and Stone. "Have you seen our video?"

They had, not an hour before, and it was grim viewing. How many times had Jarrat been in the same situation? The Army was a tough school where a kid learned fast or not at all. Stone cleared his throat and reached for a glass of water. He was still a little sore, husky. "We watched it, Colonel," he told Holder. "Your peace corpsmen were taking fire, no one denies it, and 903 bailed them out. The point Colonel Janssen is making is *how* 903 bailed them."

Jarrat's nerve endings prickled. It might have been a reaction from Stone, and he took a breath as he looked at the faces around this table. Janssen's eyes were on him, wide, hard as steel. She was waiting, and Jarrat lifted a brow at Stone. "You got it?"

"Here." Stone produced a datacube from his breast pocket. "This is the reason I was late. Conditions around Mostov were 'hot' last night ... by which I mean, the civvy group, the PAC or Scorpio, or whatever, had popped up enough ECM to disrupt everybody's comm, not just ours. We had an airborne observer over Mostov. In fact, Lieutenant Gable was flying topcover for Captain Jarrat and myself, when we went into Mostov to bring out an informant ... NARC business, Colonel. Again, it doesn't, and can't, be Starfleet's concern. This cube contains Gable's gun-camera data, which was never received by the carrier, due to the groundside ECM. Engineer Budweisser salvaged the camera from the aircraft a half-hour ago, and transferred the data. The heat over Mostov was so intense, the camera was fused solid, almost vitrified. I saw Lieutenant Gable's data while Engineer Budweisser was downloading it. Gene?"

He handed over the white metal datacube, and without a word Cantrell dropped it into the slot. One of the CRTs flickered and the images began to play. Jarrat shot a glance at Brogan, but the blond was deliberately looking anywhere in the room but at the screen. Stone laid a hand on Jarrat's arm and leaned over the table, closer to the CRT.

The image was stable, clear. When Curt Gable shot this footage Mostov still existed, though the battle was underway and the sky was punctuated by comet-bright tracer. Gable spun the 104 Corsair on its axis, and they saw the doomed Apogee in the parking lot down below, the Rand Aurora plant, the Carmichael-Lo factory, and in the distance, the battle zone. Fires were burning there, but Fire Control was already in the air. Two big yellow flyers with the TFC logo bombed the area and several fires were extinguished at once. Gable's sound recorders captured the rattle of full-auto fire and the *whoosh* of antipersonnel grenades. The sky lit up, phosphor-bright, and in the sudden illumination the cameras picked up the five troop transports which were trying to get in to extract the peace corps troops who had blundered into much more than they had expected.

Military weapons lit up the horizon and hammered on the audio track, and as Jarrat watched, one of the transports was hit. It yawed wildly, even when the pilot overran the repulsion, and headed fast into the north, toward the spaceport. Another transport was targeted almost at once. An engine blew out in a great tongue of white-gold flame, and it drifted in the wake of the first, streaming fuel and coolant. Warning sirens whooped across the city. Civilians would be scattering, headed for whatever nuke bunkers they could reach.

And the other three troop transports pulled out to safety. They could do no more: the street army was far too well equipped for the big, bloated transports to be any more than sitting ducks. Jarrat swore softly. He knew this routine. On the ground, the troops dug in as best they could and waited for topcover. The transports were armored, but not armed. Against civvy opposition they were impervious, and when they flew against military targets they didn't move without fighter escort.

'Bad Company' must have been holding up, flying a racetrack pattern above the civil air lanes. They were on the scene fast, and now Jarrat held his breath. Instinctively, he knew what had happened, and seeing Gable's gun-camera data only confirmed it. Still, Brogan was not looking at the screen, but Holder was. The older man was leaning toward the CRT, frowning as he tried to put the scene in perspective.

Right there, Stone paused the playback. "Excuse me, Colonel, but I saw this as Bud downloaded it, and what you need to see here is the Thule map. We got one there, Gene?" A two dimensional plot of midtown Thule flicked up on the next screen, and Stone said quietly, "Notice how the city spreads north to the spaceport, then east to the Amundsen Sea, and there's nothing out there for almost two hundred kilometers. Note the proximity of Mostov sector to the coast."

He said no more, but released the playback of Gable's data. Bad Company came in fast and low. A flight of eight Vincent Morello 104 Corsair fighter-interceptors performed two passes over the zone, and on the third released a full spread of air-to-ground warheads which removed the greater part of the packwar problem like a scalpel. The fourth pass would clear the zone completely, allowing the troop transports to approach, but as the Corsairs looped in a massive U-turn around the Wisting Company building, a full rack of three missiles spat out of the still-bouncing rubble.

The Corsairs' super-hot tailpipes made inviting targets, and the missiles were locked-on at once. Again, Jarrat swore beneath his breath, watching with terrible fascination as Brogan led his unit in the wrong direction. Every rule in the book said they should have let the missiles acquire and then tow them out over the sea, let them fuel-out and ditch where they could fall harmlessly.

On Brogan's flightpath, they fell into Mostov. As the Rand Aurora plant exploded, Stone thumbed the remote to freeze the image. The silence around the table was so thick, a knife would have cut it. Jarrat lifted a brow at Stone, and Stone shrugged and added no comment. At last it was Gene Cantrell who said very quietly,

"Colonel Brogan, would you like to add your commentary?"

For a long moment Brogan said nothing, and then he turned toward Cantrell. He paused only long enough to give Stone a look that might have roasted him alive. "There was a whole lot more happening than your observer could video. We'd been sensor-painted from shoot holes in a half-dozen buildings between us and the coast."

"So duck and dodge," Jarrat said in low, neutral tone.

"Dangerous," Brogan argued.

"I don't doubt it," Stone agreed. "But you accepted the risks when you joined the service, Jack. We all did. You'd have lost a couple of aircraft. Your pilots would have punched out, made their way to a pickup point eventually. We've all done it."

Only Jarrat was aware of the vast shudder coursing through him.

"To save a couple of planes, and a hike for your pilots," Janssen said in a curiously mild tone, "you flew three Paladin missiles into the middle of an industrial sector, under which was our old city, colonial heritage listed, and home to twelve thousand souls." She seemed too shocked to react with anger. The rage would come later.

Cantrell had assigned himself the role of arbitrator, or referee, but there was little he could say, and now Holder was stone-faced, silent. "Colonel Holder," Cantrell said levelly at last, "I would suggest this is a matter for Starfleet authority, at some other time. Surely this is neither the time nor the place for any appropriate level of investigation. If you'd like a copy of Lieutenant Gable's data, or an eyewitness testimony from Gable himself, we'll be happy to provide whatever your people need.

"However, the purpose of this meeting is to arrange a liaison, to make sure Mostov won't happen again." He looked from Janssen to Holder and back. "What's done is done. I'm quite sure there will be repercussions, but we can *not* afford to squabble amongst ourselves here and now. The *Athena* could easily have lost our command rank officers last night. We were just lucky. Captains Jarrat and Stone made it out, and extracted an informant who will give us the first link in a chain leading right back to the master at the helm of Scorpio.

"Let's keep this in focus, and point fingers later. If anyone is behind the Mostov disaster, I'm very much afraid it's Senator Cassius Brand, who allowed himself to be persuaded into stupidity. He floated and lobbied the bill which crippled Tactical, and has directly allowed the very weapons you just saw to get into Thule. You have the authority, Colonel Holder, to impeach and censure Senator Brand. *Do it*. But don't hold Tactical responsible for Mostov."

The name of Cassius Brand was under Jarrat's skin like glass powder. Cantrell was still speaking, smoothing ruffled plumage until both Janssen and Holder, who clearly knew each other, were talking calmly. Both of them ignored Brogan as if he were not even in the room. Only Stone was looking at Brogan, and his old rival wore a murderous expression.

The meeting wore on for three hours, and Jarrat was exhausted when it was done. If not for Cantrell, it would have been a brief, violent argument, stopping just short of physical blows being struck. In the end, all parties

agreed to share data, with NARC given the responsibility of coordinating the effort. Holder was not pleased, but he agreed. Janssen seemed to count the decision a minor victory.

The ops room was on shift change when the meeting broke up at last. Holder and Brogan stalked out, Brogan with a ramrod-straight spine which suggested barely-suppressed fury. Archer and Reardon had duties which were long overdue, but Janssen hung back to drain the coffee machine, while the doors were opened onto the ops room and Mischa Petrov's face appeared.

"Don't ask," Jarrat told him before Petrov could say a word.

"That bad?" Petrov nodded at Janssen, and Stone nodded minutely. "Doc Del called a while ago," Petrov added, "like he has ants in his pants. I told him you'd get back to him, soon as you got out of the meeting. He's probably waiting. You want I should call him?"

"Yeah. We'll take it here." Stone gestured at the crescent table.

He looked strung out, Jarrat thought, as if he had the urge to punch something, but there was no proper focus for the anger. If the empathic shields were opened by so much as a chink, he felt the acid-hot rush of Stone's frustration. He pulled a chair out from the table, sat on the table itself with both feet on the seat, while Stone paced between the empty coffee machine and the ops room. Yeddo grass and cinnamon curled on the air as he lit a cigarette, dragged the smoke to the bottom of his lungs, and passed it over to Jarrat. The mild hit took the edge off. Jarrat gave his partner a nod of thanks.

"Impeach and censure Senator Brand," Janssen said richly. "I should live to see it happen."

"I think you will, Colonel." Jarrat took another drag and passed back the smoke.

"Call me Kris," Janssen invited. "You get anything useful from your pickup?"

"Not yet, and when we do, it won't be about Michiko or Denehy," Stone warned. "His name is Petrakis, and what he knows is about the ass-end of your Angel trade. Speaking of which, are you aware you had a den called The Cockpit in city bottom?"

"I've heard of it," Janssen said cautiously. "A badboy club, isn't it? They go there to use and be used, hurt and be hurt ... not my scene, Stone, but it's whatever turns you on. What about it?"

"You'll get the report." Jarrat stretched out his shoulders. "For what it's worth. It's all academic. Dreamheads and hawks, they're all gone. Thule's Angel cutting lab was down there, probably not far away from The Cockpit, and it'll also be vaporized. And some well-heeled families in the 'soap bubbles' are going to be missing kids."

"Kids out slumming?" Janssen guessed. "There's no law against it, Jarrat. They were down in city bottom, playing with fire. And they got burned. They accepted the risk."

It was a bleak philosophy, and she was probably right, but Jarrat was not at all sure Janssen had even a vague idea of the entertainments taking place in The Cockpit. Tactical seemed unaware of the Angel connection there. He

might have opened the subject, but the CRT at his elbow chirped for attention, and Stone leaned over to accept the call.

Framed in the screen, Harry Del's face was pale, and Jarrat thought the healer looked unwell. He had never seen Del looking ill, and it was troubling. "Kevin, Stoney," Del began. "I tried to call yesterday, but I couldn't get through. Kip told me there's all kinds of shit lining up to hit a dozen fans. Thanks for taking this call."

He was using a vidphone rather than the highband R/T he had been given when he informally left NARC, and Jarrat frowned. "You could have called any time. What goes on? You managed to trick your way around the old tank? Last I heard, Kip had you talking to Bud, something about an antique tank and a bunch of iffy circuits."

At last Harry smiled, but the expression was fleeting. "Something like that. Look ... something's not kosher, Kevin."

The alarm bells were ringing in Jarrat's head, and when he looked at Stone he saw the diamond glitter back in the blue eyes. "What do you mean, Harry?" Stone asked. "You want out of there?"

"I ... yeah," Del said quickly. The tip of his tongue flicked over his lips and he paused to listen over his shoulder. "Can you spare the time to come down here? You ought to talk to Senator Brand yourselves. I don't want to say the wrong thing, if you follow me."

The smoke signals were so confused, Jarrat was not following him at all, but Cassius Brand was on the very-short list of individuals they needed to interview. "Senator Brand knows there's a NARC carrier here?" Jarrat asked shrewdly.

The healer made a face. "Jesus Christ, Kevin, the whole of Aurora knows it after last night. You were on the vids."

"Okay," Stone said amusedly, "how does Brand feel about a couple of NARCs landing in his back yard?"

"He drank your health in malt whiskey when GlobalNet announced a gunship'd pulled NARC agents out of Mostov," Del told him. "He told me he's always been an advocate for NARC, he was on the citizen's council, the civilian committee that mooted the department, thirty years ago. I don't think he'll be bothered if you land in his yard. And you should." He paused, swallowed on a dry throat and added, "Make it soon."

Jarrat was looking at the time. "Tonight? 16:00, Thule time?"

"We also need to talk to Brand," Stone added. "He'll be there?"

"Hold on, let me make sure." Harry's face vanished, leaving an angle on a bare wall and a twisted, gnarled old bonsai.

"Serendipity?" Jarrat wondered.

"Something," Stone added, "isn't kosher and Harry wants out."

"Christ," Janssen muttered, "after last night, I want out of Thule ... Except this shit-hole town is my home, where else would I go? If I was from anyplace else, I'd be on the next clipper out." She drained the coffee and thumped the empty mug down beside the machine. "I have to get back to the ant heap. There's memorial services for the TFC crews that bought it last night in Brogan's fiasco." She paused in the doorway. "I hope Eric roasts the bas-

tard over a slow fire, and I'd volunteer to grease him up!"

With that she was gone, leaving Petrov blinking after her, but before Jarrat could enlighten him Del was back. "Kevin? Senator Brand will be home all evening. Thule's a mess right now, most people are staying home, just watching it on the vids. He said he's looking forward to talking to you."

"We'll be there, Harry." Stone was frowning at Del's image. "Are you okay? You look rough."

"I'm shook up, like everybody else," Del admitted, "and I'm an empath, remember. What do you think I can feel, down here in the middle of it? I'll see you soon, Stoney, Kevin."

The comm clicked off, returning the CRT to the endless stream of the carrier's data, and Jarrat turned a speculative look on Stone. "This," he said wryly, "should be interesting."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They were ten minutes early. The Apogee which had served as the *Athena's* lighter for over a year was gone, vaporized with most of Mostov, but NARC was public now. A consignment of four Corsairs had been delivered from the Vincent Morello factory outside Paris on Rethan, and when they launched from the carrier for Harry Del's meeting it was in the new shuttle. The deep space tracking net had been apprised of the *Athena's* position, though she was still effectively screened from public systems. When Thule Field hailed the inbound aircraft Jarrat identified without hesitation as 'NARC Airborne.'

The smoke was still thick over Thule, and on cue the wind off the Amundsen Sea had dropped. A heavy ice fog had settled over the city, combining with the motes of smoke, and Thule looked like a ghost town. In the early evening, traffic was almost absent, the air lanes deserted save for cabs and freight trucks which never stopped. Tok and Villiers were suffering power outages, and the central business sector, Kansai itself, was so subdued, it might have been shut down.

To the north, the Appalachians curved away toward the tree line, where subtle terraforming was still taking place. Uptown Thule rode there, above the smog and ice fog like a fantasy. As the shuttle dropped in, already riding a beam from Argentia, Stone counted forty assorted spheres and domed platforms of every shape and size. Argentia was said to be one of the first, among the largest and most elite. One did not just fly into Argentia. One was invited, expected, or the sphere would not make an airlock available.

The pressure skin was diamond glass; the structural members were spun kevlex, strong as steel and a tenth the weight, and the whole creation rode on three massive repulsion generators and two backups, fed by two reactors

which would have powered a clipper. The outside air temperature rose as the shuttle approached: the field of floating spheres and domes generated massive amounts of waste heat. In their own way, said Michiko's advertising, they were contributing to the on-going terraforming of Aurora, warming the environment, darkening the surface with the black spruce and arctic cedar forests which had begun to flourish in the southern Appalachians.

"NARC Airborne, you are clear to approach." Argentia's AI had a light, pleasant male voice. "Please use only the facility marked out by your locator beam. Thank you."

The beam issued from Cassius Brand's private landing, and Jarrat was curious as he jinked the nose around, taking the shuttle in close. The Argentia sphere was two kilometers in diameter, and only the bottom third was given over to the machinery which buoyed it up. The base was like blue ice or frosted glass, opalescent, glowing with an inner light, but few details showed through. The sphere was partly wreathed in a faint mist of its own making.

Inside was a landscape of fantasy mansions, landscaped gardens and the reed-slender towers, corkscrew spires, of the apartment blocks. There, Thule's almost-luminaries looked out over tropical parks which hung on gossamer threads in the warm winds of a perpetual summer. Stone saw all this through the finger-thick pressure skin as the shuttle nosed in toward Brand's landing, and he whispered an obscenity.

"Yeah," Jarrat said in the same undertone. "If you lived in a city bottom rat-trap, so broke that your kid brother was whoring in a den for his next fix ... and somebody slapped a missile launcher into your hand and whispered the words '*vive le revolution*' in your ear, what would you do?"

"I ... don't know," Stone admitted uncomfortably. "I'd like to think I'd find some other way out of hell. But I'll tell you this: if you gave me the launcher and told me the Scorpio bosses lived here, and Angel dollars put 'em here, keep 'em here, it might be a different story." He paused to look at the comm relay terminal by his left hand. "Over the threshold. We're in."

The senator's private hangar would have garaged a dozen planes like the shuttle, and five were already ranked along the left side as Jarrat eased the Corsair into the space left for them. The outer hatch sealed behind them, and a red spinner warned them not to lift the canopy while reheating was in progress.

When the light turned green the air pressure was Earth normal, the temperature read as twenty-eight degrees, and Stone was reluctantly impressed. They left the hangar via a revolving armorglass bubble, as much a folly as any other element about Argentia. The scent of frangipani was on the warm air, and birds called in the woods. They had entered Argentia on the shoulder of a hill. Before and below, the slope ran away to a creek, and beyond was the towering white spire of a building that defied every law of physics. The distance was blue-hazed, and Stone looked up into the warm azure of a summer sky. Birds wheeled against the inside of the pressure skin, and several small airships glided silently between the most improbable structures Stone's imagination had never conjured.

The hillside leveled off just above the hangar. A path wound up toward a

mansion which was separated from the next palace by a double rank of palm trees, all laden with thick green bananas. The house was white-walled, the roof red-shingled, the windows standing open, as they never could groundside on Aurora. A fountain played on the lawn; tiny blue and green parrots chattered over a marble bird table and a sundial cast late afternoon shadows from the small, cool, distant star.

"Damn," Stone said softly as he started up the path in Jarrat's wake. "Hand it to Michiko. He's got style."

"But it would have taken the GNP of some colonies to float this," Jarrat observed. Hands thrust into the hip pockets of black denims, he turned to look out over the vast stretch of the sphere's widest section. Beyond the diamond glass of the pressure skin they could see other spheres.

Alhambra and Adamantia floated against the ice fog which obscured groundside Thule; beyond these sister-spheres of Argentia were the smaller globes of Arkadia and Atlantia, and the domed platforms which often linked them together. Through the pressure skins Stone caught glimpses of green, stretches of liquid water, each like an incredible oasis in the midst of the arctic.

He was transfixed and loath to look away as he heard footsteps on the path from the house, but he had summoned a smile when he saw Harry Del coming down. The smile faded at once. Del was not alone, nor did he look happy.

A big man, ebony-dark, burly in the shoulders, thick-bellied, with the tell-tale bulge of a heavy sidearm under a too-light jacket, was a pace behind him. The bodyguard was his shadow, and Del could not get far enough away from him to say a word that would not be overheard. The man was a professional. He stuck close, obviously doing the job he had been assigned. And he was damned efficient.

"Hello, Harry. Who's your friend?" Stone asked glibly.

"Captain Stone, Captain Jarrat ... Lieutenant Jean-Pierre Laporte," Del said with forced patience and mock civility.

"Lieutenant?" Jarrat echoed, though he offered his hand, and the bodyguard shook it briefly.

"Army, still Reserves-listed," Laporte told him.

"And killing time here, bodyguarding for Senator Brand?" Stone guessed. Laporte's hand was big, callused, dry-palmed.

The man did not directly answer the question, but Harry said awkwardly, "Not quite, Stoney."

"Not quite?" Jarrat's brows were up, a shrewd glitter in his eyes.

"Talk to Senator Brand," Laporte suggested, deadpan.

"Like he said." Del pocketed his hands, perhaps to conceal the clenched fists, and Stone needed no empathic link between himself and the healer to know Harry was twitchy. Without waiting, Del turned back up the path. As if they were roped together, Laporte followed, and Harry said over his shoulder, "I'm a guest in this house. I don't want to say the wrong thing and insult somebody. I'm a stranger in this town, I don't know the fine points of the law, and you may have noticed, it's quite the fortress."

He did not say it, but the meaning was leaden: if Brand did not want a

visitor to leave, he was not going to get out. Jarrat and Stone shared a look, but for the moment were silent. Laporte offered no comment. He stuck to Del like a leech, his face impassive, his big hands relaxed.

The path meandered between flowering shrubs and came up onto a terrace with hanging baskets, deep-voiced wind chimes, gold cane furniture. And Senator Cassius Brand himself, sitting in the high-backed planter's chair, with a view of the path. He had been able to see them for some time before Jarrat and Stone saw him, and Stone felt Jarrat's automatic flare of annoyance.

"Politician," Kevin said in an acid undertone.

"For seventeen years," Stone added. "Habits of a lifetime ... size 'em up and get the drop on 'em."

Just short of the terrace, Laporte moved swiftly ahead and turned to bar their way. He spoke over his shoulder. "Senator, you should know the NARC officers are both armed." He drew a remote from the jacket pocket. "I can turn off the house alarms, or disarm them."

"You can certainly turn off the house scan." Stone spoke not to Laporte but to his boss. "Or we can schedule you a ride to the carrier, Senator, if you still want to talk. In which case, Doctor Del will be jump seating with us right now. Harry?" He had laid a hand on Del's shoulder, and Jarrat had actually turned to leave when the senator spoke.

His voice was like silk over gravel. "Turn off the house scan, Jean-Pierre. Come up, Captain Jarrat, Captain Stone. Forgive my staff. We're all a little paranoid after last night."

"They were paranoid when I got here," Harry muttered.

A strident warning beep from the remote reported the house security system setting itself on hiatus. Stone strode on up the three timber steps onto a decked terrace five meters wide, thirty meters long, punctuated by troughs growing every herb, blue flag iris and orchids. A redwood rail guarded the outer edge, where the hillside dropped away toward the meander of a creek and a swathe of woodland. Beyond, the spires of reed-slim apartment blocks soared to meet the diamond glass.

"Nice place you have here," Jarrat said aridly by way of greeting as they joined Brand. He offered his hand, and the elder statesman took it. "I'm Jarrat. It's ... interesting to meet you at last."

"Captain Jarrat." Brand stood, and Stone was surprised to find him a tall man, coordinated, whipcord-strong, though the subcutaneous flesh had been worn away by time, leaving him thin. Tendons like cables stood out in his neck, but the handshake was strong, the pale blue eyes gimlet-sharp, the spine ramrod-straight. Brand's hair was white and still thick, cut short in the local style. In the tropical warmth of Argentia he wore baggy white slacks, a pale gray silk shirt, leather sandals. "Thank you for visiting my home," he was saying. "I would have gone up to the carrier, of course, but after last night I'm so busy, I doubt I could find time to get away for weeks. By which time ... well, let's say, time is one thing I don't take lightly anymore."

"You'd better start at the beginning." Stone pulled up one of the light wicker chairs as Brand gestured for Laporte to discreetly vanish.

"I sent for refreshments," Brand said evasively.

Stone watched the bodyguard withdraw. He went only as far as the wide French windows, and took station beside the vertical blinds, deliberately pulling on a headset and meeting Stone's eyes without a blink. He took this job dead seriously. The only question left in Stone's mind was, what in hell the job was. Laporte had seemed to be bodyguarding Del, but Harry said *not quite* ... and these people had been paranoid when he arrived. Stone's curiosity was piqued.

"It's all about my patient," Del began.

"My son," Brand added, fixing Stone with a hard look. "Doctor Del has been examining Marcus."

"More precisely, I've been examining a cryotank," Del said carefully. "And I've told the senator only the truth. There's nothing I can do for Marcus while the tank remains here. I'd have to bring in the technicians, and even then it'd be damned risky. The tank is old. Escada went out of business almost forty years ago. IntelScan picked up the service contracts, but they won't touch anything older than sixty years. All the tanks manufactured today are for medical purposes."

He was ill at ease, almost fidgeting. Stone had never before seen Del antsy. Jarrat was frowning at the healer, and as a servant appeared at the French windows he leaned closer. "Harry, what's wrong?"

The servant was a young girl in a gaudy kaftan. Her limbs were pale as porcelain. She could not have been up from Thule for long. Stone wondered what kind of waiting list there was for employment in the spheres. The kid set down a tray carrying glasses and two pitchers of iced tea, and like Laporte, vanished into the house.

When she was gone, Del judged himself free to speak. "What's wrong? I'm an empath," he said tiredly. "Do you know what it was like last night? Can you imagine the backlash of so much fear or pain? Today it's grief, shock ... I can't shut it out. It wears me down."

He dragged both hands back through his dark hair, and for the first time in Stone's memory, Harry Del showed his age. He was near to exhaustion, he was perplexed and, Stone thought, he was a little afraid. Was the fear his own, or the cumulative effects of the pain and grief of thousands of others? Del obviously needed to put distance between himself and Thule before he could think clearly.

"Harry, do you want to jump-seat with us?" Stone asked quietly.

But without hesitation Del made negative gestures. "I've taken responsibility for my patient. I'll not leave him now. But Marcus ... the tank ... can't stay here. I'd like to take him right back to my lab on Darwin's. I know I have the machinery and materials to do the work there, while Kip Reardon would only have to send for the gear by courier. But with the shit happening here in Thule, I don't know how possible any of this is. It's why I involved you, Stoney. Sorry." He glanced at Jarrat. "Bill Dupre promised me NARC resources if I needed them. Seems the department has a vested interest in Marcus."

What he needed was a flight back to Darwin's. A commercial charter would take a week to get there, and Marcus Brand was certainly in no hurry,

but the look on Cassius Brand's lean face at this moment was negative as a thundercloud, and Jarrat was asking,

"You have a problem with the tank being moved, Senator?"

"Only with *how* it's moved," Brand growled in his silk-gravel voice. "I'll not put it on a clipper. The risk factors are unacceptable."

"They're perfectly acceptable to the five or six hundred other passengers," Jarrat observed. "Marcus is just a passenger, after all."

Brand glared at him but deliberately made no reply. "No commercial charter can offer me suitable security arrangements," he went on as if Jarrat had not spoken. "And alas, I don't run a ship of my own with hyperdrive capabilities." He lifted his chin and looked at Stone. "If Marcus is to be transferred to the NARC facility on Darwin's, I suggest you put him aboard a NARC vessel."

From any other man, the proposition would have been ridiculously, peremptory. But Brand still had a seat on one of NARC's colonial subcommittees and his long history of involvement with the department was probably worth a few favors. Jarrat and Stone sat back in adjacent basket chairs and shared a frown as they gave the old man's suggestion due consideration.

At last Jarrat leaned over to pour iced tea for himself and Stone as he said, "A NARC ship is probably too difficult right now, Senator. You must be aware of our position, in the aftermath of the Equinox syndicate bust. But we should be able to get Harry and the tank aboard a Starfleet courier as early as tomorrow morning, Thule time. According to our schedules, the *Nimrod* just arrived with priority data and fragile cargo for the *Olympic*. She's shoving off in ten or twelve hours. Harry, if you want to be aboard, we can arrange it."

"And a NARC transport to take you up, with a few hours to spare before they prep to leave," Stone added. "You'll be back on Darwin's in two days ... and I know you didn't want to be there."

"After Thule?" Del said darkly. "I'll take Darwin's, Stoney, and read the old morons at Central the riot act, in words of one syllable!"

Jarrat chuckled. "Senator Brand? If those security arrangements suit you, we'll set it up."

"Do it," Brand growled.

The tea smelt of mint. In one pull Stone drained the tall green glass and rattled the ice cubes. Jarrat had taken the R/T from his pocket and was talking to the carrier as Harry refilled Stone's glass and took one himself. "You need any special gear?" Stone asked.

But Del seemed merely relieved. "Just a repulsion dolly, and there are several around here. You're sure about the courier?"

"The *Nimrod* was on turnaround, she's available. Unless there's an emergency, she's yours." The wickerwork creaked under Stone's weight as he turned to watch his partner. Jarrat was on his feet. He wandered down the terrace as he spoke to the carrier, tall and slim-hipped, with an almost tropical wind in his hair. "You're worried about security, Senator," Stone said to Brand, though his eyes remained on Jarrat. "You want to tell me why?"

Tiny blue parrots swooped over the eaves and on, into the woods. Brand paused to watch them, and Stone heard the reluctance in his voice as he said,

"I'm always concerned about security, Captain Stone. You may have noticed, I'm a rather wealthy man. I have a great deal to lose, and therefore a great deal to protect."

"We noticed," Stone said with a rueful glance at the mansion. "It's just routine security, then? The danger of kidnap or hijack?"

"If you say so." Like an eel, Brand slithered around the question. "Just keep my son safe, Captain, until Doctor Del can work his magic." He was studying Stone closely, rudely, and Stone knew why. "He told me about you," Brand said after some moments, as if remembering his manners. "You were the one ... the first. There was another, a young man called Kwei. But you were the first."

The first victim of Angel ever to come back; the first to be Angel-immune. Stone clamped down tight on a rush of memories. "Somebody had to be first. It was sheer luck, if you want the truth. Harry'd treated my partner for otherwise terminal brain damage."

"And it was Captain Jarrat's notion to take you to Doctor Del." Brand's eyes glittered with an unholy light, not quite sane.

"It seemed like a wild idea," Stone admitted. "Even Harry wasn't sure he could do anything for me. I was ... the grand experiment."

"An experiment that worked." Brand's zealot-lit eyes were on Jarrat now. "You both look remarkably healthy. Tell me, Captain: are you aware of any side-effects from the treatment?"

"Side effects?" Stone shot a glance at Del, wondering how much Harry had said about the empathic bond. Surely Marcus, like Tim Kwei, would be in no such danger.

"Physical, mental, psychological, sexual, spiritual," Brand insisted. "You look healthy, and from certain things Doctor Del has said, I believe you and Captain Jarrat are regular sex partners?"

The term inspired a grimace and Stone reined back on his temper. "If that's what you want to call it. Try the word 'committed' instead. And no, Senator, the *treatment* caused no side effects we were aware of, unless you want to talk about my Angel-immunity."

"Ah." Brand sat back and looked at Del. "Then, the difficulty is only with the tank. You understand, it was the fastest solution I could find at the time. Marcus was ... clinically dead, and tanks are rare."

Jarrat was wandering back, and heard the last. "You grabbed the only option you had, Senator. Nobody blames you," he said evenly. "You're set, Harry. You've got a transport coming at 02:30. Have the tank ready to load. They'll deliver to Stavanger Dock. The *Nimrod* is tucked in between the tender, *Selena*, and a flock of commercial trucks. Loading should be easy, and barring problems they ship out at 06:00, sharp." He set down the glass, dropped one hand on Del's shoulder and the other on Stone's, and spoke to Brand. "Now, do you want to give us the whole picture?"

"I don't follow you," Brand said, slick as oil.

A flash of quicksilver anger from Jarrat tingled in Stone's nerves. He sat up in the basket chair as Jarrat said, "I was talking to the carrier. Since we're here, they're running top-level surveillance on this location. You see, Sena-

tor? We're all just as paranoid about security. We're not the only ones with surveillance on you. We're picking up signs of passive monitoring, video and audio. Your lines are not tapped, but—"

"Paparazzi," Brand said with a lick of real fury. "It's GlobalNet, Captain Jarrat. They've been around me like mosquitoes since they got wind of the fact I brought in an out of system specialist to treat Marcus. You understand, it's never been a secret I have a son in cryogen. An Angelhead, a victim ... Clinically dead, revived with a few minutes of viable brain oxygen left, suspended for a quarter of a century." He shrugged and looked away toward the spires and towers beyond the forest. "I'm frequently a news item. I work with charitable institutions and government. Whenever my name comes up you can be sure GlobalNet will drag Marcus into the story, for sheer ghoulishness."

"They got hold of this story?" All at once Stone was uneasy. "Doctor Del's work is on NARC's hush-list. Your house security stinks, Senator. You realize, we'll have to brief Central."

"Oh, I know." Brand was on his feet, pacing between the guard rail and the French windows. "It was a servant, what else? I screen my servants as closely as one can, but you can never be completely sure. I've already fired the man off my staff, and he'll never work in Thule again, this much I promise you."

"Dupre is going to be thrilled," Jarrat said wryly.

"Too late now," Harry said with a certain grim satisfaction. "I have to tell you, Kevin, if this has blown the lid right off the project, I'm not going to shed tears or lose any sleep. And as for Janine Cruz, the stupid sod might actually live to talk about it!"

The senator was a cautious blank, and Stone was not inclined to explain. "We'll inform Colonel Dupre, and you can expect Central's spin-doctors to launch some damage control story. Your paparazzi will discover themselves the victims of a mistake, or a criminal fraud."

"Well, shoot," Harry muttered.

"Still, it'll take a week or more to launch the story," Brand said tersely, "and until then we'll be suffering GlobalNet parasites." He glared at the NARC men. "What are you going to do about it?"

With an effort, Stone stifled a chuckle. "I'd have told you to call Tactical, but you did such a great job of suffocating them, I'd be surprised if they had enough punch left to protect you." He cocked his head at Brand and pinned on a curious look. "You want to tell us why you did that, Senator? It seems an odd thing for a man to do, when he was one of NARC's godfathers, and is still a strong advocate for us. Why put your weight behind NARC on one hand, then go out and string your own Tactical up by the balls?"

"Stoney—" Del began in a hiss.

"Because Aurora Tactical was a runaway, powered by dangerous personal crusades, and the time comes when a maverick has to be noosed before the liberty of a whole colony gets dumped in jeopardy." The clipped accent was unmistakably that of Chryse, the major trading port of Mars, similar to Kip Reardon, who was from the same region of Mars, though not from Chryse itself.

The steely voice issued from the French windows, and Jarrat and Stone turned toward it. Pietro Denehy stood framed in the open window, cradling a brandy balloon and a cigarette. He was in casual clothes, as if he had just come in from town. Not as tall as Brand, a scant few years younger, but with the smooth, plump skin and dark hair of a determined war against time. His shoulders were wide; round biceps filled out the short sleeves of the pale blue sports shirt. The hair was glossy, mahogany brown and long on his collar. Dark brown eyes were brightened and highlighted by gold contact lenses. The smile was fixed in place as he came onto the terrace, but though his face creased pleasantly the expression did not reach his eyes.

"Pietro Denehy," Brand said formally, "this is Captain Stone, Captain Jarrat, of NARC. Doctor Del you already know."

"Gentlemen. Cass, you're looking good ... I just got back." Denehy gave the NARC officers a nod. "I assume this has something to do with either Mostov last light or the boy. Marcus."

"You'd be right." Jarrat did not offer his hand. "Our information was, you encouraged Senator Brand to float legislation designed to cripple Tactical, and pressured him to lobby it."

Denehy threw back his head and laughed. "Now, who told you that? No, let me guess. You've been talking to Kristyn Janssen."

"Colonel Janssen volunteered a lot of data," Stone said slowly, "and I've no doubt you'd like to provide a lot more. Pull up a chair."

"Sure, why not? I don't have anyplace special to be." Denehy dragged a chair closer and parked himself in it. He took a long drag on the cigarette and swirled the amber liquor in his glass as he studied first Stone and then Jarrat without regard to good manners. "You want to know about the new legislation, or about Tac itself? Or you want to talk about Kris Janssen? Maybe about her whole goddamned family."

"Start anywhere you like," Jarrat invited. "Stoney?" He touched Stone's arm to draw his attention to the figures in the shadows just inside the windows. Laporte had a companion, a big woman with the look of a pro aeroball player and a headset matching Laporte's.

"My bodyguard, Captain," Denehy said darkly. "I've gone nowhere, at no time, without a bodyguard for more years than I care to recall. Is it a problem?"

"Not at this moment." Jarrat settled in the chair beside Stone. "The legislation ..."

"Was necessary," Brand said in curt tones. "You didn't come here to discuss the situation with Tactical!"

"We did," Stone informed him. "Your son was another matter entirely. You would have been hearing from NARC soon enough ... And you too, Mister Denehy."

"Of course," Denehy said in deliberately patronizing tones. "Cass already told you: the legislation was necessary. Tactical was a runaway truck, destroying anything in its path. Nobody would question the need for a potent, aggressive Tactical department, but in this colony the power long ago landed in the hands of the heritage lunatics."

"Meaning," Stone guessed, "the first-fleet families, or their direct descendants. People like Janssen, who put the colony first."

"And the 'immigrant industrialists' second?" Denehy was sharp.

"If you want to see it that way." Jarrat slid a pair of green lenses onto his nose as the evening sun angled steeply across the terrace.

"There's no other way to see it." Denehy took a last drag on the cigarette and flicked away the butt. "The bastards don't own Aurora, Captain, but sure to God, they think they do. Their families arrived out here when city bottom was the be-all and end-all, the brave new world, the newborn colony. They think history gives them some kind of privilege to make the law. To design Aurora in their own image."

"Instead of in yours," Stone added.

Denehy only shrugged. "It's got to be designed in some fucking image, Captain Jarrat —"

"I'm Stone," he said with brittle civility and thin humor.

For the first time the smile touched Denehy's eyes and the word *whatever* hung unspoken on the air. Denehy did not actually say it, but Jarrat and Stone both heard it. So did Cassius Brand. He shot a glance at his business partner, astonished and warning at once.

"Just so long as it's not designed in the image of the heritage lunatics," Stone said glibly, "you're content? So tell me, Denehy, what's your beef with them?"

"Or is your fight with Tactical?" Jarrat challenged.

"Captain Jarrat," Brand began, "I hardly think provoking Pete Denehy is necessary. There are no secrets around this table. Anything you want to know, you have the right, even the duty, to ask."

Jarrat's gray eyes could as easily turn to ice as warm in friendship. They were like gimlets on Brand as he rasped, "I just did."

Another chuckle escaped Denehy, but it was humorless. "Don't let them get to you Cass. They're all bastards at that age. Don't you recall? We were too. Cock of the heap, and they know it. It's a phase you go through ... you also grow out of it." He paused and gave the NARC men a hard look. "If you live long enough."

"A threat?" Stone's brows rose. "Interesting."

"A warning," Denehy corrected. "Nothing in Thule is what you think, and nobody's who you believe them to be. Sure, I got my head together with Cass and we crippled Tactical. I'd say we castrated it ... but it never had the balls to begin with."

He was referring to Janssen, and Stone took a deep breath to smother a curse. "We've seen Janssen's data. She's had you under surveillance for a long time, Denehy."

"I know," Denehy said evenly. "About as long as I've had her under surveillance. The woman's insane. You didn't notice? You didn't look hard enough. She's a *Janssen*. They're better than you and me. They were out here nearly two centuries before I arrived, which makes them the uncrowned royalty of Aurora. Princes and queens, the lot of them. They want sovereignty for Aurora, which is fine and dandy. Nobody who's lived here long enough to

get sentimental about the place has a problem with it, but there's a catch. Sovereignty for Aurora puts the first families up there on the throne, holding power, the balance of the colonial government. And the trade commission, and the immigration convention." He lifted both brows at Jarrat and Stone. "You can see how some of us were ... troubled. It's a dangerous, fucking *lunatic* idea that has to be stopped. When they tried to use Tactical as a tool to bring it about, damned right we crippled them, the fastest way we knew how. You never asked why the legislation was passed, written into colonial law like *that*?" He snapped his fingers. "There's still more of *us* than there are of them. And so long as Janssen and her maniac heritage group are muzzled, there always will be."

"*Us*," Jarrat said thoughtfully, "being immigrants, latecomers, the industrialists who came out here stinking rich and just got richer when the frontier opened up."

"Rich, poor, it makes no difference," Brand insisted. "Aurora is still a land of opportunity, it always will be. People will try to tell you there's no way to escape city bottom, but don't you believe it. Those who remain in city bottom stay there because they like it."

It was on the tip of Stone's tongue to ask Brand if he was sure which planet he lived on, and if he had ever set foot in Mostov city bottom in his life, but he held his silence as Jarrat said, "You have an ... interesting perspective, Senator. I'm not sure how many people on Aurora would agree with you, but it's a safe bet everybody in the spheres is on your side. It's also not our business. Your Angel trade is our business. Scorpio." He was looking at Denehy as he spoke the word for the first time in this company. "And the weapons they're fighting with." He paused. "Maybe you'd like to talk about Oromon."

"Stinking place." Denehy did not skip a beat. "What about it?"

"You have no interest in its real estate?" Stone was only fishing. "I would have thought, after you and Leo Michiko put so much time and money into it, you'd think more highly of Oromon."

The dark brown eyes narrowed. "Me and Leo? Now, what in the sweet Christ are you intimating, son?"

"You know Michiko?" Jarrat asked.

Denehy's glare transferred to him. "Of course I do. Argentia's a small town, socially speaking. I've done business with Leo. Most people here have. God knows, we're living inside his first brain child."

"You made donations," Stone added.

"It's legal in this colony." Denehy's teeth were clenched.

"Donations," Jarrat went on, "right after Michiko crapped out on Oromon. He got well and truly screwed over when he didn't get the land packages, the construction permits."

"You know the story," Denehy said thinly.

"And you bailed him." Stone reached for a glass of tea.

A thin edge of anger brightened Cassius Brand's face as he stood, physically putting himself between Denehy and the NARC men. "You were already told, gentlemen, donations are perfectly legal as income in this colony and many others. The tradition dates back to the very early days of human

occupation and industry, when extended families and interconnected business interests, which were often one and the same thing, either stood together and *bailed* each other out of mayhem, or they went under. If you've done any homework at all, you would know, as many fortunes are lost as are made when a colony is being established. We stand together on Aurora. It's why we've grown strong."

The story was watertight. Stone lifted a brow at Jarrat. "We can accept all that," Jarrat agreed. "In fact, it's not our business. Sooner or later you'll get audited, like Michiko. The facts will come out. What we want to know is, Denehy, what you were interested in, on Oromon. We don't believe men as savvy as you and Michiko and the senator here would go into any deal like Oromon without doing *your* homework first. Michiko stood to lose too much if he couldn't shmooze his way around the politics back in the homeworlds."

"So he knew he was playing roulette," Stone added, "and he'd lose so bad it would bankrupt him, if the deal didn't get done. The only reason a man like Michiko would go into such a crap shoot is if he knew somebody was standing by to bail him." He nailed Denehy with a glare. "That'd be you. So you also had an interest in Oromon."

The anger redoubled. Brand was on his feet again. "If you were not NARCs, you'd be escorted off my property!" He was snarling.

"Because even Tactical doesn't have the muscle left to ask the right questions of the right people." Jarrat's lip curled. "You can't see how you've implicated yourself, can you, Brand?"

"Implicated?" Brand echoed and pulled back as if Jarrat had morphed into a rearing cobra.

"Sit down, Cass, rest yourself," Denehy said smoothly. "Give them their due: they're only doing their job. NARC sent them here to bust an Angel syndicate, and you know the first three rules?" He laughed, and Stone might have heard a genuine sound of humor there. With a crooked grin Denehy counted off on his thick fingers. "One: suspect everybody. Two: follow the money. Three: be a patented bastard, because it gets people so fired up, they say dumb things and get themselves into trouble before they can stop themselves."

"But, for godsakes," Brand began.

Denehy looked sidelong at him. "They're NARCs, *your* brain children, Cass, and they're fucking effective. But if you got nothing to hide, you got nothing to fear from NARC. Am I right, Stone, Jarrat?"

He was, and Stone had to hand it to the man: Denehy was either even better than Randolph Dorne, or he was innocent. "Got it in one," Stone said evenly.

"And if you have nothing to hide," Jarrat added, "you won't mind telling us about your interest in Oromon."

A gold lighter flicked repeatedly at the tip of another cigarette. Denehy smoked a great deal, but it was the scent of kipgrass and roses wafting from the cigarette, nothing stronger. "Oromon is a wasteland," he said, pluming a dragon's breath of smoke from both nostrils. "And I'm going to need a wasteland real soon. I can't get the rights to any tract of Aurora. This is a small

planet, fifty percent ocean or ice pack, and they're warming and greening every square click of land they can manage, which puts my operation in the ice fields. They're no good for my purpose."

"Your purpose being ...?" Jarrat prompted.

"Research," Denehy told him. "Bio-weapons research, to be specific. You know what PharmaTech does. We heal, we mend, we cure."

For a moment Stone was about to press him on the subject of Primax, but even if the drug were a deliberate fraud, it would not take a smart lawyer out of Earth long to 'prove' Primax just an academic blind alley, a lot of wasted time and money. It happened; stock holders lost, big time, but there was no illegality to bring down the company or its boss. Stone let it go, and Jarrat was on the same wavelength as himself.

"You're branching into weapons?" Kevin was genuinely surprised. "You have a government contract?"

Again, the laugh from Denehy. "You're trying to put the chicken before the egg. First you develop a prototype the bastards will want, then you go do your presentation, *then* you get your contract and you can start to milk the cash cow."

"You're very cynical about it," Stone observed.

"You get that way, son, if you live long enough to outgrow all the gosh-wow life's going to supply." Denehy flicked ash across the terrace. "So I needed a wasteland for a testing range. Still do. Leo had a damned good idea. He wanted to float, and I do mean *float*, a whole industrial city, home to a million people, in the Montevideo area. It's all about titanium ore. Montevideo's sitting on a low-grade deposit. Not enough to warrant a major robot mining operation, but enough to give a colonial population a boost. So long," he added, "as they didn't have to live in the stinking mess of an environment left by Oromon's war." He took a last drag on the smoke and tossed away the butt. "The Celestial Territories Act is a dinosaur left over from an era that was so self-righteous, two-faced and lunatic-separatist, it's a wonder human beings survived at all. Leo got screwed over. We all did."

"It turns out," Brand said icily, "according to the act, Oromon belongs to all Mankind, and private enterprise can't get access. Development rights are granted to government, not to industry."

"We're all aware of that." Stone was watching Harry Del's face, and he sent Jarrat a tiny prickle, a little adrenaline surge, to draw his attention. Del's face might have been carved from wood. His eyes were dark, his mouth compressed, and he seemed to have pulled his features deliberately into a mask which let through no expression.

Something, Stone thought, was not kosher, and Harry wanted out of this place, even though it was as close to a bubble of paradise as Stone was ever likely to see. The more the subject of Oromon was pressed, the more mask-like Del's face became, and alarm bells had begun to jangle in Stone's head.

"So, since you knew you were up against the Celestial Territories Act, why," Jarrat was asking of Denehy, "did Michiko pump so much money into Oromon? No, let me guess. Tax write off?"

"Smart boy," Denehy growled, "and it's none of your business."

"But Oromon is," Stone added, and would not elaborate. Let Denehy sweat; let Brand speculate, if he was unaware of Denehy's interests outside their own partnership. Brand had put himself in Denehy's camp when he moved against Tactical, and the PharmaTech camp might be a dangerous place to be. Stone met Denehy's eyes levelly, probingly, but Denehy was more than a match for Randolph Dorne. He did nothing without a watertight cover story, and if he was hand-in-glove with Leo Michiko, and Janssen was right —

Stone got to his feet and looked down at Del. "You want to jump seat back to the carrier with us right now? The NARC transport can pick up the cryotank, deliver it to the *Nimrod*, and you can shuttle over to the dock. There's no need for you to stay on here."

"I ..." Harry hesitated. "The patient's my responsibility."

"He's not going to run away," Jarrat said tersely. "Grab your stuff if you're coming along, Harry. We're leaving in five."

"Senator Brand, there's nothing I can do for Marcus till I get him into a lab with proper equipment," Del said in apologetic tones. "Till then ... I'm a passenger here, and I know I'm underfoot. If you'll trust the tank to the NARC crew, I'll be aboard the *Nimrod* with Marcus."

All sign of pleasantry was gone from Brand's face and voice. "I suppose I'll have to." He leveled a finger at Del as if it were a weapon. "Anything goes wrong, Del, anything at all, and you'll be held accountable. And as for you two young bastards —" He swung on Jarrat and Stone. "You'll be responsible for security surrounding my son, and I'll hold you as accountable as Del if the slightest thing goes wrong." The old eyes were full of fire. "You will discover yourselves not quite so high and mighty as you think you are."

He was gone with that, marching into the house past his bodyguard and leaving Denehy on the terrace. "You want to lay off Cass Brand," Denehy advised.

"Do we?" Jarrat's long fingers had fetched out the R/T, and he was listening to the carrier. "Maybe we should just focus on you and Michiko? At least Brand only jiggled the law to stop Tactical opening closets and taking skeletons out for an airing. But every time Tac tried to get up close to Michiko, somebody died."

The goad was electric. Stone was watching Denehy's face like a hawk as Jarrat hit him with it, and he saw the tiniest twitch in the muscles around the man's eyes, just a momentary deepening of the lines and creases. But Harry Del gasped audibly, color flushed in his cheeks and his fists clenched tight. He turned away from Denehy. Jarrat stepped closer, one hand on Del's arm. "Harry, you're out of here." He gave Denehy a hard look, and was glaring at the two bodyguards as he brought the R/T to his lips and said slowly, deliberately, "This is Raven 9.4. Give me an update."

The audio was cranked high enough for Stone to hear Curt Gable's voice clearly: "Red Raven are ten thousand meters downrange of your position, holding on station. You've got a GlobalNet spy plane off the west flank of Argentina, probably listening to every word you're saying. The Angel packriot in east Kansai defused itself when the Ravens showed up: we got five clean

arrests. You want the gunship to stick around, 9.4, or return to the carrier?"

"Vector it over to Argentia, Curt." He glanced at Stone; Stone nodded. "We'll head home in convoy," Jarrat told Gable.

"You launched a gunship?" Denehy demanded.

"Pack riot in Kansai, you heard the man. Just doing our job." Stone frowned at the windows, where the bodyguards had not yet moved. "Harry, go get your things. Make it fast."

Without a word Del dove into the house. His body language was eloquent. He was more than wary, he was actually afraid, yet anger had overridden fear. He had gone when Jarrat gestured with the remote. "Don't even think of holding him here, Denehy. Stand in our way, and we'd be pleased to bust the whole lot of you. You can be looking at the wrong side of the bars, you and your bodyguard both."

"You're trying to intimidate me?" Denehy shook his head slowly. "Save yourself the time and trouble. Me? Get in NARC's way?" He deliberately stepped aside. "I got nothing to hide, Stone."

He was talking to Jarrat, and he knew it. Stone chuckled wryly. "The man's good, Kevin. You think he wants to tell us about Leo Michiko?"

"I think he wants to shoot us dead, but he's got better sense." Jarrat was listening to the carrier again, though he had turned down the audio until it was no more than a crackle to Stone. "And as for Michiko ... there's nothing Denehy can say to rewrite the truth. Every time Tac tried to get close to ol' Leo, Janssen buried another officer. Means Michiko has a big stink to hide."

"And I," Stone said deliberately, "wouldn't want to be standing beside him when the lid blows off." As he spoke, Del stepped out of the house with a hastily-packed bag. The empath was pale beneath the tan he had brought to Aurora from Ballyntyre and Venice. "This way, Harry," Stone invited. He gave the bodyguards one last glance as Jarrat turned onto the path toward the hangar.

They were in the shuttle before Del would speak. He was cramped in the side of the rear seat, pressed against Jarrat's shoulder, but an acceleration couch contoured to fit riot armor would always accommodate two unarmored bodies. The repulsion hammered back off the close hangar walls. Stone was only waiting for the system to cycle. Jarrat was running up the harness when Del found a hoarse voice, and then the story rushed out like a cataract, everything he had not been able to say when he was audio-monitored.

"Denehy's *lying*. They're all lying. The house is lousy with armed guards and there's meetings, Stoney, all hours of the night. Denehy comes and goes as he likes, as if this is his house, not Cass Brand's, and Brand doesn't even notice, much less care! All Brand can see is his kid in the tank ... and Brand's dying, Stoney, Jarrat. Not of old age. He's eighty-seven years old in five weeks, which isn't exactly young, but age isn't the problem. Three years ago he started to suffer late-stage symptoms, which tells him he doesn't have too much longer. He's got one fixation: to get his kid out of the tank, spend a couple of summers with him, be the loving father one last time, before the lights go out."

"Dying?" Stone was astonished. "He didn't look sick."

"He's got one of the rare ones," Del explained. "An auto-immune dysfunction left over from the early sleeper ships, the first days of colonization. We still call it Bergman Syndrome, after the ship where it was first reported."

The hangar light turned to green and the outer doors rumbled open. The Red Raven gunship was a big slab shape riding two thousand meters away, flying interference for the sleek, silver dart of the spy plane from GlobalNet. Stone rotated the shuttle, and the Corsair was on its way out when Jarrat said thoughtfully,

"I've heard of Bergman Syndrome. It's getting more rare, isn't it? When I was a kid a few cases turned up on Sheckley, but I haven't heard of it in years."

"Quite right," Del affirmed. "Last century, something occasionally used to go wrong during retrieval, when the sleeper ship's tanks were opened. Immune system damage happened, but it wasn't picked up by the colonial medical services for two generations, because symptoms don't really start to manifest till the patient is sixty-plus. By the time the medics recognized it, Bergman Syndrome had bred itself into the gene pool as a hereditary disease, piggybacked on the Y-chromosome. The defect in the retrieval system was fixed, and as soon as they realized what was going on they started scanning, so you could be bloody-damned sure you didn't pass it on to your next generation. A handful of older guys, like Brand, are still sufferers. When they're gone, it's over. Brand inherited it from his grandfather, through the male family line."

"He had a kid," Stone said sharply. "He wasn't scanned before Marcus was conceived?"

"He was, but he figured the disease would be cured in the next few decades, so he went ahead with the family." Del's voice was laced with cynicism. "He made the ultimate miscalculation ... he forgot, who's going to invest a billion to cure a disease that'll vanish with the last sufferers? There are only three thousand cases, right across the colonies." He sighed. "The research was never done. Marcus was born with it, but he's been tanked since he was twenty-five!"

The shuttle had looped high around Argentia and Arkadia. It dropped into formation with the Red Raven gunship and Curt Gable's 104 as Stone asked, "Cause of death?"

"The death certificate reads 'Angel OD.' It was signed and filed by the treating physician at Angel of Kansai Emergency, but Brand's own house medics actually resuscitated, and they saw brain activity." Del had sunk his teeth into the case. If not for the shadow of criminal deals, violence and lying, he would have been relishing it. "I looked at the brain scans they recorded," he went on as the two Corsairs and the gunship headed out, and up, over Thule. "Marcus is alive. He was tanked in the last few minutes of viable life, and if I can only get the old tank to cooperate, I'm pretty sure I can do for him what I did for Stoney and Tim Kwei. He's in much worse shape than either of them, but I have the experience of the other two to draw on."

The smog pall dropped away below. The pale arctic blue sky shifted to mauve, black, and the stars glittered like diamond glass. Stone watched the

blue-white tailpipes of the Red Raven gunship with a frown, and at last had to ask. "Harry, you can't ... well, *heal* old Brand? I'd have thought Bergman Syndrome would be a simple fix after the crash damage and Angel cases you've treated."

"I could," Del said quietly. "But he ... he threatened me, Stoney. It doesn't make me feel obligated to rush to help. Doubtlessly I'll get around to it in my own good time, when I've forgiven or forgotten."

Stone felt the jolt of outrage from Jarrat. "Threatened you how?"

Now Del hesitated. "There was the guard on me, every time I looked over my shoulder. I practically had to negotiate for the privacy to use the bathroom. There was a tap on my phone, and they scanned me when I arrived. They found the R/T Dupre gave me ... they let me have it, but I knew I'd be monitored if I used it, so there was no point. I knew a while ago, Kevin, I need more gear than I have access to locally. I wanted to bug out then, make arrangements."

"Brand wouldn't let you leave?" Anger was brittle in Jarrat's voice.

"Not by anything they said," Harry said carefully, "but there was always a reason, a delay, holdups, things that couldn't be done ... and by that time, I'd seen things. *Felt* things." He paused, and his voice was a rasp when he spoke again. "Neither of the bastards, Brand and Denehy, had realized I'm a freaking empath." He laughed harshly. "Better than a goddamned lie detector. I knew they weren't going to let me just walk away after I'd seen and felt things. They didn't have to come out and say it! I'm a queer, Stoney, even here. They didn't know about me before. When they learned what I am, I wasn't so welcome ... but I sure as hell wasn't leaving! But they couldn't stop me using the house lines to call NARC. Denehy did try to block me, but Brand got him the hell out of the way, because I'd told him I needed to talk to Kip and Bud. If I didn't get some hands-on advice from guys with the hardware experience, I was probably going to make mistakes that killed Marcus."

"So Brand organized a dummy errand for Denehy and you grabbed your chance. Damn," Jarrat whispered. "I know what you felt in there, Harry: threat, suspicion, hostility, lies. But what did you *see*?"

The traffic lanes stretched out toward geostationary, arrow-straight from beacon to beacon, but the NARC craft diverged almost at once. The carrier was in mid-low orbit, covering the action in Thule. Stone turned the shuttle over to the automatics to cruise home in convoy, and gave his complete attention to the empath as Del said,

"I was out jogging, down by the hangars. Denehy has a Marshall Spectrum. The big skyhauler, you know the one?"

"Big as a truck, decked out like a luxury mobile home, costs an arm and a leg?" Stone was watching the CRTs, and murmured as data from Argentia showed the GlobalNet spy plane being moved along by a flock of smaller, faster and nastier vehicles launched from the sphere.

"That's the Spectrum," Harry sighed. "They were working on it, it was laid wide open when I jogged by. I looked inside. Of course I took a look! It's worth two million of anyone's money." He hesitated. "Denehy has an Ibox comm portal on the Spectrum."

"And you'd recognize an Ibex portal on sight? Be sure!" Jarrat insisted. "It's a wild goose chase if you're wrong."

The Ibex comm portal was military hardware. Stone had never heard of one landing in civvy hands, and for a moment he longed to hear Pete Denehy fast-talk his way around possession of it. The machine had just one purpose. It generated and transmitted encrypted tachyon band signals, received and unencrypted the same signals, and its levels of encryption and transmission strength were so far above civvy requirement — the technology so close to classified — Ibex would not supply them without a military requisition. They were not actually illegal in civilian hands; just rare, and difficult to explain.

"I know an Ibex comm portal," Harry said grimly. "Rethan Military Airlift Reserves, the colonial militia, operate one. They staged the wargames, Hazimaru '56, in the highlands above Chandler and Bally ... Ballyntyre, if you remember."

"I don't think we'll ever forget," Jarrat growled, and the flare of confused emotions spiked so sharply, they speared like broken glass through Stone's empathic shields.

"There were accidents," Del went on, as if he had not heard Jarrat. "A troop transport went down in the mountains just south of the logging operation, and in the course of search and rescue, they lost another plane. The weather around Mount Madison is hard to read, unless you're a local."

"That's why they run exercises up there." Jarrat had cut into the loop, and signaled the carrier. "Gives the weekend warriors a challenge. You helped out at the crash sites?"

"Every local surgeon did. Being what I am ... a queer," Del spat out the word as if he were sick and tired of the sound of it, "they flew me back to their base camp with some of the kids who weren't expected to make it. They were liaising with units from an Army carrier tender, the *Wisconsin*. I was dragged up in front of the brass before they'd let me treat my own damned patients! I'd pulled their kids out of the wreckage, patched them together, and as soon as they landed back on an Army transport, some fucking jerk of a medic wanted to zip the body bags on them before he'd let a civilian help!" The fury was many years old, and as fresh as if the wargames were the week before. "Sorry," Harry muttered. "Anyway, they had me under guard in some general's office for hours. His comm team had an Ibex set in the next room. I sat watching them, and it, while my hair went gray."

Up ahead, the *Athena* had appeared against the stars. The shuttles hung back to let the gunship head in first. All three aircraft looped down under the carrier's flat keel, and the vast doors of the Red Raven hangar bay were already open to space. The spill of white floodlights was bright enough to dim the stars, and Stone looked away in the interests of his irises. "I guess we found the source of the signals Janssen's been tracking out of the battle zones," he mused.

"The fourth faction in this war of theirs," Jarrat told Del. "Tac, and the colonial militia ... there's the PAC and then ... something, *someone* else. We all figured the fourth faction had to be Scorpio."

"It probably is." Stone took the shuttle down under the belly of the car-

rier, and nosed toward the hangar lights. "I'll give you odds, Kevin, Denehy could show us the pedigree of the Ibex unit, and rationalize why he needs it."

"None of which," Jarrat added, "would convince me he's not buried up to his balls in Scorpio. Janssen pegged Michiko as her man, but my guess is, we're going to want both of them. In fact I'm certain ... of course, proving it's something else."

"And Brand?" Del wondered as the shuttle nudged into the halo of the lights and cut back power to ride on repulsion.

"I'm not sure," Stone admitted as he rotated the aircraft and extended the struts. "He's so focused on his son, I doubt he can see much beyond. When he does see past Marcus, he's focused on his own illness, and he's got the 'us against them' mentality: the free colonials versus the heritage lunatics. He has nothing but hate for Janssen and her entire level of society. Kevin?"

"Harry, did you feel Brand was lying?" Jarrat asked shrewdly. "I know he made you feel threatened, but was that after you'd seen the Ibex unit in Denehy's Spectrum, or before?"

For a moment Del stopped to think. "After," he said at last. "Shit, understand me here: Brand's house is full of Denehy's people, and for all I know, Michiko's as well. Denehy's screwing a couple of Brand's staff, as well as his own bodyguard. Then Mostov happened, and I ... overloaded. I whited-out, all I could get was one vast, endless scream of rage and fear and grief." The color leached out of his face,

"Take it easy, Harry," Stone told him, "you're out of harm's way now. And you just put a lot of the puzzle pieces together for us."

"I did?" Del looked happier. "You know, Michiko himself was going to be at Brand's place tonight, at a dinner party. Some anniversary. Maybe I could have learned something that would help you, but the fact is, the whole house feels so stuffed with deceit, past a certain point ... I couldn't tell which direction it was strongest from. All I know for sure is, Denehy's lying through his teeth with almost every syllable, and Brand's sick, looking at maybe two years, max, before he's tanked himself, pending a cure that'll never happen ... or a hole in the ground. He's so fixated on getting his son back, he'd do anything, pay anything. Stoney's right. He mostly can't see past the kid, and when he does, he's too sick to care for anything except how he despises Janssen's crowd."

The double-canopy was whining up, and Stone was out of the harness. He lifted himself up to sit on the side, and frowned down into the rear, where Jarrat was releasing the more complex harness that had held two. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, Harry."

"My decision." Del reached up for Stone's hand to haul himself out of the cockpit well. "I put myself through it ... and I'm glad I did. I might pull the Brand kid back out of hell. And his stupid old sod of a father as well." His eyes gleamed as he clambered down the side of the shuttle, and as his feet hit the deck he said, "For a price!"

"It's not like you to think about money," Jarrat observed.

"Maybe not," Del agreed. "But Brand can afford my price, and it's the money I always needed." He gave Stone a level, piercing look. "You remem-

ber the work I was doing in my own labs, back in Bally? Christ, when I still had a home and family to go back to! If I pull Marcus and the old bastard out of the shit, Cassius Brand can fund the research: there's a blocker, a cure, for Angel out there, and Primax is not it. Primax is garbage, and Denehy bloody knows it."

"But you've glimpsed the blocker, haven't you?" Stone guessed. A chill, peculiar shiver scuttled the length of his spine. "You've glimpsed it in the numbers, in the test results."

The healer pulled back his shoulders and looked from Stone to Jarrat and back again. "Before Assante and his crew blasted everything five ways to hell, I *think* I had a compound that was maybe one percent pure, or half of that. Three years, Stoney. Five at the most, but three if I could get the funding, and I might have it." He exhaled hard, a long sigh, tipped back his head and squeezed shut his eyes. "Or maybe it's just the will-o'-the-wisp, and I'm fooling myself."

"If you are," Jarrat said thoughtfully, "fool yourself on Brand's money and take the results — good, bad, whatever — to NARC."

"I intend to." Harry reached up to take his bag from Stone, and then turned away, both hands stuffed into the pockets of his baggy slacks, and strode away to the lifts. "See you guys back on Darwin's."

His head was bowed, his shoulders down. Stone had seen Harry Del angry, disgusted, unhappy, even afraid, but never despondent. The image was troubling. He let himself down from the side of the cockpit and was grateful when Jarrat stepped closer to deliberately rub shoulders. The elevator car swallowed Del and a half-dozen crewboys and girls from Budweisser's department, and with an effort Stone forced his mind back into gear.

"I smell a deep cover assignment coming," he said darkly.

"Yup." Jarrat fell into step with him as they strode in Harry's wake. "These guys are good, Stoney. Denehy's one of the best, and you can bet your pension Leo Michiko will be just as watertight. If he wasn't, Denehy wouldn't be in bed with him."

"In bed with him," Stone echoed, and gave Jarrat a look, sidelong and from beneath his lashes. "Now, there's a thought."

"You making me an offer?" Jarrat asked in sultry tones.

"I do believe I am." Stone tapped his chrono with one fingertip. "We're due downtime, sunshine, soon as we get a report filed." He plucked the recorder from his pocket. "And since we got every word the bastard said, plus the input of an empath at ground zero, and Gable's surveillance outside, it won't take long." They were in the lift, with the car to themselves. He leaned over and deliberately nipped the lobe of Jarrat's ear.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Downtime. The word suggested magic, and Jarrat would have gambled on duty intruding. They stopped by the ops room, where Petrov was coordinating the data stream, cross-feeding Janssen's office and the *Olympic*. The *Athena* had pulled up out of her low orbit over Thule and was holding station at the Stavanger dock. While Stone commandeered a terminal to log the report, Jarrat called the Infirmary. Petrov was listening as Kip Reardon responded, but the news was not what Jarrat might have wanted to hear. Raoul Petrakis was still asleep, heavily sedated. It would be several hours before he could face questions and answer coherently.

The Red Ravens were desuited, the arrests were being processed through for a Tactical pickup. Janssen's office was overstressed in the aftermath of the Mostov disaster, and for the moment the Angel trade was low on her list of priorities. The *Olympic* was on standby with two hundred peace-corps troops on the street, but Thule was quiet and the rest of Aurora seemed too stunned to make trouble.

A heavy snow was falling in Thule as GlobalNet recorded the memorial services for the Tactical Fire Control crews. The vidcasts played on three CRTs in the ops room, but the audio was off. Jarrat watched while Stone filed a terse report and downloaded data from the audio recorder. Stone was finishing up when he checked the flight schedule board. The NARC transport was on time; the *Nimrod* was prepping and the Starfleet crew were expecting the cryogen tank.

Satisfied, Jarrat turned the ops room over to Petrov and dropped both hands on Stone's shoulders as he put the final touches to the report. The text conversion of the Argentia audio scrolled in the left of the screen, and Jarrat's eyes lingered on the names of Denehy, Michiko and Oromon.

Stone was right: they were not going to bust Scorpio from the top. A deep cover assignment was coming. The 'how' and the 'where' would pivot on Raoul Petrakis's information, but Jarrat's mind had already begun to subtly shift gears on a deep level. And Stone knew it.

With the report logged, he swiveled the seat and looked up into Jarrat's face. The empathic bond spoke more clearly than words. Jarrat simply nodded, and Stone did not question or argue. They would spend some time designing and building a character, something as complex as John D. Strother, and as many-faceted. When Jarrat went into Death's Head, the assignment was relatively simple. No one in Hal Mavvik's organization had any inkling of the carrier at Chell geostationary. Here, all of Aurora knew the *Athena* was on station. The risks were high.

With a nod to Petrov, Jarrat stepped out of the ops room. Stone followed him to the lifts, and Jarrat asked, "You want dinner?"

"Maybe later." Stone was watching the CRTs, the pictures from Thule. "It's a mess."

"It's still going to be a mess after we've busted Scorpio," Jarrat added. "Busting the Angel trade won't fix Aurora's trouble."

"But it'll make it easier to see." Stone gestured at the CRTs. "Take two of the power pieces out of the game, and between them Tactical and the PAC can get their teeth into the real trouble. Put the People of Aurora Coalition in charge, and the folks in city bottom will get half a chance to survive. Busting Scorpio is where it starts."

"Busting Scorpio," Jarrat echoed, and gave Stone a faint smile as they stepped into the lift. "It's my turn in deep cover."

"Maybe." Stone wore a brash grin. "I'll toss you for it."

But Jarrat only shrugged. "See what Petrakis gives us. See which of us fits better in the crack he opened up."

And make it fast, he thought as the lift went down and back. The Death's Head job was too long. The longer a deep cover assignment went on, the greater the risk. A man got tired, or desperate, or just complacent. Jarrat had never blamed himself for the scene in the alley in Chell's stinking spaceport warren, but he knew he had made mistakes. Giving the mule's bodyguard, Earl Barnaby, any choice about cooperation was the worst of them, and Jarrat's body could still ache around the old repairs.

He put the past from his mind as he led Stone into the nearest of the two adjoining cabins. It was nominally his own, but it had accumulated so many of Stone's things, it was difficult to tell the cabins apart. The thought made him smile.

The lights came up automatically as they stepped in, but he dimmed them again. The CRT was alive with data, as always, but he took only a cursory glance before he put the carrier, the job, out of his mind too. He could feel gears shifting inside: the smart-mouthed king shooter who had climbed to the top of Mavvik's elite palace guard had begun to stir, brash, hard, hungry.

And Stone knew. "Not yet," he said quietly. One hand reached up to draw a caress about Jarrat's face. The fingers threaded into Kevin's hair and drew his head toward a kiss. "Time enough when we have to," he whispered against Jarrat's lips.

Jarrat leaned into the kiss, wanting to lose himself in it, as if in a fantasy which would hold off the reality he knew was imminent. He could understand too well the forces driving a person to Angel. A day came when it looked like a reasonable alternative, and only much later did one wake up and discover the truth. Angel was a refuge. In the early days it was a haven away from pain and despair that were too much to be borne. The poisoning came later, and a new kind of despair. Jarrat caught Stone in an embrace, hard enough to test his lungs, and Stone's mouth opened readily to his tongue.

They went down across the bed in a tangle of limbs, and Jarrat was barely aware whose thrills of excitement made the pulse throb in his ears. It could have been Stone's heart beating hard against his ribs, Stone's hands or his

own searching out the rucked flesh of nipples, and every other nerve ending that knew how to give up one more rush of pleasure. The empathy was sometimes close to unbearable, and each of them kept up the last fraction of the shield Del had taught them.

The shimmering blue of Stone's feelings invaded even Jarrat's mind. He bathed in it, drowned in it. Skin slid on sweat-slick skin like hot silk, and as Stone's tongue lapped from root to crown, the length of Jarrat's risen cock and back again, Jarrat let the empathic shield fall completely. Stone's fingers were clenched into his buttocks, and Jarrat's spine arched as reaction tore the breath from his lungs.

He heard the same gasp from Stone. He was on his back when he opened his eyes, and Stone was still poised over him, but his dark head was thrown back, his mouth open to pant, his eyes squeezed shut in an agony of self-absorption. Jarrat's hands traced his shoulders, the smooth lines of his back, the curve of his buttocks. Stone's eyes opened to slits and he leaned closer to kiss. Jarrat tasted himself on his lover's tongue, and pulled Stone's head down hungrily.

"You've been wanting this." Stone rolled them over, put himself under Jarrat and bucked his hips to thrust the blood-hot rod against Kevin's hip.

"We don't get enough of it anymore," Jarrat said, mocking himself and Stone both. He leaned down, took Stone's left nipple between his teeth and teased it deliberately, until Stone cried out. Stone knew what he wanted: all at once the burst of excitement overtook Jarrat, and he blinked sweat out of his eyes as he looked down into the flushed, beautiful face on his own pillow.

"You sure?" Jarrat asked, husky with affection. "It's not long since The Cockpit, and you were shook up."

"I'm sure," Stone said, deep as a growl. "Nothing I saw in an Angel den has any place here." He wriggled to dislodge Jarrat, turned over and pulled one knee into his belly. "You know what I want."

"Oh, I know." Jarrat sketched a caress from Stone's nape to the deep cleft of his buttocks, and then reached over him to the drawer.

The gel was pale gold, with a scent Jarrat had never been able to identify. They had bought it on Outbound, on the stopover en route to Del's place, and the scent would always evoke a powerful storm of memory for them both. Those were the early days, when the empathic bond was difficult, their relationship new and filled with revelation, and every day was equal parts challenge, joy and speculation.

And now? Everything and nothing was the same as Jarrat stroked the gel into Stone's most sensitive skin, slipped his fingers into the deep cleft, and inside, plundering Stone's final secret. Stone whispered his name, and Jarrat held his breath, feeling it all with him: a sharp flicker of pain, a weakening pleasure, a great release as they became one. A pulse beat, slow and heavy, inside Stone's body. Jarrat felt it inside himself too, and the twin, mirrored sensations were difficult to separate.

He slid easily into the tense grip of muscle, so like an oiled fist about him, and Stone sighed. Perhaps he had needed this since The Cockpit. Perhaps the only way to exorcise those particular demons was to fight them on their

own ground. "Stoney," Jarrat murmured against the broad back, and his teeth closed on a fold of skin at Stone's nape. He would wear the brand for a few days, though no one would see it.

The tiny pleasure-pain ripped through Stone and on into Jarrat as if they were indeed one body, and it hit Jarrat's nerves like a trigger. Urgency exploded through him, banished coherent thought, and he was moving, hard and fast. Stone rode it out with him, rising to meet him, and Jarrat's right hand slipped around to grasp him tight.

The surge of shared sensation was too much. Sanity was stretched thin, and Jarrat listened to the race of his own heart, the hammer of Stone's. Coming was a cyclone, sweeping away thought, reason, any grasp of reality. In their place was a whirl of color and fantasy images Jarrat recognized from Stone's dreams, some of which he had shared. Dreams which had been written indelibly into his own deep memory.

Angel dreams were seductive, pervasive, often more real than reality. He glimpsed Hudson River on the other side of the world from Venice; a pleasure den in the upper levels of Venice's city bottom, and other dream-memories, sometimes troubling, always so erotic that he felt the kick of rogue hormones in every cell.

He slid down onto Stone's wide back, cradled there and semiconscious as the empathic bond rolled over them both, enveloped them. Reality receded yet again, and for a long time they drifted in a warm, blue-green ocean where two had become one. It seemed a lifetime since love had stirred awake between them. A lifetime since they had almost blundered into an embrace, knowingly, eagerly breaking every rule and ready to burn every bridge behind them. The word 'love' was seldom spoken aloud. Where was the need for it, when the emotion permeated every cell, every moment, when the empathic shields were let down.

Jarrat had no memory of even moving away from Stone's surrendered body, much less fetching a washcloth and doing sketchy honors for them both, but he must have. The damp cloth smelt of Stone's favorite cologne, Ice Blue, an expensive elixir from Mars, and the near-trance of the bond had lightened to a doze when a buzz from the comm insinuated. He rolled over with a smothered curse. Stone had not moved, though he was wide awake and listening as Jarrat selected voice-only and muttered,

"Yeah, Jarrat, this better be good."

Kip Reardon chuckled. "I interrupted something?"

"Don't you always?" Stone rumbled.

"A post-coital nap?" Reardon guessed.

"Not quite a nap." Jarrat stretched his shoulders and listened to the pop and crunch of joins and sinews. "We're on downtime, Kip, what's so important?"

The surgeon had the grace to sound apologetic. "I thought you'd want to know your boy's awake. Petrakis, your city bottom pickup."

"Lucid, ready to talk?" Stone sat up and reached for the cloth with the Ice Blue tang, swiping away the evidence of indulgence.

"A half-hour ago I'd have said forget it till tomorrow," Reardon told him,

"but Harry came by ... he's headed out on the *Nimrod*, you know? Goddamn! It's the first time I ever had the chance to watch him work. He did something. Reached into the kid's head and tweaked this or that. Petrakis is lucid, ready to talk, and he's not full of trunks. Harry's still here, if you want to grab an early breakfast with him. You might need him. You're going to get Petrakis stirred up again, and aside from sedating the kid, there's not much I can do when the hysteria hits."

Stone was looking at the CRT, the flight schedule: Del's shuttle over to the Stavanger Dock was due to leave in less than an hour. The *Nimrod* was on standby, already tracking the hyperflight sled it had cast off on entry to the Aurora system, and the transport had delivered the cryogen tank containing Marcus Brand without incident. The Starfleet crew reported it secured in the aft compartment of the courier, a tiny hold reserved for priority or fragile cargo.

"We'll be there." Stone swung his legs off the wide bunk. "Give us ten minutes, Kip." He dropped a kiss in the middle of Jarrat's back as Kevin reached over for the clothes he had let fall where they would, not long enough ago.

Downtime had a way of fluttering away. "Ten minutes," Jarrat grumbled, sorting shorts from jeans. "This job," he swore, not for the first time, "is beating hell out of my love life."

"*Your* love life?" Stone echoed, and managed a creditable chuckle. "So quit," he challenged as he got a hand on his own slacks, which had landed in the middle of the cabin.

"Don't think I haven't had wild fantasies about it," Jarrat said darkly, and then neatly ducked the issue. "I'm hungry." And he was on his way out while still tugging his shirt over his head.

The Infirmary was quiet. Its only patient was Petrakis, and he was out of bed, sitting at one of the desks with Harry Del. The desk was a litter of food, none of it looking like breakfast, but both Petrakis and Del were eating determinedly. Petrakis was in the familiar blue-gray NARC fatigues; his hair was neat, his face flushed. His eyes had a rabbit-in-the-headlights look as he watched the officers step in.

Most of the fluoro strips were out, and the splash of blue-white illumination picked out the corner where Reardon's own office stood. Treatment rooms, ORs, the cryo-stores, labs and morgue were all dark. The wide triage area was apparently being used as a marshaling yard for old imaging equipment going out, new units coming in, still packed in their IntelScan shipping crates. Kipling Francis Reardon himself was at his own desk, but not working. His feet were shod in battered old gym shoes, a plate of noodles was balanced on his middle, and he was intent on the monitor. The sounds of a wild rugby crowd issued from it and he looked up only briefly as Jarrat and Stone appeared.

Even after Harry's good work, Raoul Petrakis was nervous. He jumped to his feet, hands clenched, and was dry mouthed as he said, "I thought I'd be talking to Tactical."

"NARC bothers you?" Stone asked levelly.

"No. Well ... yes. I mean, I'm on the wrong side of the law, aren't I?"

"Are you?" Jarrat pulled up a spare chair and left Stone to attend to the autochef. "Morning, Harry."

"It's morning?" Del looked puffy-eyed. "I've lost track."

The young man's eyes were dilated. The trunks had worn off enough for him to be awake, but he was still full of them — and whatever else he had taken in Mostov. Dutch courage. "I've known about the Thule money man for a year," he said miserably. "I didn't go to Tac. That's withholding information, isn't it?"

"Yes," Jarrat agreed, "but it's also the reason Colonel Janssen offered the amnesty. There's got to be a regiment of people who know the money man or the mule, but they're too scared to speak."

"Shit-scared, that's me." Petrakis hugged himself and cast a glance at the Infirmary, and by extension, the carrier. "I can't stay here for long, can I? When I go back ... Christ." His face clenched. "What was I thinking? I'm screwed. I might as well dig a fuckin' hole and jump in."

As he set a vast bowl of fettuccine on the corner of the desk between himself and Jarrat, Stone sighed. "Janssen's not going to dump you back into Thule. Pick your place, put distance between you and the bastards who've put the frighteners on you, and remember the bounty as well as the amnesty. New name, new job. New face, if you want, and a fat cash pad under you, to start again. So, let's hear it, kid. Kevin?"

Jarrat had already turned on the recorders. A discreet lens panned onto Petrakis's flushed face. He knew it was there, and glared at it. Del leaned closer. "Relax, Raoul. I know these men. I've worked with them for months. You can trust them."

"If you say so." Petrakis licked his lips and looked anxiously at Jarrat. "The one you want is Reineck. Leena Reineck is the money man, not that she's a man. I don't know the mule's name, but I've seen him. Big guy, looks like he might've been a ballplayer a few years ago. Him and Reineck are like this." He laced his fingers. "Get 'em in the same place, they can't keep their hands off for ten minutes at a time. If you get a look at Reineck, you'll see what I mean." He held his cupped hands way out from his chest and pouted. "She used to be a Companion in the spheres. I guess she just got sick of screwing old men and rich, underage uptown brats. She went into business for herself."

"Dealing Angel," Stone said sourly.

But Petrakis's red-blond head shook. "Not at first. She started out selling Buran, and in this colony, Buran's so fuckin' illegal, sellin' the crap's worth a firing squad! It's the death penalty."

"We know," Jarrat said thoughtfully. "So Reineck didn't mind running risks to get rich fast selling Buran, and from there it was just a promotion, up to Scorpio's money man. More money, less risk."

"You got it," Petrakis said unhappily. "Thing is, I can't give you proof. I know what I've seen, but I can't prove squat!" His narrow shoulders lifted in a shrug. "S'one reason I never went to Tac. First off, if I'm right, I'm banged up in prison for ten years for withholding evidence, and they'll bloody kill me

in there. Scorpio can reach you anywhere. Second, I got no proof! Why would Tac listen to me?"

"Janssen would have listened," Stone told him, "but you were right before: you had to pick your time, or you'd be dead meat." He lifted a brow at Harry. "You got time to help?"

Del had finished eating and had retreated to Reardon's desk to watch the closing stages of a game that must have been a grand-final, if the roar of the crowd was any indication. "If you're quick," he said over the hood of the monitor. "My shuttle leaves in thirty minutes. What do you want me to do?"

"It'll only take two minutes of your time." Jarrat knew he was on the same frequency as Stone. "You said it yourself, Harry: you're better than a lie detector. Just take a seat beside Raoul while he tells us what he knows."

"I can tell you now," Del said, sweeping the debris aside on the desk to find perching space, "he's on the level. Don't be insulted Raoul, it's procedure. Based on what you say right now, these guys are going to put their necks on the line to bust Scorpio."

"They already did. I'm alive ..." Petrakis's face crumpled and tears welled up. "Mostov's gone."

"You lost family, friends?" Jarrat frowned over the kid. Petrakis was not much younger than himself, but in that moment Jarrat felt a century old. "Harry?"

The healer was risen to the surface in Harry Del. He had forgotten his own troubles, Marcus Brand, the NARC project he despised, even the dock shuttle that was testing engines and flight systems, ready to leave the *Athena*. The empath's hands cradled Petrakis's head in a curiously tender embrace, and in moments the young man calmed.

"He's not going to lie to you," Del said softly. "Not by intent or omission. You can trust what he says. Just don't press him to make guesses or assumptions. He can be dead wrong without lying."

"Conjecture, we can do without," Stone agreed. "Thanks, Harry." He passed the bowl of fettuccine to Jarrat and took a long draft of root beer. As Petrakis's eyes cleared he gave the kid his attention.

The information was confused, offered in the wrong order, often raising more questions than it answered, and useful data was pieced together like a puzzle. Much of Petrakis's information could be verified through Tactical's computers and public records.

Leena Reineck was about forty years old, lived in the Barsoom sphere and spent a lot of time in city bottom, passing her presence off as slumming. She haunted a club called El Relámpago, in Tok city bottom, and it had a reputation for being busted. Buran was traded there regularly, but only the dealers were arrested, and since Reineck had not dealt Buran in years, and had never been investigated for the trade, she was safe. She shuttled between the spheres and city bottom two or three times a week, in a chauffeur-piloted Rand Viper. And at least once a month she met two men in the back rooms at El Relámpago, where the most expensive Companions entertained.

One of these regular contacts was the mule, and though Petrakis did not know his name, he could describe him in great detail. Tall, big-shouldered,

with buzz-cut black hair and a necklace of barbed-wire tattoos, four or five big platinum rings among his thick fingers and white-gold rings in both nipples. Find Reineck on the town in the evening, and at least twice a month the mule would be on her 'like fungus,' in Petrakis's words. He hated the mule about as much as he fancied Reineck, and if Harry had not been so sure of Petrakis's honesty, both Jarrat and Stone would have suspected mischief.

It was so easy for testimony like this to plunge an innocent into interrogation ... and then a crew of uptown lawyers would crucify Tac for the blunder. But no matter how Petrakis hated one and drooled over the other, he knew what he had seen and heard. Reineck had traded Buran, which earned a firing squad in this colony, and now she shuttled between Barsoom and city bottom, while her ballplayer lover apparently spent his time traveling between east-end Mostov and El Relámpago, with baggage.

In the dim, heavy-scented shadows of the back rooms of Reineck's favorite club, where house Companions drifted like hollow-eyed succubi, the baggage changed hands. And often, according to Petrakis, the acid scent of Angel, quite different from the subtle sweetness of Buran, stung the sinuses. And in the east-end, the most labyrinthine part of Thule, the mule was often seen on the lowest-level, a sex shop called Keiken.

"Often seen by whom?" Stone asked quietly, interrupting Petrakis's train of thought for the first time.

"By me," Petrakis said sourly.

"You followed him?" Jarrat pressed.

"Four times, maybe five." Petrakis looked away. "One night in El Relámpago I was with a house Companion. I go there sometimes. Not just because Reineck's often there ... even though, she is. There's a couple of the Companions I like." He flushed. "It's legal."

Jarrat smothered a grin. "Did we say anything?"

"No." Petrakis's shoulders scrunched. "Anyway, this one night my Companion was edgy, wandering, not *with* me, even though I'd paid my money and bought my time. She went into the back and I followed."

"Which is when you saw Reineck and the ballplayer, and the baggage was open ... and you smelt Angel," Stone guessed.

"Saw it too, saw the whole thing." Petrakis gestured vaguely. "You know. Big money changing hands, cash. Credits, Aurora dollars, cash from out of system. The bags were full of the pure shit, not the cut stuff in the bubbles, like everyone knows it. There was enough Angel in those bags to knock city bottom flat on its ass for weeks. Reineck gave a pop to my Companion, and when she started tripping, Reineck and the mule did a number on her I'd only *heard* about. They never knew I was there, but I got curious." He huffed a sigh. "I knew valuable shit, you know? I knew *things*, I'd seen *things*. It had to be worth my ticket out of city bottom. I thought, what I knew would put me in a place like Arkadia." He gulped. "Or in a grave."

"So you sat on what you knew and waited for your chance," Stone mused. "You got a job laying cable for PharmaTech. When you saw the message come in from Tac you took your shot. Smart kid."

"I, uh, thanks," Petrakis said awkwardly.

Stone was only guessing. "You tried your luck with Reineck and got told where to go shove your head?" The kid's flush deepened to beet-red. He never made the actual confession, and did not need to. "You ever try picking up the mule, the ballplayer boyfriend?" Stone wondered. "You followed him often enough."

"I thought about it," Petrakis admitted, "but I never saw him with a guy. Reineck's his kind, so what'd be the point in me, uh ...". He shook himself. "I followed him to Keiken, but he never saw me but once, and that night I'd already picked up one of their sleazeball Companions, so he figured it was just coincidence. I was lucky. A lot of people use Keiken, because it's like The Cockpit, full of Angel, and uh, Angel-heads." He shuddered. "Keiken has ... *had* the ones with about three months to live, you know? They're sick, and they're desperate, and they'll do anything to get the shit."

He was disgusted, Jarrat saw, but at the same time he was filled with grief. "You lost somebody in a place like Keiken?"

"Didn't we all?" Petrakis hugged himself. "My cousin. I was raised with him, by my grandparents. Our parents died in the same air crash, froze to death on a hillside. Nathan died in a lousy den over on Maui." He turned his face away. "It's not their fault."

"I know," Stone whispered. "Hey, kid, relax. You're safe here, and you've given us plenty. You want a pill? Doc Reardon can give you something to make you sleep. Or forget for a while."

He blinked owlishly at the NARC men. "Keiken was the front for the cutting lab. But it's gone, with The Cockpit and the rest of Mostov. I could've given it to you, it was worth something. Is Tactical gonna stiff me, now it's all gone? Jesus!" Panic hit him hard.

But Jarrat dropped a hand on Petrakis's shoulder. "You've given us plenty. Reineck and the boyfriend are a good place to start, and they'll know the next link up the chain. This is how it works. The Barsoom sphere, you said?"

"S'where Reineck lives," Petrakis said heavily. "But when she was a Companion she used to work in Arkadia and Argentia. I guess she made friends there. I know she's in Argentia a lot, too."

"You know that for sure?" Jarrat's ears pricked, and he shot a look at Stone.

Petrakis shrugged. "She gets imaged a lot. When you see her, you'll know why. She's always at parties and receptions and galas. Argentia's full of artsy-fartsy bullshit, all artists and musicians and actors, and the first-families strutting around like royalty. Get on AuraNet and take a look at the paparazzi pages. Reineck's on their pages all the time, always screwing somebody. It'd be a habit you get into, I guess, if you used to be a Companion."

A habit? Jarrat was thinking about Jesse Lawrence, and one of Hal Mavvik's house Companions, Lee, and he allowed himself a chuckle. "You could be right, kid." He sat back and arched both brows at Stone. "So she's in and out of Argentia, part of the social scene. The halfway house between paradise and the pit is El Relámpago, and as for the pit itself ... they'll need a new cutting lab, fast."

"They probably lost a few runners," Stone mused. "When Mostov went

up, there would have been Scorpio business in the works all over city bottom, so they're going to be hiring about now. So long as Reineck herself didn't buy it in the fire —"

"Fuck," Petrakis whispered, "I never thought of that. If she did, I got nothing left to sell." His eyes widened. "The cutting shop's gone, and I don't know the name of the mule."

"Colonel Janssen'll play fair," Stone said tersely, "we guarantee it. And as for Reineck, let's find out." He reached over and thumbed the comm. "Ops room. Petrov?"

"He's off shift," Curt Gable's voice responded, "and Cap Cantrell's also off. You're stuck with me. What do you need?"

"Find me an individual, resident of the Barsoom sphere," Stone told him, "name of Leena Reineck." He spelled out the last name, looking at Petrakis for a nod of agreement. "Find out if she bought it in Mostov, or if she made it out."

"Will do, Cap. Hold on." The comm remained open, relaying a whisper of audio from the ops room as Gable ran the search.

Del was on his feet, and hefted his bag from the footwell under the desk. "I have a dock shuttle to catch, guys. I guess I'll see you back on Darwin's. You want me to call, when I get Marcus out of the tank? Or when I hear something about Central's damn fool project."

"Keep in touch, Harry." Jarrat had swung out his chair and was about to offer to walk Del to the hangars when a quiet alarm cut across the comm like a hot knife.

"What the hell is that?" Kip Reardon put the game on hold and swiveled a CRT toward him.

But before Jarrat could hail the ops room with demands to know what the emergency was, Gable was back on the line. "Cap Stone, Cap Jarrat, we just got a heads-up from Stavanger Dock. Trouble on the *Nimrod*. They don't say what but I'm holding."

Stone was moving. "We can be there in ten minutes."

"Harry, stay put," Jarrat said sharply, when Del had taken a step after them. "It could be anything, an engine flutter, a reactor scram, even a ram-raid from some PAC bastard who hates Starfleet."

But Del was still right behind them as they crossed the triage area, and Gable's voice called from the comm, "Insurgents. Somebody got aboard the courier, opened the cargo hold ... they've got two dead bodies, one critical injury. Medical emergency, guys — they're flagging us and the *Olympic*. Move!"

"Insurgents?" Harry's voice rose sharply. "Jesus God! Brand was trying to lay on corporate security for the tank. I told him it wasn't necessary. It shouldn't have been! It's just a cryotank, for godsakes!"

"The man said, move!" Kip Reardon's voice was a bark of authority. He had a medical case in each hand, and thrust them at Jarrat and Stone as he took off fast ahead of them, headed for the emergency lift to the hangar deck.

"What about me?" Petrakis wailed from the Infirmary.

"Stay put, wait for Reardon's people," Stone shouted. Jarrat, Del and

Reardon were already in the lift, which was adjacent to the triage zone, and Del was holding it for Stone. It went down fast, and Jarrat had already punched for the dock shuttle bay. Stone hit the comm. "Ops room, what's on standby?"

Gable was there at once: "Transport 09 is ready to fly. Blue Ravens are suiting up. What do you need, Stoney?"

Jarrat and Stone shared a grim look. "Give us four Ravens on the Transport," Stone said, "armed, and armor. Hold the gunship ... the dock's too tight for maneuvering."

"Copy." Gable did not even pause for breath. "Blue Raven 6!"

"I'm on the loop, I heard," Cronin called. "Will meet you at 09, Cap Stone. We're suiting right now."

And then Gable again: "I just got an update from Stavager Security. It's something to do with the courier's cargo hold."

"Ah, shit," Harry breathed as the lift opened into the hangar. "It's the tank. I knew it would be. Brand's going to flay me alive."

The old senator might try, Jarrat thought bleakly, but the whole dock, *Nimrod* and all, was covered by Starfleet security. If Brand wanted to roast anyone, he would have to get his hands on Colonel Eric Holder. He shifted his grip on the medical case Reardon had given him, and pointed Del toward the transport just to their right. The whole hangar was already purging to partial pressure, and their ears popped painfully. A red spinner was on and the hangar's regular crew was absent. Jarrat was the last aboard the transport, and was glad to seal the airlock behind him. The Ravens would arrive suited; zero pressure would not trouble them.

The *Athena* flew twelve transports. They had been designed for the Army and were a small version of the troop transports which had been shot to pieces in the battle over Mostov, before Jack Brogan made the fatal decision to save a couple of Corsairs at the expense of a whole city sector. In the cockpit, Stone had already pulled on a headset when Jarrat joined him. He was listening to the loop, the Ravens, the ops room, as he hurried through a flight systems check.

"Hardsuits?" Jarrat wondered, a pace inside the cramped cockpit.

"Suit up, be sure," Stone agreed. "I've got an update from Stavanger Security. They just found a third deader. A medevac transport just launched from the *Olympic*."

The deck plates lifted out to reveal lockers in which were three suits of riot armor, and Jarrat was already suiting when the airlock light blinked red. It took under a minute to cycle, and before he had the breastplate on, Gil Cronin and Joe Ramos were aboard, ahead of Blue Ravens 12 and 14, Judd Taft and Troy Allen.

Cronin and Ramos released the umbilici and lifted off the helmets, but Taft and Allen were on short-call, and remained helmeted and in the airlock. Cronin's right glove closed on the hang-straps as the transport lifted off and angled over. He nailed Jarrat with a shrewd look.

"Something about the courier's cargo? Some express delivery for Darwin's? You want to brief us, Cap?"

"I wish I knew," Jarrat told him. "The cargo's just an old cryotank." He had locked the wrist seals, and Ramos handed him the gloves, the helmet. The earjack settled, and Jarrat cut into the loop. "Ops room, Raven Leader is in the field. Acknowledge."

The voice answering belonged to Petrov, which did not surprise Jarrat. Petrov slept with one ear open, listening for the comm. Ambition drove him hard. He was never likely to leave kudos for an understudy, and Gable was content to stand back, let him have it. Petrov was due for promotion, and Gable's own time would come.

"Ops room, Petrov. Blue Raven units, Raven Leader is in the field ... and watch yourselves. There's mayhem on Stavanger Dock. You got a medevac lifter headed over from the *Olympic*, two flyers from Stavanger Security, and a race plane, unidentified, trying to make its way out. Not a lot of elbow space. You flying, Stoney?"

"Yup," Stone responded. "I see 'em all, Mischa ... Stavanger Dock is coming up." And then, "*Launch Blue Raven!*"

"Launched," Petrov barked. "What is it, Stoney?"

"The race plane just bolted," Stone told him, "soon as they saw a NARC transport headed in. They almost tore up the dock to get out, which means we want them. I got a visual before they punched out."

Jarrat was hunched over, trying to get a visual, out through the wide cockpit canopy, but was only in time to see the bright flare of tailpipes. On the CRT was a decent image, and he swore vividly as he turned sideways to fit the armor into the rear of the cockpit behind Stone. The bolter was a Yamazake Sylph, faster than the Lightning, and at least as fast as the Corsair in a straight drag. If the gunship could get in a clear shot they might damage it, capture it in tractors, but at a glance Jarrat could see the pilot of the Sylph was using the dock itself, and the civvy traffic lanes, for cover. If it came to a drag, the Yamazake would outrun the gunship in a headlong race into hyperspace.

The transport was just big enough to be an annoyance in the dock, just small enough for Stone to be able to rotate it around and bring it in beside the *Nimrod*. The transport from the *Olympic* would have to dock opposite, leaving the medics to make their way around, but Jarrat had no objection: with both Reardon and Del aboard, NARC had the medevac situation covered.

Without warning, Harry sucked in a sharp breath and hugged both arms around his belly. Reardon knelt beside him, peering into his face, but Del only fended him off. "Harry! Harry, for godsakes," Reardon said over the rumble of engine noise as the transport docked. "Harry!"

"Not me ... it's not me." Del forced his spine straight. His face was the color of old wax, yellow-gray and beaded with sweat. "Somebody just died. There." He gestured in the direction of the dock.

"At last count they had three dead bodies and one critical," Jarrat reminded him.

Del's eyes were wide, dilated. "And the cryogen tank," he added. "Insurgents, Kevin ... insurgents in the cargo hold."

"Marcus Brand?" Jarrat paused, helmet lifted halfway to his head. "You

think maybe Marcus Brand just died?" Then the airlock's red spinner lit up and he was out of time. He dropped the helmet snugly into the seals and screwed in the umbilici. As he took his first breath of chill 'canned' air, he took an FN 540 from the airlock's gunrack. "You with me, Stoney?"

"Reading you," Stone told him, deceptively close, almost intimate. "Dock security's running berserk. The *Olympic's* transport is docking, four ports away from you ... I'm routing your audio from Stavanger Security. Watch yourself, Kevin."

"I intend to." Jarrat's eyes swept the helmet instruments, and he knocked the safeties off the assault rifle. "Kip, Harry, you hold up back here till you get an all-clear. Blue Ravens, with me."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Helmet audio was modulated to safeguard the eardrums, and Jarrat was grateful. Gunfire ripped out of the cargo bay to the right of the NARC transport's docking ring, and out of the transit tube to the right. Big caliber rounds were chewing through construction members and panels, and Jarrat swore as he led out the squad of Blue Ravens. The docking facilities were normally pale gray and shades of blue, with strip lights in the walls and ceiling, but two thirds of the lights had already been shot out, and a haze of particulate debris was heavy in the air.

Instruments a hand's span from Jarrat's nose issued toxicity warnings. Exhaust gases from the weapons were mingling with pressurized vapors from the dock's systems. A man's bare lungs would protest. Stone was shouting over the chaos of the comm loop, but Jarrat already knew some idiot was using an energy weapon. The buzzing whine was audible under the coughing spatter of conventional guns, and burn tattoos had appeared in the cargo bay.

The Blue Ravens strode out into the crossfire without hesitation, and Jarrat called loudly into the audio chaos, "Prisoners, Gil! Take 'em alive, or we're back to square one."

"Prisoners," Cronin echoed tersely. "Taft, get on the courier, get right in the cargo bay, I want a status on the tank."

Jarrat turned on the public address, keyed the volume close to zero and called over his shoulder in the direction of the transport, "Harry, we're putting a man on the *Nimrod*. Standby till the approach is clear."

He was taking heavy rounds in the breastplate as he spoke, and he keyed up his apparent mass until a hundred-fifty kilos held him in place. The shooter was concealed in the dark well of the cargo bay, his position betrayed by sporadic muzzle flashes, but the FN 540 did not have the knockdown to reach him. The rotary cannon mounted on the forearm of the riot armor did — but

little would remain of the man. Jarrat swore softly and beckoned Cronin.

"Get the fool with the energy weapon, Gil. Blow him the hell away if you have to. He's getting dangerous."

"Will do," Cronin responded, and paused to monitor the Blue Ravens' own audio channel. "Taft's on the courier ... two bodies, Cap. Looks like Starfleet security goons. It's shitty in there."

"The tank?" Jarrat pressed as he stepped into the line of fire from the cargo bay and let the armor take the punishment. At twice his normal body weight he felt sluggish, but he leaned into the 50-cal, walked into the muzzle flashes, and flicked on the helmet's floodlights. Stark white light picked out the bay, crated cargo, every size and shape of repulsion sled — plus one sprawled body and the shooter himself.

He was injured, using a Colt Kaiowa left-handed, which was awkward with a weapon designed to be used right-handed, and by a righthanded individual. Still, the shots were on-target until Jarrat's floods shriveled the man's irises. He turned his head away, but his right arm was too torn for him to shield his eyes. He was gushing blood from a ruptured artery, and Jarrat muttered a livid curse as he reached down with one steel-gloved hand and confiscated a Kaiowa with a smoking-hot barrel shroud.

"One deader, one critical in the cargo bay," he reported. "Stoney!"

"The *Olympic's* transport locked on a moment ago. They're sending a medical squad and security ... I'm reading bad air in the dock, Kevin. I'll warn them off."

"Do that," Jarrat keyed his weight down to forty kilos, stooped, and lifted the injured shooter. "I've got one here who might make it, if I can get him back to Kip and Harry." He had lifted the man, straightened and turned toward the transport, when a massive vibration in the deck plates rumbled through body and armor alike. "What the hell was that?"

"Standby." Stone's voice was taut. "Blue Ravens, report!"

Joe Ramos was cursing so fluently, it seemed to be another language. "It was fucking booby trapped!"

"What was booby trapped?" Cronin roared. "Joe! Joe!" He was moving even then, covering the distance between the loop-passage which lead on, around to other docking ports, and the transit tube.

"I'm okay, Gil." Ramos sounded closer to furious than injured. "The mother fuckers 'trapped the tube. They took out the last car, fixed it so the next in'd blow shit out of the whole dock. Cap Stone!"

But Stone was a jump ahead of him. "The docking clamps are fine, the transport's secure ... but I'm reading a bunch of overstressed plates, hull and both decks, your location. If she goes, she'll decompress the *Nimrod*. Kevin, you want to get her out of there? Dump the shooter and make it fast, kid, you don't have much time."

"Warn the Starfleet squad to bug out," Jarrat called as he let go the inert body he had been carrying and dove toward the courier.

"Too late, they're on top of you," Stone told him. "Move it, Kevin. You're going to lose the hull by the docking port!"

Klaxons were already screaming through the dock, and helmet audio

picked up the chiming impacts as pressure doors slammed and locked. As Jarrat made his way fast to the *Nimrod*, Stone was sealing the NARC transport. "Blue Ravens, you're on your own," he called. "Raven Leader?"

Jarrat was ten meters short of the *Nimrod* when the Starfleet squad appeared at a dead run, out of the darkness around the curvature of the tocamac-shaped dock. Five security men in helmets and flak jackets were ahead, three medics behind. All wore respirators, but none of them knew how close they were to an explosive decompression. Jarrat kicked on the public address.

"Get on the *Nimrod*, all of you! We're going to lose the hull any second. *Move!*" He stood aside to let them go ahead. "Blue Ravens, report!"

"Blue Raven 6, right behind you," Cronin called. "Cap, we're starting to lose pressure!"

"Blue Raven 7," Ramos shouted. "In the transit tube. I can't patch it. Inform Stavager Security, seal the system before it blows!"

"Blue Raven 12," Taft yelled. "Already on the *Nimrod*. Am securing the cargo bay. Can't tell if the tank's bugged or not."

"Blue Raven 14," Troy Allen bellowed. "I got one shooter here, condition is critical, bringing him up to the *Nimrod*, but don't wait for me. I don't think the bastard's gonna make it."

Helmet audio was picking up groans and squeals before the last Starfleet corpsman was aboard, and Jarrat was seeing the same data as Cronin. The armor's environmental monitors were hair-trigger sensitive. The air right across the dock was pure poison, and the pressure had begun to drop fast. His floodlights illuminated a storm of wind-borne trash, all of it racing toward the hull plates around the docking ring.

Jarrat dove aboard, and Cronin was a pace behind him, bellowing for his offside. Ramos came up at a flat sprint, his armored mass adjusted to thirty or forty kilos. Jarrat was holding the airlock for him, and as Blue Raven 7 jumped through, he sealed it.

"Allen!" Ramos shouted into the comm clutter. "Blue Raven 14! You're on your own, Troy. Dump the shooter, grab something!"

"We're out of time, Stoney," Jarrat rasped as he shouldered through into the cramped cockpit of the courier. The bulk of the armor would not let him settle in either of the pilot seats, but he reached over and engaged the AI pilot. Immediately, the boards were peppered with red lights and an alarm began to buzz. He shut it off at once, and spoke directly to the autopilot. "Emergency undock!"

"Authorization code?" Its voice was genderless, calm, apparently oblivious to the situation.

"Override: NARC 105.94 Alpha-Delta," Jarrat barked.

The AI ran the code in less than a second, and the docking clamps disengaged with a too-familiar bass chime. Repulsion kicked the ship off from the docking ring, and a blizzard of metal confetti fluttered out with her. Stavanger's hull plates were still holding, but when they tore at last they would peel open like cans.

"Step aside, Jarrat. Let me."

The voice was unexpected over the helmet audio, and Jarrat turned toward it, presenting a full-faced, featureless visor to a figure that seemed lately to have shrunk. Jack Brogan had snatched off his respirator in the better air, cast aside a borrowed security squad helmet, and as Jarrat pressed into the space behind the copilot's station Brogan slid into the pilot's seat. He was still in a black flak jacket, and what he was doing with the squad, Jarrat did not know.

"NARC transport, this is Raven Leader," he called into the melee of a comm loop gone mad. "Stoney!"

Stone's voice was almost overridden by the audio from the Blue Ravens, the carrier and Stavager Security. Jarrat tuned them out, leaving his partner a lone voice against the whisper of a battle zone. "We're out," Stone was saying. "Turn right, two-two-five. Kip and Harry are safe. Stavanger reports, they're locked down. She can blow any time she wants to."

"And the runner?" Jarrat asked. "The Yamazake Sylph that went through here like a lightning bolt?"

"Blue Raven gunship is after it," Stone reported, "but it's showing them its tailpipes. They couldn't get a target-lock till it was too far out."

"Damn," Jarrat breathed.

"*Watch out!*" Stone's voice rose sharply, and before he had finished the warning, red hazard lights scattered the panels.

The courier had already turned her tail to the dock, and she was maneuvering as the storm of shrapnel enveloped her. Hull segments the size of a Marshall Skyvan smacked into her, bounced off the flanks, but the hull was toughened for hyperflight. Red lights returned to green. As the *Nimrod* left behind the ruined facility, Jarrat lifted off his helmet.

The ship was looping around toward the *Olympic*, and he dropped a heavy, steel-gloved hand on Brogan's shoulder. "Hang a left and drop your nose, Brogan. You're headed for the *Athena*."

Brogan glared at him. "We're a Starfleet courier, we're headed to a Starfleet base ship."

"You're carrying a NARC medical cargo and three NARC personnel," Jarrat said acidly. "Consider yourself commandeered." He touched his headset. "Raven Leader to ops room. Power up a docking port. The *Nimrod* is coming in."

"Shit," Brogan said in a furious undertone.

Helmet under his arm, Jarrat angled a hard look at him. "What's your beef with NARC? You hate our guts, don't you, Brogan? Or is it just me and Stoney you hate?"

The pilot looked away. "Another time, another place, Jarrat."

"Name it," Jarrat said harshly. "You want to tell me what you're doing with the security squad?"

For a moment it seemed Brogan would not answer. He was taking the *Nimrod* around in a great arc, coming into a loose formation with the NARC transport, and as they dropped in under the carrier's keel he said grudgingly, "Making myself useful, Jarrat. I'm grounded. Something to do with a tribunal. Whaddaya know? My ticket home. Back to Earth."

No surprise there. Jarrat watched the hangar lights as the bay doors opened for the transport. "Ops room, which docking port?"

And Petrov's voice: "Use Port 6. You need security?"

"No, Mischa, no prisoners," Jarrat said tersely. "But have a medical team stand by ... Stoney?"

"Reading you." Stone's voice was so clear, he might have been standing at Jarrat's elbow.

"Have Kip and Harry make their way to Port 6, soon as you're back in ... we've got the tank, but who knows what shape it's in? Any news from Stavanger Security?"

Docking Port 6 was up on the side, on the starboard flank of the carrier. Under Brogan's hands, the *Nimrod* was sliding up like a calf beside a blue whale, and before he had locked on, Stone called, "We're in. Hangar is repressurizing. The word from Stavanger is, they're sealed. Engineers are looking at adjoining compartments, medical and security's pulling out bodies." He paused, obviously to listen, and added, "looks like the four 'Fleet corpsmen on duty at the dock itself are dead, and they're counting three shooters ... no ID on any of the bodies, but get this, Kevin: the dock police picked up a couple of characters hanging around, watching, listening, loaded with gear. We might score a couple of prisoners yet."

"What about the courier's crew?" Brogan demanded.

Stone skipped a beat. "Is that Jack?"

"He invited himself along," Jarrat said acidly, "since he's got nothing better to do. And he has a point, Stoney. The *Nimrod's* pilots logged in not an hour ago. Where the hell are they?" The magnetic clamps took hold with a heavy bass *thudd*, and in the same moment Jarrat felt a flare of reaction from Stone. "What is it? Stoney!"

"Have you searched the *Nimrod*?" Stone asked darkly.

How many places could you lose two human beings aboard a ship the size of a courier? Jarrat's mouth was dry as he turned to look back along the body of the craft. The armored shapes of Cronin, Ramos and Taft almost filled the cabin. The seven from the *Olympic* were crammed into what little space remained, and the aft cargo bay was filled to capacity by the old, bulky cryogenic tank.

Air pressures equalized with a shushing sound and the hatch opened. Gene Cantrell's face appeared, ahead of a detail from the Infirmary. He beckoned the Starfleet personnel, and Brogan pushed past Jarrat to rejoin his crew. The Blue Ravens were shouldering through the hatch while Jarrat hung back, glaring at the inside of the courier. Where could you lose two human beings?

A strident Canadian voice called from the hatch, "Somebody here sent for a mechanic?"

It must have been Reardon or Del who had asked Budweisser to look at the tank, but Bud's smart-ass remark made Jarrat think of running repairs and his eyes were drawn to the deck plates, where most of the ship's essential systems could be accessed in-flight, from a trench.

His mouth dried again. "Stoney, where are you? Is Kip with you?"

"Yeah. We'll be there in two minutes. You find something?" Stone was on the move. Jarrat heard the background noise of passages, machinery, other conversations, behind his voice.

"I'm not sure. Maybe nothing. Standby." The Starfleet people had gone, and Brogan with them. The Blue Ravens were loitering by the open hatch, and Jarrat leaned out. "Give me a hand here, Gil."

Cronin had taken off his helmet, and passed it to Ramos. "What you need, Cap?"

"I want to lift the deck plates," Jarrat told him. "Take the end."

The plates were two meters long and a meter wide. Removing them usually called for tools, but the armored gloves made light work of it. Cronin took the aft end of the first of three deck plates, and as Jarrat hooked steel fingertips into the forward end and lifted, the plate came up and out, revealing the service trench beneath.

Two more plates were set into the deck behind this one, working their way aft, and for a moment Jarrat saw nothing in the dim recess of the trench. "Watch your eyes, Gil." He had set his helmet on a seat just aft of the cockpit, and now picked it up, angled it and turned on the floods. Merciless white light cast hard shadows, and in the recess under the second plate he picked out the shape of a pair of legs.

"Next plate," he told Cronin. He turned off the floods and set the helmet aside.

As the plate came up and out Stone appeared in the hatch, a headset still on, talking to the ops room even then. His face was set in grave lines, and he slid past Cronin, to Jarrat's side. All three peered down into the trench, and Stone swore softly.

The two bodies, pilot and copilot, were crammed into the trench like old boots into a duffel. Like most courier pilots, they were young, not more than twenty-five, and the man was vaguely familiar. Perhaps he had been their pilot a year ago, or two, when Jarrat and Stone went out to join the carrier on assignment. The woman was probably even younger.

"Damn," Stone said softly. "Make it nine dead. Three shooters, four Starfleet security ... and these kids."

"Dead?" Kip Reardon was in the hatch. "You want to move your butt, Stoney? Don't touch anything. You're looking at old-fashioned murder here. This wasn't a battle zone."

In fact there was not a mark on the pilots. If they had fought, they would be showing wounds, but Jarrat saw nothing at all. Reardon had gone to his knees by the trench, while Harry had headed aft to the tiny cargo hold with Budweisser. Stone leaned down over the trench for a better view, and touched the headset. "Kip, let me get a crew in here. We'll need video and audio."

"And an autopsy," Reardon said darkly. He angled a frown up at Stone and, beyond him, Jarrat. "We know for a fact, the tank was the target for this raid. If you can nail who wanted the tank, the very least you can slap on them is a multiple-murder rap. I was listening to Stavanger Security." He straightened and shook his head over the pilots. "And for what? I don't understand any of this. The Brand boy's been tanked for twenty-five years, and he was

clinically dead, had to be resuscitated, before they shoved him in there! I did some research after I talked to Harry. I got my hands on the death certificate. Three specialists in narco-emergency at Angel of Kansai confirmed Angel OD."

"So why," Stone growled, "is Marcus Brand a target worth the loss of nine lives today?"

"Why," Jarrat added, "was Cassius Brand trying to lay on corporate security for the tank? He bloody *knew*, Stoney. You remember what he said? Anything goes wrong, anything at all, and Harry would be held accountable along with NARC. Or us, specifically."

"He's known all along his kid was a target," Stone said slowly.

As he spoke, Del stepped out of the cargo hold with a face like thunder. "I told you the Brand house was full of armed guards. I just wasn't sure who or what was being guarded."

"And how's the tank?" Jarrat asked as Stone drew aside to talk to the ops room. He was sending for an audiovisual crew, and as soon as the trench and hold were thoroughly scanned and imaged, Reardon's people would have the bodies in the Infirmary.

"The tank's damaged," Harry said sourly. "It was going to be hard enough to get the poor little sod out of there. Now, it's going to be nearly impossible. According to Bud, we'll virtually have to rebuild the tank around him before we can even look at retrieval."

"Meaning antique parts and power cells," Jarrat said grimly.

"If we can track them down at all." Del sighed. "I might find some on Rethan. I can call Tansy ... damn!" He rubbed his face hard enough to leave the cheek ruddy. "Whoever forced entry here tried to crack the seals on the tank. They didn't manage it, because the old electronics are so persnickety, you have to use jumper cables and an external control device. Even the remote doesn't work anymore. Understand: cracking the seals is quite different from retrieval. It just pops the tank without any preliminaries. It's fatal, even if the occupant's only been in there for a few seconds. Brain structure turns to sludge as the cells come back up to a working temperature. There's only one thing you could intend, by cracking the seals." His eyes were wide, deeply troubled.

"Murder." Jarrat lifted a brow at Stone, and reached for his helmet. "The question is, *why*. And why now. Why try to kill Marcus Brand after so long?"

"Because there was a damned fine chance Marcus would be out of that tank, and cured," Stone mused. "Before Harry's work hit the headlines in Aurora through the paparazzi, the kid was nobody's problem. He was in there till the cure for Angel was developed, and if Primax is the best they've been able to come up with, old Brand would have been starting to think he'd never see his son again."

Jarrat was thinking along the same lines, but there was only so far a puzzle could be worked when half the pieces were missing. "Marcus is the key to it," he agreed, "but until or unless Harry can retrieve him, we've got nothing, Stoney. GlobalNet put the whole thing on the newsvids, which means the hit on Marcus could have come from any part of the system, or any sys-

tem within reach of the GlobalNet transmissions.” He tossed the helmet from hand to hand, and stepped out of the way as the forensics and audiovisual crews arrived in the hatch. Harry remained with the old tank, where Budweiser was working with a battery of instruments. “Let me get out of the hardsuit ... and then we have work to do, Stoney.”

Always expressive, Stone’s blue eyes crackled. “Track down Leo Michiko,” he said quietly as holocams began to hum. “He either talks to us, or I’ll put my name on a warrant for his arrest.”

“Call Senator Brand,” Jarrat added, following him out through the hatch. He beckoned a crewboy closer. “Get a tractor, son.” He knocked on his breastplate. “This goes back in the lockers aboard 09.” He was opening the smart-seals which self-formed at wrists and shoulders as he spoke. “I want straight answers from Brand. He *knows* what’s going on around his kid, and he’s not telling a tenth of it. You know what I’m thinking?”

Stone took the armor pieces from him as he shed them. “You’re wondering, did Brand lobby the legislation through to keep Tactical the hell away from an investigation involving his only son?”

“You surely have to wonder.” Jarrat paused as the figure of Jack Brogan stepped into the docking bay. He dropped his voice. “We need a probe into the three of them, Michiko, Denehy and Brand.”

“The kind of probe Tactical couldn’t do,” Stone added, “even if they weren’t hamstrung.” His brows rose. “All the way back to DAC.”

“And covering at least a quarter century,” Jarrat added, “right back to the time Marcus Brand was tanked.”

“It won’t be easy,” Stone mused. His eyes were on Jack Brogan, following the pilot on his way across the docking bay from the lounge where Cantrell had briefed the Starfleet crew and settled them, waiting for a dock shuttle. “Even with NARC clearances, that kind of probe takes time and sheer deviousness. McKinnen?”

“I was thinking the same thing. It’s the kind of probe an AI would perform better than a human, in a tenth the time, and that’s right in her ball court.” Jarrat raised his voice as Brogan approached. “If you’re waiting to take the *Nimrod* back to Stavanger, you better go get yourself a coffee. They’ll be a while. We found the pilots stuffed into the engineers’ trench under the deck. It’s murder, it’s Angel-related, so it’s our priority. We’ll release the *Nimrod* when we’re done with it.”

For the first time in Jarrat’s memory a flicker of genuine emotion crossed Brogan’s face. “Christ, I knew those kids. The pilots. A few years ago it could have been —” He closed his eyes and turned away.

It could have been Brogan himself stuffed under the deck plates. Jarrat and Stone shared a frown, and Stone said quietly, “You want a ride back to the *Olympic*? Forensics are going to be in there awhile.”

“Yeah.” Brogan pulled both hands through his cropped blond hair. “I’ll take you up on that, Stone.” He gestured at the courier. “You know what goes on here?”

But Stone could only make negative gestures. “Not yet. But we will, Jack. You’re, uh, flying shuttle service now?”

The pilot's face froze and his spine stiffened. "Holder grounded me." The word might have been 'betrayed.' "Shit, Stone, you know the way it works. You put your own people first: leave no one behind, retrieve your equipment, bring back everyone and everything. That's the rule they engrave on your brain with a hot needle when you're still sweating through rookie school classes."

"Is it?" Stone watched the tractor come trundling up to collect Jarrat's armor. "I wouldn't know. I went into Tactical, and you've heard their motto: 'Justice and security for all people.' Kevin?"

In fact, Jarrat had sweated through approximately the same rookie school. He knew as well as Brogan did, the 'rules' were wide open to interpretation. At the close of an assignment gone wrong the unit commander would be carpeted to give account of his actions, and he could as easily be promoted as forcibly retired.

"It all depends on the spin you put on it," Jarrat said to Stone, while he studied Jack Brogan critically. "Half the time, it's down to a bunch of old fogeys back on Earth who haven't walked a battle zone in twenty years. That your plan, Brogan? Play to a captive audience, argue the credit-value of three or four, maybe five brand-new Corsairs against a falling-down dump of a city bottom?"

He was deliberately provoking Brogan, prodding for a response. Stone knew what he was doing and was intent on the sparring partner of his late teens. For a moment Jarrat was sure Brogan was about to lash out physically. The pilot's fists clenched, his face was taut with anger, and then he visibly throttled back on the reflex, as if he saw what Jarrat was doing.

A crooked, cynical smile replaced the twist of fury. "I was just bringing my people home alive, Jarrat. By the book."

"Colonel Holder doesn't agree," Stone said pointedly.

Brogan's wide shoulders lifted in a shrug. "It's got squat to do with him now. Soon as Holder grounded me, gave me the ticket home, it turned into a Starfleet tribunal shindig. Like your bastard partner says, Stone, it comes down to a bunch of geriatrics who can't even remember what a battle zone smells like."

He stalked away on those words, back to the lounge where the other Starfleet personnel were waiting. Cantrell was still with them, and as Brogan returned, Gene strolled out across the wide, breezy docking bay. He wore a headset, and was listening. Jarrat was stacking the last segments of his armor on the tractor when Cantrell looked up at him and Stone. The tractor moved off toward the hangar, and Transport 09. Cantrell gestured to the lifts.

"That was the Stavanger Dock police. They called Tactical and Janssen bumped the call straight through to us. They want to know what to do with their prisoners. They made four arrests. I told them, send the whole company to us. They're shuttling them over."

It was an unexpected bonus but Jarrat remained skeptical. "Stavanger arrested these people for loitering at the scene, watching?"

"Watching from a restricted area, while loaded down with gear," Cantrell added, "and two of them were heavily armed."

The service elevator opened, and Jarrat stepped in. "Do we know who they are?"

"All four are carrying ID," Cantrell told him. "The word from the ops room is, the bolter shot through into hyper. No way was the gunship going to chase down a Yamazake Sylph with a good head start. The gunship's on its way back in."

Stone touched his own headset, resettled the earpiece and called, "Ops room, get me Doctor McKinnen."

"Yvette?" Cantrell asked of Jarrat as the lift went up and forward fast. "She was making plans to take the clipper back to Darwin's."

"She'll be on a courier instead," Jarrat said grimly. "What do you know about DAC, Gene?"

The older man puffed out his cheeks. "I know them by rep, but I can't say I've dealt with them much. Data Access Corporation often does business with Central. Anything I wanted, I kicked the request back to Bill Dupre." Cantrell stepped out of the lift and strode into the ops room. Stone was a pace behind him, and plugged into the comm loop while Cantrell and Jarrat reviewed the forensics data, which was coming up on several CRTs. "You want to get into DAC with a jackhammer," Cantrell said softly, "which is why you're putting Yvette McKinnen on a courier." He gave Jarrat a speculative look.

"A data probe," Jarrat affirmed, "that'll push NARC clearances to the limit. We're about to find out how far we *can* push, Gene, and we won't get what we need through any normal channels."

"Hence, Yvette." Cantrell made a face. "Central could hang you by the balls for this."

"Bust us right back to civilian?" Jarrat felt a surge of humor, his own or Stone's, it was impossible to tell. He shared a dry chuckle with his partner as Stone took off the headset and turned back to them. "Depends on results, doesn't it? If we come up dry, and we've stomped enough delicate toes —"

"You could be wading knee-deep in the shit," Cantrell finished.

"Calculated risk," Stone said acidly, "is what this job is all about." He tapped the headset. "The Stavanger shuttle's coming in, and I've asked Harry to join us. Bud's transferring the cryotank to the Infirmary, and Kip reports job done on the *Nimrod*. We should have an autopsy report in a couple of hours." He pushed his hands into his hip pockets. "And four prisoners for interrogation."

"I'm glad we have Harry aboard." Jarrat surveyed the ops room, watching Petrov for several moments. The Russian was coordinating the data feed to Tactical and the *Olympic*, and a major telemetry package was on its way to Central, video from Stavanger Dock, plus the forensics audiovisuals and Blue Raven's video. Jarrat was satisfied, and gave Petrov a nod. "All yours, Mischa," he said dryly, knowing it was much less than Petrov wanted, and followed Stone to the elevators.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

All four prisoners were carrying ID. The cards had been confiscated by the dock police, along with an array of equipment and weapons which surprised even Stone. Cameras the size of his thumb, camera drones the size of a chickadee, with the ability to image in thermo, vision intensification and ULF-resonance, and stay in the air for days. Long-range audio gear which could pick up a whisper three kilometers away, lasers interferometers which could translate coherent audio out of the vibrations in window glass. R/T as powerful as anything NARC used, with levels of encryption which linked them back to *some* Ibex comm portal.

At least in Stone's mind, this meant Denehy's machine, installed in the Spectrum which had been parked at Brand's private landing just days before. The weapons were just as surprising. An Austin 44, a Steyr machine pistol, and two Colt Kaiowa assault rifles, identical to the weapon Jarrat had taken from the shooter in the cargo bay over on Stavanger Dock.

The whole cache was set out on a bench at the rear of the lab which was being used for the interrogations. Harry Del whistled as he saw the haul. Yvette McKinnen was less impressed, since she worked in the field of biocyber devices and covert systems, but she raised a brow as she saw the individuals, civilians, who were in possession of equipment which was actually designed for, and supplied to, the military. She was only passing through on her way to her lab, and as she left two Green Ravens appeared, both of them armed. They dwarfed her as they took station to either side of the door.

The four prisoners sat stoically on one side of a table, drinking coffee, smoking, and maintaining a granite silence. Their ID was swiped through a reader and the comm relay terminals came alive. Of the four, two of the civvies belonged to GlobalNet, and Stone was unsurprised. The paparazzi were the scourge of the 'bright lights' sectors of any city, and Brand had been at war with them for years.

The GlobalNet crew glared at the CRTs. Arial Quinn was a journalist who had been with the vidnews service for eight years, and five more with AuraNet before that. She was fifty, a tall, rawboned brunette, the consummate professional, and if she was anxious about NARC, she did not show it. The dock police had deliberately, even maliciously strip-searched all four, and like the others she was clad in the blue-gray coveralls common to inmates in Aurora's prisons. She was angry — the search was unnecessary, since a handscanner could have performed the whole process — but she had the measure of the dock police. The coveralls were unzipped down to the crotch, displaying honey-gold skin, body-art tattoos, pierced-in jewelry and a lot of cleavage.

Quinn was so adept at this routine, Stone wondered how often she had done it before. She was lighting a fourth kipgrass-lemon cigarette as he watched and, aware of his scrutiny, she arched back and shrugged the coveralls half-way off her shoulders. The body-art continued wherever he saw skin, and Quinn regarded him from beneath lowered lashes. The dock police had made a mistake, taking her on. Every line of her body language was plain: Want to get physical? Don't start what you can't finish.

Sitting beside Quinn was her av recordist, Cal Goldstone. He was twenty-eight, with slender body lines, soft hands and long carrot-orange hair roped into a braid. And the recordist looked fazed, Stone thought. He was smoking too, and his hands shook, either in reaction to the malice of the dock police or the fact he was sitting in a lab aboard a NARC carrier. Neither would imbue a man with confidence. Goldstone had been with GlobalNet for only three years, but his record was clean up to this point, whereas Quinn's was a ten-year list of arrests, complaints and inquiries, none of which had led to a formal arrest.

A little apart from the journalists were two men, big, thick with muscle and as hard-faced as Arial Quinn. Shim Redden was in his late thirties. He was ex-Army and wore it like a flag. The hair was still buzz-cut, the old unit badges were tattooed on his forearms, and the dogtag in his left earlobe was spot-welded in. The dock police had removed all the jewelry they could from the four prisoners, but short of tearing off Redden's ear, the dogtag was staying where it was. Now Redden looked merely bored, and as his service record came up on the CRT, Stone saw why. He had served three six-year hitches on various Army carriers, seeing action on Sheal, Calleran, Oromon, and beyond the frontier in the region known as 'freespace,' where some of the worst battles were fought. Redden had seen a good deal more action than Jarrat, and over many more years; and his current assignment was predictable. He was a listed as a company sergeant with the PharmaTech corporate army, currently on loan to Cassius Brand. The tank had been his responsibility — he had blown it, and he obviously believed he had far more to fear from Brand than from NARC.

Beside him, at the corner of the table, was Denny Chizmar, also from PharmaTech. Twenty-four years old, also wearing a hard-face, but his mask had a brittle look about it. Behind it was a very young man with a single Army hitch under his belt. Six years spent mostly on bases; one two-year tour on the frontier. He did not have Quinn's and Redden's experience, and Stone did not need any telepathy to know what he was thinking. He and Redden had been assigned to guard the tank; they had blown it, and his sergeant would make sure Chizmar took the rap. A promising career in PharmaTech was probably over right here, and Chizmar was looking at an Army carrier or an unemployment line and a flea-pit apartment in city bottom.

In the rear corner of the lab, Harry Del stood with folded arms and a deep frown. He was looking at the back of Quinn's dark head as Jarrat asked of her, "How did you people come by the equipment? This stuff isn't cleared for civvy use."

"Talk to my editor," Quinn said brashly. The stock retort. "We check it

out of Supplies. We don't use anything we haven't signed out. You got a problem? Bug Matt Rashevsky about it."

"We will," Jarrat promised. "And I suppose you were covering the Marcus Brand story for GlobalNet?"

She gave him a withering look. "Like we'd be killing time in some shit-hole dock if we weren't? Get real, Captain. Time is money in this business. Rashevsky doesn't pay us to sit on our asses and watch the paint dry. You want to know our assignment, call him."

Jarrat gave Stone an amused look. The story was so easy to check, going through the motions was a waste of time. However, all a confirmation did was place Quinn and Goldstone on business on Stavanger Dock. If their business was the assassin's work, was another question. Matt Rashevsky would deny to his last breath that he had assigned them to murder. Stone looked up over the woman's head at Del, and gave the empath a nod. Harry's tongue tip flicked over his lips and he took a step closer, behind Quinn.

"So," Stone prompted, meeting her challenging eyes, "you expect us to believe you didn't go to the *Nimrod* to ... interfere with the cryogen tank?"

"To do what?" Her eyes narrowed against the smoke as she took a drag on the cigarette.

"Did you get on the courier?" Stone's voice hardened.

"Of course we did," Quinn said scornfully. "How do you expect us to get pictures if we don't get aboard?"

"You had a pass to go aboard?" Jarrat asked.

She barked a laugh. "If we waited for permissions, we'd never file a story. I already told you, time is money."

"So you got aboard," Stone went on, "and imaged the tank. How did you interfere with it? Did Matt Rashevsky give you that assignment as well? Pass the buck if you want, lady: we'll be glad to drag Rashevsky's ass up here."

For the first time he saw a chink in Quinn's armor. She stubbed out the cigarette and leaned toward him, both elbows on the table. "I'd be a big, fat liar if I said I knew what you're talking about. We came up here to get a story. We snuck aboard when the Starfleet crew took off for breakfast. There was one, repeat *one* Fleet guard on duty, yawning his brains out. I had somebody from GlobalNet call him on the private line in the dock office. He went to take the call and we snuck right in." She shrugged. "The tank was sitting there like a dead log. We imaged it from every angle Cal could dream up, and it's still brain-dead footage. Then we snuck out again, and went for coffee. We were killing time, only waiting for the courier to shove off. They look real pretty as they leave the dock and light up the tailpipes, and I thought we might get some decent pictures, what we call 'beauty shots,' with the *Olympic* in the background. Viewers like to see the big ships. That's the whole story, Captain ... what d'you say your name was? ... and if you don't believe me, all you have to do is run the data in those cameras."

"We will," Stone assured her. The camera was in his hands, and he passed it to Jarrat. "What's your interest in Cassius Brand?"

The camera jacked into the CRT and was downloading as Quinn said acidly, "My interest? None whatsoever. He's a fossil living on borrowed time,

and living big in the spheres. The days when he had anything interesting to do or say in front of a vidcam are long gone.”

“Your interest in his son, then,” Jarrat amended. “Stoney?”

The raw data, captured in-camera by Cal Goldstone, was playing on a CRT the prisoners could not see. The low-light conditions in the cargo hold made pictures difficult to get, but Goldstone was working with the best equipment in the business, his results were more than adequate. And the data was exactly as Quinn had described.

They had shot the docking bay, the side of the *Nimrod* through a viewport, and the security office; the next shots were in the cargo bay, every conceivable angle on the bulky old cryotank.

“I’ll give you this, kid,” Stone told the vid recordist, “you have a nice touch with the equipment.” He looked up at Goldstone over the top of the CRT. “What the hell are you doing working for a sleazeball outfit like GlobalNet?”

Jarrat stifled a chuckle. Goldstone blinked several times before he said, “Uh, the, uh, money’s real good.”

“And the jail time?” Jarrat wondered.

“Jail? What?” Goldstone was visibly shaking.

“Callum!” Quinn barked. “Shut it! Not a word, kid.” She glared at Jarrat and Stone. “There’s fuck-all they can charge us with, and they know it. Truth is, they don’t know shit, they’re just fishing.”

But Stone was shaking his head, and holding the vid recordist’s wide, panicked eyes. “She’s dead wrong, Cal. You should know, the tank was tampered with. *Someone* tried to crack the seals. They didn’t do it, because they weren’t aware that the old electronics are jacking around. But they tried ... and we’ve got you bozos tagged.”

“Not us,” Quinn said hoarsely. “I got no interest in Marcus Brand. He’s been tanked since I was twenty-five ... back then, I was still in school, reading for a political science degree I never finished.”

“And you, Goldstone?” Jarrat prompted.

“Me? Twenty-five years ago, I was still trying to convince my parents to let me have a tiny little bike if I swore to God I’d wear their dumb purple helmet. I don’t know anything about Brand’s kid, except he was a terminal doper, and he was DOA at Angel of Kansai!”

The kid was so panicked, lying coherently would have been difficult. He was more than likely innocent, but Stone was not so sure about Quinn. “So you took a shot at sabotaging the tank while young Cal was setting up his shots, did you?” Again, he was needling, trying to provoke a response for Del. This time he got one.

“You,” Quinn told him, “are a cast-iron bastard, and you can screw yourself, Captain. You’re trying to set me up to take a rap, because you’re either too lazy or too dumb to go find the real murderer ... and I’ll be damned if I’ll make it easy for you.”

She was good. Jarrat and Stone looked up at Harry, who was still standing behind Quinn. The empath wore an odd expression, but he did not hesitate. “They’re on the level. You’re wondering if they took a contract to kill

Marcus *in lacus*, and used the GlobalNet assignment as an excuse to be on the dock, in case they were picked up?"

"The thought occurred to us," Jarrat affirmed. "No?"

"No." Harry was definite. "This one, Quinn, is scared spitless, but she's doing a good job of hiding it. She's never been grilled by NARC before, and she knows she can be thrown in a cell without even being charged, and held indefinitely, on NARC recommendation. I saw her record when you ran her ID. She's anxious ... probably because a whole boat-load of other bullshit she's pulled over the years could come home to roost any minute."

"Hey, what in the hell are you?" Quinn twisted in the chair to look back at him. "Telepath, is it? Mutoid?"

"Mutoid," Del echoed darkly, and turned his back on her. "Rethan mutation 87/T. You know about us?"

"I researched you when we got the tipoff about Brand's story, how he brought in some faith-healer to work on his kid." Quinn stared unblinkingly at Del. "You're the Rethan empath? I heard Brand hired you because you fixed up some NARCs who'd got busted up."

"You have a problem with empaths?" Jarrat asked tersely.

"No." Quinn lifted her chin defiantly. "Just so long as they stay the hell out of *my* head."

Del stepped away from her, as if he must put distance between them. "Lady it's a deal. She's on the level, Kevin. She's one of the most disagreeable bitches I ever met, and I'd like to slap her upside the head, but she didn't go aboard the courier to kill Marcus."

"Two down," Stone said acerbically, "two to go." He was looking at the PharmaTech goons. He began with the elder of the two. "Sergeant Shimon Redden, is it? You're quite the career Army man. You didn't stay with the service and try for officer selection. Now, why would that be?"

The man peered through a haze of kipgrass smoke. "There comes a time, Captain, when you get sick to your guts of looking at the inside of Army carriers. You want more out of life than drills and taking orders from brain-dead officers getting on toward half your age. I knew when to quit, and PharmaTech was offering a good deal. And before you ask, no, I bloody didn't go on the *Nimrod* and try to kill the Brand kid. You ran my ID? Then you know Den Chizmar and me are on loan from PharmaTech to Senator Brand. We were sent up here to bodyguard the tank. I thought it was the stupidest duty I ever pulled, till all hell busted loose. Turns out the old man was right."

"Right about what?" Jarrat popped the datacubes out of the av recorders before returning them to the stack of GlobalNet's gear.

"About somebody taking a crack at the boy." Redden's eyes were on Quinn. "You sure about these two? I had her pegged for the one."

"Quite sure," Stone said tersely. "I'd say you blew your whole assignment, Redden."

"Tell me about it." Redden squeezed his eyes shut. "Get your 87/T mutoid around here, tell him to do his thing. I'm only going to say it one more time, Captain, and I expect you to be listening."

Behind him, Harry bristled. Anger flushed in his cheeks and his lips compressed.

"Watch your mouth, Redden," Jarrat rasped. "Guilty or not, we can make your life *interesting* if you dance too far out of line."

The veteran soldier appeared unmoved. "Yes, we blew the assignment. And yeah, we're going to be hauled over the coals till we roast. We'll be lucky to work in this colony again. In fact, I'm leaving, soon as NARC's done with me. Aurora's not the only place to hire on." He glared at Stone, and then at Jarrat. "You get it this time? I did not touch the cryogen tank. I personally don't give a flying fuck if Marcus Brand lives or dies ... but I got a whole lot of respect for his old pa's money."

The empath's face was grim once more, but he gave Jarrat and Stone a small nod. "He's on the level. He's an SOB and I don't doubt there's things he's done that are worth five to ten in a cage. But attempting to murder Marcus Brand isn't one of them."

"Three down," Jarrat said sourly as he stepped up before the younger PharmaTech man. "Denzil Chizmar. They call you Denny. Six years in the service ... two on a carrier, a tour on the frontier. Then you thought you'd try for the big money. PharmaTech."

"But you found an even faster way to the money," Stone added. "Contract shooters get well paid. Assassination's always been big money. So who hired you, kid?"

"You can talk your way back from a firing squad to a sentence," Jarrat told him. "You won't see daylight for twenty or twenty-five, but at least you'll be out by the time you're her age." He nodded at Quinn, who was watching with shrewd, unblinking eyes.

Chizmar was blank, as if he could not assimilate the words. "Look," Stone reasoned, "*somebody* tried to crack the seals on that tank. If it wasn't Quinn and Goldstone, and it wasn't the sergeant with the loud, nasty mouth ... it had to be you."

"No!" Chizmar was halfway to his feet.

"Denny, sit your dumb ass down!" Redden roared. "Give 'em a reason, and they'll beat shit out of you."

"We'd need a *slightly* better reason than a kid stretching his legs," Jarrat said with mock patience, though the two Green Ravens had in fact taken a step closer. He gestured them back to the door. "Butt out, Redden. Let the kid speak for himself. If you have nothing to hide, Chizmar, you have nothing to fear."

"Nothing," Chizmar said wildly. "Not one crappy thing! I haven't done *nothing*! I only signed on with PharmaTech six months ago. Shim recruited me, right off the *Destiny*. We served together, his last tour, and when I got to the end of my hitch ..." Chizmar ran down into silence as he became aware of Redden's eyes on him. "I didn't even know the name of the stiff in the tank," he said miserably. "Shim just said, this was a piece-of-cake assignment, nothing to do but play cards and kill time and get paid."

Every word rung true. Stone had already heard enough. "Harry?"

And Del nodded. "He's hiding something, but he's not lying about the

assignment or the tank. Whatever he's hiding embarrasses him, Stoney. He wishes the deck would open up and swallow him."

"Well, well." Stone wiped the smile off his face. "I was wondering where you two guys were when somebody snuck aboard the courier. Play cards, kill time and get laid, was it?"

"Shit, you're kidding," Quinn muttered. "Cal and I never saw them, Captain. We ran the diversion, got somebody at GlobalNet to call the dock security office, and took our chance. These two goons were never around the *Nimrod* while we were."

Jarrat indulged himself in the moment's wry humor. "If they had been, they'd have picked you up and bounced you. But they were away somewhere, doing their own thing. That right, Chizmar?"

The young man was scarlet to the roots of his hair. Quinn laughed out loud. "They were off on their own, bonking on Cass Brand's time? Christ, if he gets his hands on them, they're toast!"

"No wonder Redden's headed out of system." Stone returned to Jarrat's side and thrust hands into pockets. "Here's the picture: Starfleet security at the *Nimrod*'s docking port were standing normal duty. Brand was so paranoid, he borrowed a couple of bodyguards from Denehy, and it was just lousy luck he had to score these clowns. By the time GlobalNet showed, they were already back in a freight bay or somewhere, and Redden had this one bent over a crate."

"And when Quinn diverted the one security man," Jarrat went on, "there was no one guarding the tank at all. The insurgents just walked aboard and tried their luck ... and then Redden and Chizmar came limping back just in time to see them leaving the *Nimrod*, and the firefight started. Security showed up fast, and we were called. Yes?"

If looks could have killed, Jarrat and Stone would have dropped dead. A muscle twitching in Redden's jaw betrayed grinding muscles. "You got it," he said sourly. "And we took down most of the bastards. We only missed two, and I swear one was wounded. They got back to the plane and were out, like shit off a shovel. And no, before you ask, I didn't recognize faces." He gave Jarrat a surly look. "You didn't grab the Yamazake? There's your contract men! Has to be."

"The gunship couldn't chase it down," Stone told him, "but we got some clear video. We're tracing its ID right now." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Okay, you idiots. Grab your gear. We'll give you a ride back to Stavan-ger, after that you're on your own. And if I were you, I'd be out and running before Brand hears any of this."

With a livid curse, Redden pushed his way to his feet. From the lab bench, he took the machine pistol and one of the two Kaiowas. Chizmar made a clumsy grab for the other weapons, and was in Redden's wake as the sergeant headed for the door. The Green Ravens wore fat smirks, but they let the PharmaTech goons go by.

The GlobalNet people were on their feet, and Quinn hovered by their equipment. "The Marcus Brand story's classified? I mean, *this* is a real story. The human interest crap about the poor, sweet kid in the cryotank and the

poor old man who just wants to hold his boy in his arms again before he turns up his toes — barf. What's it worth, Cal? Two minutes after the weather forecast?"

"Minute and a half," Goldstone said cynically, "because there were no decent pictures. But we got one hell of a story now." He gestured at the datacubes Jarrat had confiscated. "I got good footage of the gunfight, and you guys. I mean, great stuff ... this one guy in armor just walked into the crossfire. It'd have to headline on the sixteen. So, are we going to get our cubes back, man? I mean, Captain."

A quirk Stone recognized had taken root between Jarrat's brows. "We'll have to review the data," he said slowly, "but there's *probably* nothing NARC would want to classify." The emphasis on the one word spoke volumes. "You open for a trade?" Jarrat asked of Quinn.

She looked him up and down deliberately. The tip of her tongue traced her lips as she dealt Stone the same scrutiny. "What you got in mind? I don't usually do threesomes, but I could make an exception."

"Data," Jarrat corrected with a crooked grin.

"Damn." Quinn zipped the coveralls halfway. "What you need? I might be able to help. I got nothing against NARC ... various remarks I may have made earlier notwithstanding. You guys have one hell of a rep, and you probably earned it."

The hard reputation NARC had earned was thirty years old. The days of brute force and harsh methods predated even Cantrell's long career, but neither Jarrat nor Stone was about to dispute it. Often as not, trading on the old reputation was more effective than investing more time and muscle.

"You've been bugging Senator Brand for years, according to the old man," Jarrat said slowly. "GlobalNet must have file material up to the eyeballs." He juggled the cubes in his palm. "Trade us, Quinn. You get your story, your pictures. Your headlines on the sixteen."

She laughed harshly. "You want the dirt on Brand? Give me a ride back over to Stavanger. I'll get back to you tomorrow. Maybe sooner, if Rashevsky cuts me some slack. No promises: he's another SOB."

The datacubes slipped deliberately into the breast pocket of Jarrat's shirt. "Call Thule Tactical, they'll bump your call on to the carrier. And as for your gear ... most of it's not even legal. Tell your editor to file a claim and produce the military supply tickets. If the paperwork's good, you get your stuff."

"And our clothes?" Quinn demanded. "And my jewelry?"

"In the next lab." Stone jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "We didn't tell Stavanger Dock to come on strong. They were PO'd, and I can't say I blame them."

"It's not the first time." Quinn was on her way to the door. "Cal?"

The kid was still hovering by the equipment. "Can I just take my cameras? They're legal! They're also mine. If they were GlobalNet's you'd be welcome to them, like the rest of this crap."

The comm buzzed, and Stone left Jarrat to negotiate the point. He turned a CRT away from Quinn and Goldstone, and when he touched the comm, saw Kip Reardon's face framed there. "What is it, Kip?"

The surgeon's face was grave. "You wanted an autopsy report, Stoney. You want to come down here?"

Stone looked over at Jarrat, and Kevin nodded. The GlobalNet crew was satisfied, and as the Green Ravens stood down Stone said, "We'll be there in five, Kip."

"One other thing," Reardon added as Stone was reaching back to close the comm. "I've got Marcus Brand's tank in here. You'll have to notify his father. Ethics of the trade."

"We know." Stone paused. "How long can you sit on the information? Ethically speaking?"

"A day or so," Reardon said slowly, and gave Stone a suspicious look. "What's going through that corkscrew brain of yours?"

"Maybe nothing," Stone said evasively. "We'll be right there."

The lab lights darkened as Harry Del followed them, the last out. He still wore a bitter expression, and Stone did not wonder at the cause. It had taken him years to carve out a place for himself on Rethan, where he was well-known and had family and friends around him. Even here, few people liked the idea of an empath knowing exactly what they were feeling. It was human nature, Stone thought, but the admission made Del's position no easier.

Two decks up and three hundred meters closer to the bow, the Infirmary was busy. The old cryogen tank stood at one side of the triage area, and Budweisser was still working on it. Stone peered over his shoulder and saw him cross-wiring his way around an ancient remote, which might not have worked in decades. The service cover was off the control panel, and the circuits inside were testing as dead, even though the tank's 'housekeeping' systems were alive. An operator simply could not reach them from the touch-control pad. Only the failure of the surface electronics had saved the boy's life.

OR Three was powered up, the lights were on and the doors were open as Jarrat and Stone approached. Two bodies lay under green sheets on benches, side by side. Two pale young faces seemed merely asleep; two body bags were already labeled and waiting. Alex Pell and Yves Hardy were two years into their Starfleet hitch.

"I've prepared the death certificates," Reardon said baldly as Stone entered the OR. He was still in surgical greens, but the gloves were off. "Starfleet will inform the families, but I doubt they'll disclose the cause of death. A 'killed in action' statement would disturb the families a good deal less than the truth."

"Which is?" Jarrat tilted his head, the better to see the young faces. His own face was shuttered, without expression, and Stone felt a deep disquiet, a well of darkness. Kevin may have been looking at Pell and Hardy, whom he had never known, but he was seeing the faces of friends he had lost many years ago. Stone was no stranger to the feelings he perceived from Jarrat.

"They were killed by a compound called Hexadimorphen." Reardon took off the greens and cast them over the back of a chair. "In small amounts it's used clinically to treat cardiac conditions. It's a muscle relaxant, easier to use and easier to control than the traditional curare. In large doses the drug is lethal: the heart simply stops ... and this is where it gets interesting. If autopsy is not performed within two hours, the molecule bonds with glycogen, and is

virtually impossible to detect. The net result is simply heart failure.” He sighed over the casualties. “You’d think there wasn’t a mark on these kids, so I ran every blood test in the book, plus a few I developed myself. You notice, the autopsy was noninvasive. There was no need to pick up a knife.”

“They didn’t suffer,” Stone guessed.

“No, no, not at all.” Reardon pulled up a rolling chair and sat.

“How?” Jarrat wondered. “How was the drug delivered? Were they gassed? You said there isn’t an obvious mark on them.”

But Reardon shook his head. “In fact, there is, but I had to search.” He beckoned the younger men closer and lifted down the sheets to expose the necks of Pell and Hardy. “You’ll have to look closely. In our line of work we’re so accustomed to seeing gross-level wounds, it’s too easy to miss something as subtle as this.”

The puncture wounds were needle fine. Stone leaned close to see them at all, and Jarrat said quietly, “Darts. Compressed air delivery. No acoustic signature, no metal parts to the weapons. The killers could have walked aboard and not tripped the security alarms.”

“Exactly.” Reardon mimed shooting a tiny, palm-sized weapon. “Cold blooded murder, Kevin. And the only thing that saved Marc Brand was, the touch-control pad on the tank doesn’t work. Bud told me some wiring’s parted company in the last fifty or a hundred years. If it hadn’t, the boy would be dead.”

“Damn,” Stone whispered. “He’s one lucky kid.”

“Lucky?” Jarrat echoed. He was looking out through the OR’s open door. Harry Del had joined Budweisser, watching the work on the tank. “Marcus *died*. Angeldreams ... Angeldeath.”

“Still, he’s lucky,” Reardon said thoughtfully. “He’s going to get a second chance at life.”

“If,” Jarrat said darkly, “we can keep him safe.” He gave Stone a speculative look. “The tank stays right here.”

And Stone nodded. “Kip, compare notes with Harry and Bud. Send back to Darwin’s for whatever you want, our authorization.” He frowned at the tank. “I have a odd feeling about this. A hunch.”

“Like, get the answer to this one, and we’ll have Scorpio?” Jarrat nodded. “I get the same feeling. I’m thinking, Denehy didn’t have to twist too hard on Brand’s arm to get him to jiggle the legislation controlling Tac. Marcus was ... I don’t know. Involved. At the time Kansai Emergency declared the kid dead, Cassius was only about Gene’s age, or Dupre’s. Still full of ambition, with a son soaked in Angel and running with a hard, nasty crowd. Something’s not right.”

“Fast-forward twenty-five years,” Stone continued, thinking along the same tracks. “*Somebody* just made his move ... and we were the trigger. The common denominator is Angel. Or NARC. Or both.” He lifted a brow at Jarrat. “The question is, how much do we want to tell Senator Brand, and when?”

It was Reardon who answered. “Brand’s sick. He’s not young, but age isn’t the problem. Did Harry tell you? It’s Bergman Syndrome, and Brand knows he’s got a couple of bad years in front of him, then either a cryotank

pending a cure that's unlikely to happen, or cremation." He sighed. "Bergman is rare and nasty. Gradually, kicking-off with the atrophy of early old age, autonomic functions go to hell. Digestion goes buggo first. In the early years after the disease first showed up, colonial medics were treating everything from pancreatitis to peptic ulcers. Finally someone put the pieces together. You notice how gaunt Brand is? I saw the file pictures." Reardon slapped his own flat belly. "Nothing works like it should. The next symptom, starting to show about now, is metabolism, BP, body temperature. He'll be on therapy, but he's losing peripheral circulation. If he's not constantly monitored the next thing he'll lose will be fingers, toes, a limb, while his metabolism races, eating up his body." His face was grim. "It's not pretty. The best we can do is treat it symptomatically. Maybe buy him an extra year ... but I *think* he's already had it. He's been getting treatment for well over a decade."

"You got your hands on some files?" Jarrat guessed.

They left the OR, and Reardon killed the lights behind them. "Harry told me what he'd seen, felt. I got interested." His eyes had a glint of fascination. "It gets better, Kevin. Eleven years ago, Cass Brand set out to hunt down a cure for Bergman Syndrome. He put a lot of money, eight figures in colonial dollars, into PharmaTech. This is the connection between him and Denehy. The research is still going on at PharmaTech. Brand's still channeling money in their direction. Now and then they come up with a new therapy, and they test it on the Senator."

"Nothing's worked so far," Stone observed cynically.

Reardon only shrugged. "Don't be too quick to blame PharmaTech for that one. Bergman is one of hard ones to even diagnose, and the effects are like a cascade through the whole body. Tracking it down could take twenty years, especially since the research is being privately funded. It's not a 'let the money flow like water' project. But you're right, Stoney. It's equally possible Denehy's had Brand on a string, milking him for one fortune after another. If it's true, Brand can't see it."

"Denehy's good," Jarrat said tersely. "If he's a con artist, he's the best in the business."

"And remember, Brand *wants* to believe," Reardon added, "and wanting something so badly makes a person blind. Like Primax, which is another of Denehy's little money machines."

"Garbage?" Stone's brows rose.

"It's a cocktail of time-release uppers, downers, minerals and vitamins." Reardon shrugged. "It can't hurt ... the patients who're testing it out in hospices in Thule and Inquanoc are already terminal. But Denehy's touting Primax as halfway to an Angel cure, and it's not. It's no more than I did for you, Stoney, in the Infirmary here, before Harry got hold of you and really *did* cure you." He sighed heavily. "PharmaTech is going to make a whole 'nother fortune out of Primax, and there's not one thing anyone can do to stop them."

"Unless Denehy's got his fingers in Scorpio," Jarrat added. "We're trying to prove it. Michiko either talks to us inside the next day, or we issue an arrest warrant. If Tac can't pick him up, we will."

It was well within the NARC brief. Refusal to assist with an investigation

was read in any court across the colonies as a confession of involvement in the Angel trade. Reardon's heavy brows had knitted in a frown. "I don't know if it means anything, but the drug that killed the Starfleet pilots this morning, Hexadimorphen, is a PharmaTech patent. Don't read too much into it: Den-ehy holds over two hundred patents, half of them registered in Chryse."

"But it's interesting," Stone decided. "Thanks, Kip."

"You're welcome," Reardon said, his tone regretful as he looked back into the darkened OR. "If you can, don't mention too much of this to the Senator. I've a feeling he's been used, and is still being used."

At the same time, however, the old man was more than likely shielding Marcus; but from what? Stone's fascination was piqued. He dropped a hand on Reardon's back. "We'll give Brand a break. Tell him ... what, Kevin? There was an *incident* on the dock, but the tank was never in any danger, Stavanger Security had it covered, and we've taken charge of Marcus personally?"

"Sounds about right," Jarrat agreed. "Thanks for the briefing, Kip. If Bud and Harry can do anything with the tank, keep us posted."

Del had heard this, and as Jarrat and Stone headed out of the Infirmary he walked with them. "It won't be soon. I need a crate of equipment from my own lab on Darwin's. If you can get me space on a courier, give me a week."

"We'll be releasing the *Nimrod* today," Stone mused. "It took no damage in the incident, and forensics have been all over the interior. It's good to go, and it won't be carrying the tank."

"Give McKinnen your list," Jarrat suggested. "She's headed back to Darwin's on a fast turnaround."

"Business? Last I heard, Yvette was looking forward to a week living the good life on a clipper." Del had been so preoccupied with his patient, he was hazy about peripheral affairs.

Stone made amused noises. "How did Gene put it? We want to get into DAC with a jackhammer. Launch a data probe into Brand, Michiko and Denehy, so deep, even NARC clearances won't do it."

"So we'll use DAC's back doors and sneak," Jarrat added, sharing his partner's amusement.

"Ouch." Del walked with them as they headed toward McKinnen's lab, which was obliquely opposite, on the other side of the triage area. "You're sure? You could get into big trouble."

For an elastic moment Jarrat and Stone looked levelly at one another, and both nodded. "We're sure *enough*," Stone told Del. "But to keep our butts covered, we're also putting a man in deep cover."

"A man?" Del's face darkened.

"Me," Jarrat said, not quite glibly. "It's time, Harry. I'll be setting up the cover ID, soon as the telemetry package is in shape. Stoney?"

A sigh ambushed Stone. "If you want. I told you, Kevin, I'll take it. You were buried in Death's Head for weeks, I was only in Warlock Company, Equinox, for a matter of days."

"I don't *want*," Jarrat said slowly, "but ..." He looked away. "I think I have to. You know what I mean. You can bloody *feel* it."

He was right. If Stone allowed the empathic shields to drop by even a tiny

fraction he was immediately aware of the currents of ambivalence from Jarrat, the threads of his anxiety, even dread. 'Stage fright' was normal, every agent suffered it; most swore it sharpened their performance. But what Jarrat was feeling went beyond, into a zone where warning lights flickered, and Stone knew why.

Aurora would be his first time since Death's Head. The first time he had done a real deep cover assignment, not a simulation, a mock-run. In the pit of his belly, in the back of his mind, lurked a shadow of uncertainty. Stone knew, and Del was frowning at them both.

"I have to find out," Jarrat said quietly. "I have to know if I can do this. *You* did it, Stone. You went into Equinox. Let me get back on the horse, beat this thing once and for all."

They had come to rest outside McKinnen's lab. Lights spilled from within, but the loudest sound was the whir of cooling fans from many computers. "Post-trauma syndrome, Kevin?" Del asked softly.

"A touch of it," Jarrat admitted. "I never let Central know, nor Kip. They'd pull the plug on me. It was during the Equinox assignment, and it pass-over. I was okay in the action, and I've been fine since."

"Well ... a touch of post-trauma would be normal. You wouldn't be human if you didn't feel it, after what happened to you both." His eyes flicked to Stone. "And you?"

"I'm all right," Stone said carefully. "I get dreams sometimes."

"You'd be a machine if you didn't," Del said softly. "Kevin ... be careful. It could be dangerous."

Very deliberately, Jarrat straightened his spine. "I know, Harry. And don't fret on my account. I know how, and when, to push a panic button, and I recognize one when I see it."

He had gone ahead into McKinnen's lab when Stone added, in a bass growl, "If the bastards give you time to push it ... and time for anybody to come drag you back out."

Merciless images of Chell's spaceport warren haunted him, memories of a hunt through crumbling alleyways, looking for any trace of Jarrat, who had vanished off the face of the planet. It was an act of sheer willpower to lock the memories away, and Stone was aware of Del's concerned face as he followed Jarrat into McKinnen's workshop.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

To her credit, Yvette McKinnen did not even flutter an eyelash when Stone outlined to her the full extent of what they wanted. She knew just how far NARC clearances would take them, and she was equally as aware of the consequences, if the probe turned up nothing to warrant the intrusion. The probe was rendered quasi-legal by its NARC launch pad, but only hard results would vindicate it when the legal feathers began to fly.

She regarded Jarrat and Stone with amusement. "You two are lucky. That's half your trick, isn't it?"

"Meaning?" Jarrat hitched his denim-clad buttocks onto an unoccupied bench and toyed with an encoder very similar to the Ibex machine Del had seen on Denehy's Spectrum.

"Meaning," McKinnen said with dry humor, "even this thundercloud of yours has a silver lining." She pulled up a stool. "Stone, get me a coffee, would you?"

He brought four, two mugs in either hand, and beckoned Del to stay. "Pull up a stool, Harry. This involves your patient ... actually, your *patients*, plural. You'll want to be up to speed." He handed around the mugs and leaned on the bench beside Jarrat. "What silver lining, Doc?"

McKinnen was intent on some data scrolling through her CRT, and gave them half of her attention. "The information you're looking for is mostly so old, it's archaic. If it were current, say three months or so, you'd have to access DAC-Tokyo direct, on Earth. Even if I fed an AI into the tachyon band network, you'd be looking at seven weeks, minimum, to get data back. But you're asking for documents, records, stretching back a quarter century. As I said, you're lucky. Those documents may be restricted, but at least they will be present in DAC-Venice, on Darwin's. The system updates more or less quarterly. This data? No problem ... so long as it's your heads rolling, Jarrat, Stone, not mine, if the bottom falls out from under you." She graced them with a smile. "I will insist, I was merely following orders. I assume you've appraised Captain Cantrell of your intention?"

"Of course. Not that it's Gene's call." Jarrat rested one elbow on Stone's shoulder. "You forget, he's purely an observer on this ship."

"An observer," McKinnen said musingly, "because Central remains unsure of you. Uncertain if they should trust empathths in the field." She paused, and frowned at Harry. "Speaking of observers, Doctor Del, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings. I've had routine messages from my labs on Darwin's. Following the Scorpio assignment NARC wants to resume the testing on Jarrat and Stone, and they've asked me to observe and report."

"Testing?" Stone echoed sharply. "Testing what?"

She gestured between them. "The empathy. The bond, the link, whatever it's called. What levels of communication are possible between you? How far apart, in terms of distance, can you remain functional at a productive level? What forms of energy, stimuli, substances, interfere with the communication, like ECM? These are all sound questions."

The healer was incensed. "They're only sound questions, Yvette, if the empathic bond is turned into a weapon!"

"Hardly a weapon," McKinnen argued. "A surveillance tool."

"Which amounts to the same thing!" Del was just short of genuine anger, and gave Jarrat and Stone a warning look. "They ran you ragged last time. They'll do it again, and worse. Energy, stimuli, substances? It'll be a minefield, and in the end the data is worthless."

McKinnen cocked her head at him. "I wouldn't say worthless. You've been asked to work with other NARC partnerships, Harry. I've heard about the project involving Janine Cruz and Scott Auel. You'll be trying to reproduce with them what you've done with 9.4 and 7.1, and the data you gather during the next test program could be invaluable."

"Not," Harry said between clenched teeth, "if I have anything to say about it. I won't do it, Yvette. I've told Billy Dupre *no*, and he passed the message on, back to Central on Earth. They want to Angel-addict Cruz? Fine. She'll have almost two years before she goes critical. When she's off the NARC payroll and killing time in a fucking hospice, she can bloody call me!" His voice rose with every syllable.

"Harry, calm down. Take a pill." McKinnen was unruffled. "You can stall the Cruz and Auel project by stalking off in a huff, but think of this: your absence won't stop Central wanting the research into Jarrat and Stone to continue. And in your absence, the exercises will be — how shall I put this? Unmoderated. No one understands the empathy as you do, Harry." She paused. "And no one cares for Jarrat or Stone as you do. Central could push them to the breaking point, and past it. Destruction testing is frequently the only way to get results. And if the subjects have rendered themselves expendable through methods Central chooses to censure ..." She lifted a brow at the younger men.

"Destruction testing," Del said bitterly, "is for machines."

"In other centuries," McKinnen said quietly, "dangerous substances were tested on live animals. Thank God, vivisection was banned a long time ago, but I don't think Central would see your argument."

Jarrat hopped down of the bench and drained his mug. "You're overlooking the obvious, both of you. We can leave." He slapped the mug down on the bench. "Stoney and I can walk out, and their project flies away like a swarm of bugs."

For a long moment McKinnen studied them closely. "I know you better than you think, Jarrat. And you, Stone. I've worked with you long enough to know, NARC is what you *are*. It'd cost you more than you know to walk away."

"A price we'd pay," Stone growled, "before we'd let them treat us like machines. Christ, you'd think Central would know it!"

"They do," Del said mildly. "And they fully expect me to be there as your *moderator*." He paced between the equipment-laden benches. "So we all go, or we all stay. That's some choice."

"But we don't have to make it right now," Jarrat added. "And you never know, Stoney ... we could be so far wrong about Denehy and Michiko, we'll be busted right out of the service by next week."

Stone shared the wry humor. "The *Nimrod* will be cleared to leave later today, Doc. We need the data return as fast as you can get it. Two days back to Darwin's. Then, how long inside DAC-Venice?"

Her lips pursed as she considered the question. "I won't actually be inside DAC myself. If I even approach the system, it'll lock me out of the levels where I most need access. I'll design an AI to slither in, a little like a virus. A *lot* like the AI launched into PharmaTech and Michiko Aurora by Colonel Janssen's department."

"You can do the design work en route?" Stone wondered.

The biocyber systems developer gave him a scathing look. "Was that an insult?" McKinnen indulged herself in a rare smile. "I have three or four basic models, and I confess, I took Janssen's AI to pieces for the fun of it."

"Tactical sent you a copy?" Stone was surprised.

"I called Janssen, asked about the AI and its designer, and we traded, one of mine for one of theirs." McKinnen had pulled up a file, and skeins of colored lines wove and raveled on the CRT.

They were logic strands, Stone knew — so complex, the human eye could not even follow them, and yet still no more than a fraction of the complexity of the human cortex. He forcibly reminded himself, the human brain was a place where Harry Del routinely worked.

"Janssen's developer is a rookie, still taking Tac classes," McKinnen was saying. "He's wasted in Tactical, and Janssen knows it. He's only finishing rookie school so as to graduate, then he'll be in the comm and cyber labs." She looked up at Stone. "Like me. Expect the child to be recruited by NARC." She tapped the CRT screen with one predatory, ivory-varnished fingernail. "And yes, I can kill time aboard the *Nimrod*, adapt an AI to infiltrate DAC-Venice. The program itself will be inside the DAC matrix for under a minute, then I'll be waiting for a courier."

It was the news Stone had been wanting to hear. "Give Dupre our regards, tell him what we're doing. He'll put you on the first courier back to Aurora ... and you'll be sharing it with a cargo of equipment from Harry's lab."

She gave him a pained look. "Two days out, two days back, in a sardine can. They don't pay me enough for this." McKinnen turned her back on them, already working. Files were downloading to cubes as Stone watched and she said over her shoulder, "If you want me on the *Nimrod* in a few hours, go away and let me do this. Harry, you have a list of what you need from your lab?"

The two were talking in rapid-fire undertones as Jarrat and Stone stepped out, and Stone swore softly. Once the mills were set grinding, things happened fast. Still, four days was an eon in the middle of an Angel bust, and

they could ill afford the time. The face of a syndicate could change in hours. Jarrat thumbed for the lift and Stone knew without asking, he was headed for the ops room. Every fifteen minutes their data feed from Tactical and the *Olympic* updated, and they were waiting even then for critical information.

The ops room was cranked up, and a glance at the status boards showed why. Green and Gold Ravens were on launch procedures. Petrov and Cantrell were studying the vid-grid of Thule, and Curt Gable was already in the air, bucking reentry. A packriot was in progress in Tok sector, and the GlobalNet feed was live. Stone stopped to watch a CRT as violent scenes unfolded.

He might have wondered if it were an Angel riot or another street war, like the one that engulfed Mostov, but GlobalNet's readover was definite. Aurora was pioneering new narco-laws, and there was going to be trouble.

Life sentences had been mooted for people who deliberately withheld information, like Raoul Petrakis, and the uptown lawyers immediately asked the question, what of parents who were protecting a child who had bought Angel foolishly from a friend, perhaps a neighbor's depraved 'wildchild.' The death penalty was automatic for dealing Angel in this colony, and juveniles were tried as adults. But under the new law the victim would be hardest hit. His parents would be serving a life sentence, while his childhood friend was executed and his own life festered with the drug. The Angel lawyers made a strong case: such kids would be a burden on the colony, and the law would victimize the wrong people. The additional suffering would certainly shorten young lives, and with Primax right around the corner, the theft of months or weeks, from a kid's life might legally constitute murder.

The riot was berserk, with the PAC on one side and the Angel Rights mob on the other. Every time it was the same: it began with shouting and verbal abuse, until someone threw a rock or a bottle. Tac was out in force, trying to separate the combatants, and they were armed. Both the Angel Rights protesters and PAC arrived heavily armed, and it was only a matter of time before the shooting began.

Tactical called in the colonial militia — the only backup they had — and the fight was on in earnest. Someone in the back ranks of the Angelpack had a launcher; phosphor grenades burst like star-shells in the middle of the Tactical ranks. A big Chevvy Marauder went up like a bomb and two Tactical troopers dropped to the ground, rolling desperately to douse their own flames. Sirens blared over the battle zone: a Fire Control squad was coming in. The storm of retardant would put out the spot fires which had erupted in store fronts and vehicles, but it was so toxic, anyone caught unprotected in it might not live.

"Green Raven and Gold Raven are in the air," Petrov reported. "Gable reports the zone on instruments."

The scene was all too familiar, and Stone turned away from the CRTs to look at Jarrat. "Thule's a damned dangerous place to be."

"Tell me about it," Jarrat growled. "I've been thinking about a cover ID. After Mostov they'll be short handed at the boot-end of the trade. Shooters, muscle, drivers. It'd be the easiest way in."

He was right, but Stone did not have to like it. With the gunships in the

air, Petrov ambled toward them and offered them a couple of headsets. Jarrat pulled one on, but Stone wanted the last feed from Tactical, and turned his attention to the comm relay terminal where mundane textual data scrolled endlessly. Petrov was behind him, scanning the feed, and when Stone paused the screen he leaned closer.

There it was: the ID on the race plane, and provisional IDs on two of the insurgents who were shot dead in the fight on the Stavanger Dock. A little kick of adrenaline alerted Jarrat, and he was at Stone's shoulder a moment later.

The Yamazake Sylph, license plate RSV-227-149, was registered to Montenegro Investments, and it was conveniently reported stolen, fifteen minutes after the scene on the dock, but someone at Tactical had dug a little deeper. They had probably hit paydirt, Stone thought, though none of it would ever hold up in court.

"Montenegro," Jarrat read off the screen, "is a subsidiary of Michiko Aurora, so new, the ink's still wet on the documents."

"Connection," Stone said softly.

"Good enough for me, but I wouldn't take it into court," Jarrat added. "A good lawyer would shoot this one down in thirty seconds ... but I'd gamble on it, Stoney." He released the screen and paged on through the data, looking for the ID on the insurgents.

Two of the three shooters who had died on the dock had been identified from a combination of prints, file pictures and DNA scans, and Tactical had pegged them fast. The third remained unknown, but two out of three would do. They were contract men out of Avalon and Sheal, with a long history of near-arrests in several other systems. And they were close to the bottom-end of their profession.

"Contract men ... and whoever set up the hit on the *Nimrod* did it fast." Stone looked sidelong at Jarrat, brows up. "They didn't want to use their own people in case it went wrong, but they didn't have time to hire real talent. They used whatever was available, and prayed a lot."

"And the Yamazake?" Petrov gestured at the screen, where an edit of the Blue Raven video had appeared. "You don't find those on every street corner. You're talking money there."

The race plane was hyperdrive enabled, and with both a NARC carrier and the *Olympic* insystem, it was a safe bet the shooters were supposed to pull off a whisper-silent kill and vanish, right out of Aurora. On the CRT, the Sylph was a dove-gray dart with massive hexagonal pods and sun-bright stern-tubes, outrunning the gunship.

"You want to get your shooters right out of the colony," Jarrat suggested to Petrov, "and fast, because you're up against NARC and Starfleet. You can't even think about the clipper or a commercial charter. There's no time, and we'd pick your boys up at Immigration, shoot 'em full of Honest John to get the truth out of them, and be on your doorstep in an hour. So you need to put up a hyper-enabled private craft ... but if the job goes south your fancy-shmantsy raceplane will be making its run one jump ahead of a gunship. Getting out's down to luck." He gestured at the screen. "You gamble with some-

thing you can afford to sacrifice. A plane that'll do the job, property of a competitor you just took over."

"It's a good story," Petrov allowed.

"Theory," Stone corrected glibly. "And if we're right, it puts Michiko in the hot-seat. Gene was going to call him, tell him we want to talk. You ever get an answer?"

The Russian was watching the CRTs displaying the live GlobalNet vidcast from Tok. "We got his secretary. You've got a meet in three days, 08:00, Thule time, Michiko's place in Aspen."

"Three days?" Jarrat echoed. "He's pushing it."

"The secretary said he's in private conferences," Petrov said acidly, "with out of system clients, at some 'retreat' up in the Appalachians. He can't be reached. All of which sounds like so much bullshit, but you'd have to call them on it to be sure."

"He just bought himself a few more days," Jarrat mused, "and he's been ducking us since we arrived insystem." He stirred, restless, distracted by his own thoughts.

Stone was well aware of the restlessness. Jarrat was switching gears in earnest now. Some part of his mind was already on assignment. Stone set a hand on his arm, and the gray eyes looked at him, filled with questions. Doubts? Stone's fingers tightened for a moment and then let go. "Gene?" he called quietly.

Cantrell came down the body of the ops room as Petrov returned to the CRTs monitoring the Green and Gold Ravens. Video from Curt Gable's gun-cameras commanded three screens, and the whisper of audio from GlobalNet announced the arrival of the gunships. They were not visible yet, but the paparazzi operated military-grade equipment. They knew the big ships were coming in.

"What do you need, Stoney?" Cantrell may have been officially an observer, but he was a veteran, never reluctant to work.

"Message for Senator Brand," Stone told him. "Let him know an incident took place at the dock. Don't let him know the tank was in any danger. NARC security smothered the attack, there were no survivors. We have the tank here, and it'll stay here till Marcus is out."

"Tell him the bastards who tried to take his kid are out of system shooters," Jarrat added. "And tell him we suspect Michiko." He lifted a brow at Stone. "Stir 'em up a little bit more?"

"See what rises to the surface," Stone agreed.

"And Gene," Jarrat went on, "see if you can get a location on Michiko. *Exactly* where he is. If I were him ... I'd be getting twitchy."

"Will do." Cantrell was watching GlobalNet. A long lens had just picked up the inbound gunships. Green Raven was a hazy spot in the arctic blue of Aurora's summer sky, swiftly growing as it fell, brick-like, through the thin, cold atmosphere. "I tracked down the woman you were wanting, Leena Reineck. You want her arrested?"

So the Thule money 'man' had not been in Mostov, Stone thought with a grim smile. Raoul Petrakis's information was still viable. They had a place

to start at the bottom, and a fast-track right to the top. Reineck and her ball-player boyfriend, the mule, were their ticket in.

"Let her run," Jarrat was saying. "Have Tactical tag her. Carefully, Gene. We need to know where she is, but if we're sussed, it falls apart."

The older man's eyes narrowed. "You're setting her up."

"She's the way into Scorpio." Stone's face and voice were bereft of humor. "Time to design a deep cover assignment."

"Damn," Cantrell said with feeling. "You always hope it won't be necessary. Goddamn it, it always is. You need any help?"

But Jarrat was shaking his head. "Just a couple of hours in Archives ... then, the right *moment* to go in will be critical." His brow was creased in a frown of concentration, and Stone could almost hear his brain ticking over. A plan was forming inside that tousled head, and Stone felt his belly flip-flop. His own reaction, or Jarrat's?

"We'll be in Archives if you need us," he told Cantrell. "Get through to Brand if you can, let us know when Tactical's tagged Reineck. And find out where the hell Michiko really is."

Jarrat was intensely preoccupied, and Stone merely followed him into the almost shrine-like peace of Archives. The lights there were dim, sounds oddly muted, and when the double security doors closed over, they could have been inside a vault. A cool draft wafted from ceiling vents; the black lens eye of a security camera watched passively, but the compartment was not audio monitored.

A palm-print and a six-digit access code were enough to get them into the system, and Jarrat began to sift and sort, looking for just the right identity. Stone was uncomfortably reminded of the creation of John D. Strother. He leaned on the back of Jarrat's chair, watching a man built from the ground up. And as he worked Jarrat outlined, in a terse, preoccupied voice, the 'script' he had in mind.

It was risky but not harebrained, creative enough to work without being so overdeveloped that it would take too long, and too much, to set up. It had every hallmark of a winning plan. And Stone hated it. He would have hated anything about a deep cover assignment, and he held his silence, trying to lock down the empathic shield until his resentment would not leak through to Jarrat.

He kept the shields intact until Jarrat was printing cards — ID, visas, licenses, permits — and then a surge of acrimony took him unawares, strong enough to make Jarrat gasp. The chair swiveled toward him and Kevin looked up, eyes wide and dark in the dim light. He reached out, set his hands on Stone's slim hips, wrapped both legs about Stone's much more muscular ones.

"Don't do this to me." His voice was a rough-soft growl. "You know I have to go. It's the job. We do it, or we quit along with Harry."

"I know." Stone's fingers threaded through Jarrat's hair, combing it, rearranging it. "But I don't have to like it."

"I'm not thrilled about it myself," Jarrat said with a creditable attempt at levity. "A few days, Stoney, if I'm lucky. I can be in and out. It won't be like Death's Head."

"What makes you so sure?" Stone leaned down, pressed his lips to Jarrat's brow.

"Mavvik's organization was scattered, widespread, disorganized ... a pack of dangerous amateurs," Jarrat told him. "They were as dangerous to themselves as anyone else in the end, but they were just crims. Not like Equinox, and nothing like Scorpio."

The evaluation was accurate. In the same moment, the Death's Head bust had been much less complex than Equinox, yet much more difficult, because Death's Head was diffuse, disordered, fifty individuals going in different directions, each with his own agenda. Equinox had been simpler to bust: take Randolph Dorne, and the house of cards came down. By contrast, Death's Head might have been decapitated but still flailed around for months as, one after another, the people Hal Mavvik had groomed as his heirs tried their hand.

Scorpio was different again. It was less a monster than a phantom, a shadow moving within shadows, gray against black, sometimes lurking in the morass of city bottom, and sometimes near-transparent, difficult to pick out of the crystal fantasies of uptown Thule. Stone doubted if it had just one head to cut off ... but when its multiple heads were cut away, the rest of the body was nothing like Death's Head. The power behind Scorpio was concentrated in a nucleus, and men like Pete Denehy did not allow competitors, pretenders. No Angel barons would be waiting in the wings to pick over the carrion: a super-predator like Denehy would neutralize them soon as they raised their heads. Like Dorne, and too many other syndicate moguls Stone had known.

The cards were perfect. ID; a visa for Aurora, valid for three years; driver's, pilot's and shooter's licenses. A valid permit to own and carry a Colt AP-60. A license to fly multi-engine 'heavies,' transports, freighters, even gunships; hands-on experience in the Army, one hitch in his late teens and early twenties.

And as Jarrat stood up, turning his back on work that was complete, the assignment persona was being fed to Tactical's computers: a history of hits, investigations, reports, but no convictions and only one arrest when he was fresh out of the Army. Rethan and Avalon Tactical knew him, but he had slithered into Aurora aboard a private charter, skipped Immigration completely, and Thule Tac were not looking for him. His name was Max Tyler.

The ID was solid enough to withstand even a thorough background check, and Jarrat was satisfied. He was committed to it, and Stone was not about to argue. Do the job, or quit, as Kevin had said. He leaned in to kiss, and Jarrat opened to him readily.

"Not here," he whispered against Stone's tongue.

Not that the Archive was less than secure, but Jarrat wanted to let the empathic shield drop. He wanted more than could be snatched in a moment. Privacy and time for sensuality were always rare on the carrier, and on assignment. Stone had learned to grasp whatever opportunity offered.

A stack of five plastex cards slid into Jarrat's breast pocket, along with the datacubes he had taken from Arial Quinn and her photographer. He dropped the cubes into Stone's waiting palm. "Let GlobalNet have their story.

The more we can shake up Scorpio, the easier it'll be for me. They'll be nervy, careless, desperate."

"Cornered animals can get bloody dangerous." Stone drew a caress about Jarrat's face. "I love you," he said with gruff honesty. "I don't tell you often enough. I guess I just expect you to know."

"Ditto." Jarrat touched Stone's mouth with his fingertips, almost to silence him before he could hex the assignment with words which, once spoken, were impossible to erase. "I want you," he added, and Stone felt a rush of emotion from him, a wild blend of lust, love and all points between.

The CRT in his cabin was busy with Green Raven's data. The gunship was over Girard Mall on the east end of Tok, and the descant troops were on the street, meeting halfhearted resistance. Gold Raven was on standby, five k's downrange, where Tok became Mostov at the sector line, and the devastation began. Stone took one long glance at the stats and the video feed in the top right of the screen, and then turned into Jarrat's arms.

The hours before a deep cover assignment had always been difficult, but before the Equinox job they had not been intimate. Friendship was elusive and precious; but this? Stone buried his face in the hot silk of Jarrat's shoulder and for the thousandth time counted the cost of everything he had to lose. In many ways the rule book was dead right. 'If you get an offer, shag it as hard as you can,' as the Ravens liked to say ... but don't get involved, don't *feel* it. Don't ever cross the line from lust into love.

NARC was breaking every rule in its own book by letting him and Jarrat return to duty, carrier command, and Stone was not about to betray their trust. Nor was he about to betray Jarrat, but since Chell, since Elysium, he was painfully aware of the risk, and the dread of loss. Jarrat knew. How could he not?

The empathy was clear as a bell chime on a frosty morning, and the gray eyes were dark. Stone felt the contradiction of Kevin's healthy ambivalence about the assignment, and his commitment to the job, to NARC. In the soft cabin lights he looked very young, yet the tips of Stone's fingers traced his scars, too many of them.

"Stoney?" Jarrat whispered the name. He was kneeling astride Stone's belly, his skin prickling as Stone's searching fingers raised gooseflesh along the muscles in his arms.

But Stone said nothing and just pulled him down.

A long time later the comm buzzed. The lights were down, and Jarrat was asleep when Stone touched the audio toggle and said quietly, "Stone. We're on downtime, Gene."

"You'll want to hear this," Cantrell said, a thread of sound from the machine, "Janssen's office just called. Leena Reineck's been tagged. They caught up with her in the Barsoom sphere, shot her with a radioactive tracer. She has no idea she's tagged, but they can follow her from a half-klick out."

"Tell them to keep a tail on her," Jarrat said thickly, only half awake, head still on Stone's chest, eyes still closed. "Nights, she heads to one specific club in city bottom. We need to know when and where."

"You got it," Cantrell assured him. "And I tried twice to get a call through

to Brand. Nothing doing. I got his house security gaffer, some goon by the name of Laporte. You'll get no sense out of Cass Brand for a while. The story is, he's taken sick, hospitalized at home, can't take calls. I can force the issue if you like."

"Leave it, Gene." Stone slid an arm about Jarrat and held him. "As it happens, I'm inclined to believe the man ... ask Doc Reardon."

"And keep us apprised of Reineck's movements," Jarrat added.

The comm closed down and Stone gazed up into the darkness above the wide bunk. Jarrat settled again, somehow managing to doze, but sleep was far from Stone's mind now, and his willful imagination turned to the deep cover assignment.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tok city bottom was alive at midnight, and El Relámpago was at the hub of a storm of energy which never abated. Steelrock thundered out of the wide-open foyer. Not the meaningless noise of Solitaire, but the structured, formatted, counter-entropic noise of bands known across the colonies. The music was canned, the volume so high Jarrat struggled to hear his own thoughts.

Strobes danced around the foyer, multicolored, restless, painting the incredible bodies of the Companions, some of whom worked here, all of whom were trawling for trade. And every one of them was hoping to be discovered and given a ticket to the spheres. Some would make it. The boy with the raven-black mane, the horse-cock and the gold-painted eyelids. Those almond eyes suggested Asia, though his pupils had been changed to sparkling silver-gold by contact lenses. And the girl who had spent untold fortunes having her genes tweaked, her body augmented, until the gazelle-legs were too long to be natural, the pneumatic breasts too huge and too high to be real on one so young, and in Earth-normal gravity.

More than twenty Companions were on display like goods in a storefront, posturing for uptown clients. And one of the most amazing bodies belonged not to a Companion but to a client. Tac had no record of him, but Jarrat recognized him at once from across the foyer. Raoul Petrakis's description was dead accurate. The man was thirty or a little older. The buzz-cut, the wide, ballplayer shoulders, big arms and thick thighs alerted Jarrat as the mule walked into El Relámpago, and the tattooed-on barbed-wire necklace clinched it.

Jarrat turned around, leaned both elbows on the bar and peered closer in the odd light, looking for the platinum rings on the man's fingers. He saw four. The mule turned in his general direction, and Jarrat saw the outlines of

pendant jewelry at both nipples, obvious through the clinging silver-gray shirt when the man pushed his hands into the hip pockets of tight black jeans, and the light vest splayed open.

Security at El Relámpago was too tight for anyone to get through the door either properly armed or carrying a wire, but Jarrat had stalked through the sensors with an R/T in the breast pocket of a flimsy black silk shirt. The device masqueraded as a cigarette lighter and was passed through, along with the two loaded needle-guns, one in the side of his boot, the other in his hip pocket. The guns had no metal parts, no chemical ammo, no power sources the sensors here could recognize. He would not have walked into Argentia this way: military-grade scan platforms would have picked up the micro-cells in the R/T, the drugs in the tiny dart-tips, twenty of which were loaded into the needle-guns.

And still Jarrat felt naked as he leaned down toward his pocket and, under cover of a glass of the house brew, said to the R/T, "The mule just got in."

Stone was less than a klick away. Jarrat could feel him, every bone, every muscle, every twist and thrum of emotion, through a narrow band deliberately left open in the empathic channel. Stone was in no jeopardy. A Rand Umbra, very similar to the *Athena's* lighter and borrowed for the occasion, stood in the skypark directly above this club. Gil Cronin and Joe Ramos had brought it down, and the two were groundside in plain clothes, as inconspicuous as descant troops could contrive to be. They were somewhere out in Kovalesky Mall, which stretched three kilometers, from the sealed-off wreckage of Mostov to the outer reaches of Kansai. The transit tube ran right through the third level, headed up toward midtown, and the last Jarrat had seen of Cronin and Ramos, they were buying chili dogs at a stall outside the holothheater, watching the foyer of El Relámpago and trying to look innocent.

A kilometer higher, Stone was airborne. A 104 Corsair was riding repulsion in the icy darkness, running lights off, its engine noise masked by the din of the city, muffled by the snow which had been falling for hours as Jarrat made his way over from the Tactical building, in a rented Rand Eclipse. Cantrell had lifted an eyebrow as Stone opted to put Raven Leader into the field, but after their experiences in Mostov and as long ago as Chell, he was not about to query Stone's judgment. Curt Gable was riding with him, and both he and Stone were in armor. The Blue Raven gunship was holding up on the fringe of space and the Red Ravens were on launch alert.

None of which made Jarrat feel any less naked as he stood at the bar in El Relámpago and studied the mule with overt interest. The club's bouncers were heavily armed, and a lot of the uptown clients were accompanied by licensed bodyguards, whose sidearms were permitted on the job. Max Tyler was in no such employment, and Earl Barnaby was on Jarrat's mind as a voice spoke, slurred, out of the strobe-shadows beside him.

"You checkin' out Damon Vaughan?" The voice laughed hoarsely. "Good luck."

Max Tyler turned toward a young man who was already drunk, and still drinking. He wore uptown clothes, city bottom trash jewelry, and the remains

of body-art which had been smudged. "You know the man?" Jarrat asked. He tried the name on his tongue. "Damon Vaughan." Stone was listening, and would be running an ID on Vaughan before the drunk could find the coherence to answer.

"Do I know him?" Blurred eyes squinched shut. "Well, sorta-kind. I guess. Good enough to've been busted in the face for comin' on to him, how's that for knowin'?" The young drunk looked Jarrat up and down and clacked his tongue. "You're not his kind, jack."

"I'm not?" Jarrat was amused. "And, what would Vaughan's kind be? And did you stink of schnapps and bourbon the time you tried your luck?" His eyes followed Vaughan across the foyer. Tonight the mule was not carrying the baggage Petrakis described, but Jarrat was not surprised. The cutting lab in Mostov had been destroyed, and another would not be so easy to set up.

"His type?" The drunk belched noisily and poked Jarrat in the silk-clad chest. "No tits, jack, that's your problem. You want to get under Damon Vaughan, you gotta get tits." He belched again. "Big ones." He mimed carressing a couple of balloons level with his shoulders, and peered at Jarrat again. "Unless you give the best head in town."

"In which case Vaughan will make an exception?" Jarrat gave the drunk a firm shove. "Back off a pace, will you? You stink. And if you're thinking of making me an offer, forget it. Go someplace and sober up ... or get stoned and fall down."

The drunk heaved a vast sigh. "Story of my whole life," he told Jarrat, and stumbled off into the thick shadows, where dreamsmoke curled in the alcoves and 'guest rooms,' and the sweet-rotten scent of Buran had begun to shimmer in Jarrat's sinuses.

The drug was still illegal in most colonies because the blockers were so expensive, many users could not afford both the pops and the come-downs, and because Buran, even when it was blocked, caused minute but cumulative brain damage. Aficionados swore they would never use enough to be dangerous, but the Buran pack called themselves 'connoisseurs.' They cut the drug ten ways, and according to city bottom folklore, if Buran was cocktailed with Angel, the connoisseur could take an Angel trip without blundering into Angel addiction.

The folklore was dead wrong, and Buran was so dangerous, most colonies worked almost as hard to keep it off their streets as Angel. Still, Jarrat smelt it, a few molecules wafting from the alcoves deeper in the club where Companions were performing in the half-light, exotic routines which would have been physically impossible if they were sober.

A whisper from the R/T, almost too quiet to be heard under the throb of the steelrock, informed him in Gil Cronin's voice: "Woman's on her way in, boss."

They had pulled Leena Reineck's file from Tactical, and even if the surveillance images there had been poor, a few minutes on Aura-Net had provided a library of publication-quality stills and a few minutes of video. She had been a Companion, and her career started right here in El Relámpago. Reineck was one of those who were 'discovered,' and she used this club as a

springboard right into the spheres. From city bottom she landed in Argentina in one jump, and at a glance, Jarrat saw why.

Tonight the buttock-long mane of hair was white with glacier-blue highlights, and the body it cloaked was in a flesh-toned skinthin, so sheer, Reineck might have been naked. She was as tall as Vaughan and half his weight, but every kilo was bone or muscle, with the exception of the prodigious appendages that had seduced Raoul Petrakis. And those *were* bare. The skinthin was high on the nape before it plunged down and under, leaving Reineck's best assets on the loose and quivering. Tiny bells were set into the platinum nipple rings, and every breath set them tinkling. She halted in the middle of the foyer to enjoy the reaction she caused, and struck a pose. Twenty years ago she had stalked this jungle just a few times before she was 'discovered' and left for points north and up. Once again, most of El Relámpago stopped, turned and gaped at her.

"I see her," Jarrat said softly to the R/T, behind the dubious cover of a beer glass.

"Be tough to miss her," Cronin growled. "You got the mule?"

"Reineck just made contact," Jarrat whispered. "Stoney?"

"Right here," Stone's voice murmured from the R/T.

"Game's on," Jarrat told him. "Standby."

A thrill of emotion from Stone flooded through the empathic channel, and Jarrat took a breath. "Where are you, Gil?"

"One minute ... on our way in." Cronin said no more.

The club opened right onto Kovalsky Mall, and through the wide foyer Jarrat saw the street crowd. At just after midnight the overhead floods were low. Most light streamed from store fronts where restaurants and dance shops were doing good business. He saw the two Blue Ravens a moment later, and flicked a glance at Reineck and Vaughan.

They had come together on the far side of the foyer, opposite the Pelican Bar, where Jarrat had staked out the entryway. And Petrakis was right, Vaughan was on her 'like fungus.' His face was buried in the valley between those breasts, his hands clenched into them, and when he backed off to seize her mouth he was still batting them to make the bells tinkle. Reineck had wound one long leg about him and was poised precariously on one high spike heel.

The word 'vulnerable' did not seem to be in their vocabulary, and Jarrat was surprised. They were so complacent, they were going to make this easy. Damon Vaughan was so intent on the woman, so deafened by the music, he did not notice the ruckus at the club's entryway until Cronin and Ramos were halfway across the foyer. El Relámpago's bouncers were shouting, trying to block their way, but the Blue Ravens swatted them aside and barreled through.

They were cutting a swathe through the crowd, directly toward Vaughan and Reineck, and this was Jarrat's cue. Max Tyler made his way swiftly around in the opposite direction, coming up on the Scorpio people from the opposite direction, in the cover of a bank of blackjack machines and holo-aeroball tables. Reineck and Vaughan were so engrossed, they did not see the Blue Ravens until Cronin and Ramos were almost within reach.

Close enough to make himself heard over the thunder of the steelrock, Jarrat roared at them, "Get down! *Drop!*"

He had a needle-gun in either hand as Vaughan and Reineck turned toward him, and from the line of his eyes, the line of his aim, they saw the direction threat was coming from. Reineck spun, but her costume allowed for no concealed weapons and it was Vaughan clawing under the vest for a palmgun as Jarrat squeezed off four shots.

These darts carried no drug-load, but all four lodged in their targets. Cronin and Ramos would be aware of smarting pinpricks in the neck, the cheek, just enough to make their reaction look genuine before they sagged at the knees.

"Move it! Reineck! Vaughan, will you move your ass!" Jarrat bellowed. "*They're NARCs!*"

The speed with which Reineck and Vaughan moved was as good as a signed confession. Neither was involved in the Buran scene any longer, and if they had not been involved with Scorpio they would have held their ground. But the two took off fast, diving into the back of the club, where the music dulled to muted concussions, like a distant battlefield. The lights dimmed to a shade between red and purple, and the crackle of random Angel molecules mingled with Buran on the air. Angelheads gazed blindly out of corners, mouths slack, eyes glassy. The smell of sex was musky, earthy, but Jarrat did not have time to glance into the alcoves and cubicles as he dove after Reineck and Vaughan.

Back in the foyer, Cronin and Ramos would be reeling to their feet, keeping up the pretense of being drugged. Their body weight would ostensibly keep them conscious even while the drug hit them, hard as a blow. They would blunder out of El Relámpago and stagger down the mall toward the service lifts. In five minutes the borrowed Umbra would be in the air, headed for the gunship. Their part in the charade was over.

Jarrat's had just begun. He was behind Vaughan and Reineck as they cut through the club's rear, through the kitchens serving the restaurant, and beyond them, the loading bay. A truck was backed in at the dock, full crates going in, empties coming out. Vaughan did not stop, though Reineck had begun to shout at him, demanding where he was going. Jarrat paused to look back and saw a crowd gathering in the yard as Vaughan turned right and headed through the fire access way into another yard.

"Damon! Damon, will you hold up!" Leena Reineck bellowed. Her voice was like a ripsaw. "Damon, goddamn it!"

"You didn't hear the man?" Vaughan yelled over his shoulder. "They're NARCs! They've picked us up, Leena. You had to know they would, soon as a fucking carrier got here."

The pace kept up through three yards, between reeking trashpacks and overflowing dumpsters, and at last Vaughan slowed as they entered the rear premises of a speed shop. The dumpsters here smelt of synthetic compounds, and Vaughan slithered to a breathless halt between them. Reineck was panting, filmed with sweat, and even Jarrat was feeling the close air, heat and humidity of city bottom.

A judas-door was set into the truck gates, and Vaughan tapped in an access code as he glared at Jarrat. "Who the hell are you?"

"Tyler." Jarrat tilted his head to listen over his shoulder. "Max Tyler ... and you guys are in deep trouble."

"Shit, you think?" Reineck was trying to blot sweat from her face without smudging the makeup. "Those gorillas were NARCs?"

Gorillas? Jarrat must remember to tell that one to Cronin and Ramos. "Like Vaughan said, you've been made, lady."

The judas-door slid open and Vaughan stepped into a well of darkness. A moment later a battery of blue-white fluoros fluttered on, and Jarrat followed Reineck through. They were in the storeroom of a shop catering to the whims of speed freaks. Every kind of gadget was shelved, not all street-legal. Jarrat saw superchargers that would not have embarrassed a grand national air race pilot, packaged alongside turbocharger kits, airfoils and cosmetic trim for groundies.

The door closed, locked, and Vaughan leaned on it. The look he gave Jarrat might have flayed the flesh from his bones. "Okay, let's have it. Who are you, *what* are you?"

"I told you. Max Tyler," Jarrat said brashly. "And I'm the man who just kept your asses out of a sling. The NARCs were probably following you since you got into city bottom, and they were waiting for you, man. They knew you'd be here, they know what you look like." He gave Reineck a smoldering glance. "And as for you, Reineck, Tac's had you under surveillance for long enough to tag you."

"To — what?" Reineck's eyes widened.

"You're tagged, lady," Jarrat said harshly. "You're carrying a radioactive tracer. Split, PDQ. You're the kiss of death to us all."

Vaughan straightened his spine, standing away from the door. He was taller than Stone, at Brogan's height and weight, but Jarrat thought Stone was more muscular, leaner and in far better physical condition as well as better health. "You know a whole lot about us, Tyler."

He grinned, brash as the king shooter who had talked his way onto Hal Mavvik's payroll. "I should. I've been tailing you myself since before the pigs blew the bejesus out of Mostov." He thrust both hands into the pockets of black denims that were as tight as the silk shirt was loose. "I came here to see if I could meet you. Lucky I did, right?"

The big man took a step toward him. Jarrat did not back off. "So how do you know us?"

"Grapevine," Jarrat told him. "I was with Death's Head, till NARC set up for the bust. I was one of the smart ones ... the ones who bugged out while they could. I worked with Joel Assante and Hank Weaver." He was dropping names now, and watched Vaughan's face closely. He would not expect Reineck to know much beyond the Companion's trade and the Buran business between here and the spheres, but Damon Vaughan had the *look* about him: he had surely been hired muscle before he was promoted up the Scorpio ladder. He was on a fast-track to the top, and the ambition driving him made Petrov's personal goblin look sweet.

"Names," Vaughan said tersely. "Assante and Weaver were in the vids, they made the GlobalNet headlines even here. More names, Tyler. Convince me, or I'll wishbone you."

"You can try." Jarrat gave him a crooked grin and glanced at the woman. "He's quite the hard boy. Good in bed, is he?"

She had been badly flustered but she was back in control now, and she came to Vaughan's shoulder. "Like he said, Tyler. Names."

"Okay." Jarrat pretended to think. "There's Hal Mavvik himself, of course. Nice guy. We got along. I could have worked for him, if NARC had kept the hell out. But he had some assholes on his staff, and I swear to God, I'd have put a clip in Brett Rooney if NARC hadn't blown him away. Was that on the vids? You should know we had a captain off the carrier. He was a prisoner, Hal kept him at the palace. Name of Stone."

"It wasn't on the vids, Damon," Reineck said quietly. "NARC would never let the story into the news."

"Like the rest of it," Jarrat added. "You heard about Stone?"

"The grapevine goes both ways." Reineck studied him with a frown. "I'm still listening, Tyler. I heard about Stone, and how they blew Mavvik's head off at the stadium, but I never heard your name."

Max Tyler only shrugged. "There's no reason you should hear of me. I wasn't anybody. Just a guy trying to make a name for himself when it all went up in smoke. You want more?" He took a breath. "Okay, lady. Did the grapevine tell you about the other one? The shooter who turned out to be a NARC under cover? Jesus! We had the bastard in the palace for weeks. He was shagging the kid, the Companion, what's his name ... Lee, that's right. Roon and Charlie Grenville hated his guts. When they got the chance to beat shit out of him —" He shrugged. "They almost wasted a NARC captain that night. And I can tell you for a fact, none of it was on any newsvids."

For a long time the Scorpio runners hovered, but at last Reineck said grudgingly, "We owe you one, Tyler. We didn't know Tac was on us, much less NARC. I'm, uh, tagged?"

"Radioactive tracer, he said," Vaughan growled. He gave the wide swathe of Reineck's bare skin a hot glance. "They probably shot you with it. You present plenty of target, Leena. And he's right, you better go to ground, fast." He gave Max Tyler a glare. "You been following us? What do you want?"

"A job." Jarrat gestured at the city bottom mall. "I want out of this crappy basement. I came here, buried myself, when Death's Head was busted. They're ancient history now. Time to get off my ass, make tracks ... get out of this creepy dump." He made a face. "Means work, Vaughan, and I don't mean punching a clock or putting myself up on the meat rack at a place like El Relámpago. I want *way* out. The spheres'll do for a start."

"You saw Tac shoot me?" Reineck was searching herself for a tiny puncture wound she had not even noticed at the time. It would have been less than a pinprick.

"No, but I scan their frequencies. I was in Barsoom a while ago. Following you, what else? You were on AuraNet, they told me where you'd be, and I picked you up like that." He snapped his fingers. "You're dead easy to pick

out of a crowd, lady. Then I saw a squad tailing you, and I listened in."

"Shit," Reineck muttered. "Shitshitshit! Get me out of here, Damon. Get me some place where they can get it off me!"

"Out of you," Vaughan corrected. "It's in your blood."

"It'll also wear off eventually." Jarrat looked at his wrist for the time. "They tagged you to make it easy to follow you, Reineck. You led them right to your boyfriend." His eyes rested, smoldering, on Vaughan. "They used you to get to the mule in one jump, and you were so close ... goddamn! You're lucky."

She was hugging herself, probably wishing she had chosen to wear something more substantial. The skinsuit may have guaranteed an outrageous entrance to El Relámpago, but it was not quite the outfit Jarrat would have recommended if one was on the run. "Get me home," she said to Vaughan.

But Vaughan was adamant. "Stupidest place you could go is home. They'll have your place staked out."

"And for a while," Jarrat added, "they'll be tracking you, unless you guys have a way to jam the system."

"Jam it?" Reineck echoed.

"He's right." Vaughan was thinking in overdrive. "You got a car, Tyler? Can you get us out of here in something Tac and NARC don't recognize on sight?"

"I hired an Eclipse." Jarrat gestured at the service lifts. "It's just a groundie. You'll forgive me if I don't have the cash left for wings. I've been buried in this dump of yours too long."

"And you're too picky for the meat rack at a club," Reineck said nastily, "as if you think you'd even get the job."

"Hey, no offense." Max Tyler backed off, hands up as if at gunpoint. "D'I tread your toes there?"

"It's a sore spot," Vaughan told him darkly. "She started out on that same rack at El Relámpago, and she can't forget it."

"I know where you started, Reineck." Jarrat turned back as he headed for the judas-door. "But you got out of there so fast, I thought you'd appreciate my point."

"What he said, Leena." Vaughan propelled her before him.

They left the speed shop by the same way they had come in, and Vaughan made his way down an alley, back to Kovalesky Mall. There, he stopped. His right hand snaked into the curve of his spine under the vest to draw the tiny Austin sneak gun.

A Tactical squad had closed off the foyer to El Relámpago and a vast crowd was milling about, growing every moment. The Angel Rights pack would seize any opportunity to play to the GlobalNet holocams, and the shouting had already begun.

"Looks like a pack riot getting started," Jarrat said with seeming glee. "Just what we need, Vaughan. It's the diversion she must have been praying for." He gave Reineck's bare torso a rueful glance. "Or do you want to head out to my groundie in that outfit, Reineck? I'm parked high up in the skypark, and it's five below up there."

She glared at him and arched her back to make the most of her charms. "Try remembering, pretty boy, I dragged myself out of this fucking flea-pit before I was eighteen years old."

Pretty boy. The words found a finger-wide chink in Jarrat's armor and poured acid through it. It had been his persona for the weeks he was inside Death's Head: the pretty boy shooter who was a pain in the butt, and far too talented to be ditched.

He did not think he flinched visibly, but he knew Stone would feel the acid burn and he smothered it fast. "Whatever," he said, brash as the young hoon Hal Mavvik had hired, and deliberately turned his back on Reineck. Pretending he did not notice her was more effective than a slap in the face. "Where do you want to go, Vaughan?"

"Transit tubes." Vaughan's voice was stretched taut across a mass of anger. He was infatuated with Reineck but at the same time driven by the simple ambition to survive, and tonight he was trapped between the two. Reineck was panicking. She was a Companion by trade, and an amateur in Scorpio's dangerous game. This was probably the first time she had been backed into a corner, certainly the first time she had been tagged. Jarrat saw a wildness in her eyes. This was where an individual learned fast or perished. From the look on his face, Damon Vaughan had no idea which way Reineck would, or even could go. She was the unknown quantity, and Jarrat realized she must have scored the job with Scorpio because she was expendable. Incredible Companions were ten to the credit in any city bottom, and all were hungry.

If he had any sense, Vaughan would leave Reineck before she got him caught, but Jarrat was betting he would not. Sure enough, Vaughan barked at last, "We're parked in the basement of the Hotel Karoda, and you can forget going back to the Viper, Leena. Tac'll have staked it out by now. Hit a store, buy a coat. Nobody's asking you to go out bare-tit in five below."

"You guys want to think about maybe hurrying?" Jarrat needled. "Tac's got to be tracking her. She's like waving a flag. If we stand here *discussing* it much longer —"

"Tac's out there, and all I've got's this little piece of shit." Vaughan gestured with the Austin palmgun. "You armed, Tyler?"

"Just a couple of dart guns," Jarrat told him. "Useless against flak jackets, Vaughan, so watch yourself. I wasn't expecting to go up against NARC tonight. You want me to take point?" He held out his hand. "Give me the gun and shadow Reineck."

"I don't need nobody to look after me," the woman snarled.

"I didn't say you did, lady." Jarrat spared her a single glance which drifted down over her torso. "But looking like that, you're going to draw attention, and we're trying to turn into cockroaches and scuttle. Look, Vaughan, wait here. I'll go grab something, and rustle us up a diversion." He gave the mule a brash grin. "Man, are you gonna owe me after this!"

He took off fast, and he knew where he was going. For an hour before committing to this exercise he had wandered the VR map of the area. He knew every transit tube, every parking lot, elevator stations, Tactical and

emergency facilities, vidphone booths. The parking lot of an expensive Level 1 restaurant was only fifty meters away and *up*. He was in an elevator in seconds, and as he stepped out into the cold, windy half-light he knew what he was looking for.

The cars were predictable — expensive, plush, and well insured. Someone would be making a claim tonight, he thought grimly as he borrowed the fire extinguisher from the aid station by the lift doors, and cracked out the left rear window of an ice-green Volvo Yasumi. A near-silent car alarm would be chirping on a keyring in the restaurant, and repeating on a screen at both Tactical and the insurance company, but Jarrat was back in the lift in moments. He had no interest in the Volvo, but from the back seat he had taken a voluminous rain-cape, the kind of waterproof shroud that was ubiquitous in this colony. Reineck would despise it, but it was opaque, cheap, and available.

Cockroaches, he thought as the lift took him back down. Reineck had better sense than to refuse as he handed her the cape. She sealed the velcros and glared at him. “Like you couldn’t have found me something decent?”

“Fox fur or mink?” Jarrat pressed against the corner of their alley to see the growing riot. As he watched, someone threw a bottle. It smashed against the cab of the Tactical squad vehicle, and rifles were unslung. “Forget it, Reineck, I didn’t have time to be choosy ... and nor do you. One minute, Vaughan, and they’ll be shooting. Give me the damn gun, let me get us out of here.”

For a moment Vaughan hesitated, and then he slapped the gun into Jarrat’s palm. “What job did you *do* for Death’s Head?”

“Bit of this, bit of that,” Jarrat told him. “They hired me as a shooter, but I’m a pilot, and a bloody good one. Ready? With me!”

“They’re out ... track is moving northeast, groundside. They could be headed for any point in the Argyll sector, or maybe Mannum. Or they could take Route 32 into the Appalachians.” Curt Gable was watching the CRT in the rear cockpit. The same data was on Stone’s own screen.

The Rand Eclipse could also swing around and take Spaceport Drive after the Argyll four-way. Jarrat could be headed anywhere, and as yet the only instructions Damon Vaughan had given were to get out of the skypark, hang a right and head onto Glendavis.

Audio from Jarrat’s R/T was intermittent, and as the Eclipse ran in closer to the spaceport the breakup would get worse. A rimrunner was on approach and the radars were cranked to maximum. Stone could still pick up voices. If he had to, he could have used radio to track the car. The radioactive tracer was clearer, though not for much longer.

The shuttle was still riding repulsion, a thousand meters over Tok, and he let it drift in Jarrat’s wake until the Rand headed into the dense traffic around the Argyll junction. Now it would become more difficult. Forty high-frequency radio transmissions issued from the area. The port radars routinely sheeted

out the weaker ones, like R/T, and the signatures of hotcore generators in the cars up in the air traffic lanes confused the image.

"I've lost him," Gable muttered. "He just vanished into the muddle. Unless he boosts his R/T output, I can't pick him out of the crowd."

"I can." Stone closed his eyes, left the shuttle to Gable and concentrated on the empathic channel. He opened it wide enough to feel Jarrat's taut muscles, the pulse of adrenaline, the strum of nerves. He was intent on the road. He had been holding the fast lane at two hundred k's, but he was aware of Stone, and Stone felt an odd little vein of wry humor as the Eclipse braked down and hopped lanes to take the left cloverleaf.

"He's headed for the spaceport," Stone whispered, as much to the helmet recorders as to Gable.

"Damn," Gable said softly. "We'll lose Reineck's tag altogether, soon as they get among the big ships."

"And Damon Vaughan knows it. Give the man some credit." Stone remained focused on Jarrat, but opened his eyes to watch the snow-veiled lights of Thule arc around as Gable took the Corsair after Jarrat's rented car. "Relax, Curt. He's on top of the job ... no problem yet."

In fact Stone felt a positive surge from Jarrat: he was in control, the job was going his way. The 'script' was playing out more or less as he had intended, and the empathic link was even clearer, easier to read, than it had been when Stone went into Equinox.

Thule Field was a vast wasteland of plascrete aprons, gantries and cranes, bunkers, freight bays, warehouses. Colored lights outlined the facilities, and animated neon welcomed visitors headed to the passenger terminal. The Cygnus Lines clipper *Rhapsody* was docked at the platform at geostationary. Passengers were gathering for the shuttle, and Stone gave the vehicle's bell-shaped aeroshell a wry grin. McKinnen had thought she would be on the *Rhapsody*.

Instead, she was the only passenger aboard the *Nimrod*, with Jack Brogan as her pilot. Brogan was filling in for the Starfleet kids who were going home in cryogen. At Darwin's World he would become a passenger himself, headed in to Earth. A tribunal would be ordered, and Stone had no doubt NARC would be subpoenaed to give evidence. It had the makings of another circus like the Equinox inquiry; but this time there was good cause.

"You still have him?" Gable asked as the shuttle hung back at the outfield, just before it would cross into Thule Field's restricted airspace.

"I have him," Stone reported. "He's ... parking. Level four or five of the skypark. I could be exact to a meter if we were a tad closer."

"Jesus," Gable muttered, "it's incredible. All I got is garbage on my screens here. Audio is no good, and the tag's a fart in a cyclone."

The metaphor amused Stone. "Trust me."

"I do." Gable paused to check instruments. "It's easy to see why Central want to see if they can graft what you do onto other guys ... Thule Field is asking us to either set down or move along. What you want to do, Cap?"

Stone had the incoming rimrunner on his CRT. The spaceport was on

standby, emergency services were on alert, nuke bunkers were powered up, fire control was out on the plascrete. All normal operations when one of the behemoths was on approach. Few accidents took place, but when it happened, it was spectacular. Thule had never yet had an incident, but Chell had suffered two. Spaceport cities swiftly grew paranoid. Few needed to learn from others' mistakes.

"We'll move along," Stone decided. "There's no more we can do for Jarrat." He opened the empathic channel a little wider ... and felt a sudden deep cold, shivering in every extremity. Jarrat was out of the car. He and the Scorpio people would be hurrying to the nearest elevator, to get out of the skypark, into the terminal. Or better yet, the transit system under the field, where the engine signatures of a hundred craft would so far overshadow Tactical's tracer, they were safe. "You're on your own, kid," he whispered, though Jarrat could not hear words.

The shuttle turned its nose up, and Stone opened both throttles to send it looping up to join the Blue Raven gunship. A packriot was in full cry in city bottom, and Tac were outclassed, outnumbered, outgunned. Janssen had called for NARC, and Stone found a sense of irony in this one: their own setup had triggered it. El Relámpago was a favorite haunt for the Buran crowd, and the part of the Angelpack with money. NARC showing up there was a nightmare come true, and it was unfortunate that a Tactical squad was taking the backlash.

According to the last data feed, they were dug in, under cover and just waiting for the NARC descant troops. The Blue Ravens would disperse the packriot quickly, with a minimum of collateral damage. Their only real challenge was getting into city bottom, and the unit leaders had picked up the gauntlet. They knew every way in and out, legal and illegal, and had explored them all in VR.

As the shuttle fell into formation with the gunship, Stone felt a warmth in his belly and knew what it was: bourbon. Jarrat was out of the cold, his heart was slow and steady, the adrenaline rush over. He was in now, not quite entrenched, but halfway *in*. And Stone felt himself also switching gears. Old habits were difficult to break.

He might not see Jarrat for a week, a month, even longer. Every bust was different, but the only way to tackle it from the observer's perspective was to settle in for the long haul. Stone was resigned, yet his nerve endings prickled as he opened the empathic channel wide enough to monitor Jarrat, felt the enduring strangeness of another man's sensations in his own body. A twist of annoyance, a burst of humor ... the sudden warmth of a slug of booze, the prickle in the nostrils of some burning weed, and a jolt of surprise.

Jarrat had never spoken of his own experiences when Stone was buried in Warlock Company, but Reardon had worn a curious face, and had required an unexpected set of tests. It could not have been pleasant, Stone realized. Jarrat had been with him, pace for pace, breath for breath. The Scorpio job would be no different. Stone could not say he had not been warned, and he had accepted the task, risks, discomforts and all.

"Blue Raven gunship is on approach." Gable cut into his train of thought

and Stone divided his attention between his partner and Tactical's operation. "Cronin and Ramos are back aboard ... descant troops are waiting for them to suit up."

"Insertion point?" Stone wondered.

A tiny part of the city's vid-grid expanded on his CRT and Gable pointed it out. "It's a service shaft. Tok's power, air, water, the lot, goes in and out through this trunk right *here*. It's ten meters wide and it goes straight down to the subbasements under level five. Access is via a blockhouse on the surface. Looks like an office, but it's not. The trunk's wide enough to take four Ravens at a time, they'll go down like bricks on repulsion. Access to the level five mall is from a service hatch."

Like the one to which Raoul Petrakis had led the way, when Mostov was erupting like a live volcano. Twelve Blue Ravens were deploying in this jump, and Stone was satisfied with arrangements. As he watched, the gunship dropped in low. The jump bay was already open, spilling a flood of white light, and below, a Tactical squad had opened up the access to the utilities shaft.

The snow had stopped as the twelve mirror-black locusts fell out of the gunship, feathering down in the halo of their own lights. The draft of repulsion from both the suits and the ship kicked up a haze of powder snow and they strode into it, one by one disappearing into the shaft.

"Good enough," Stone said tersely. His hands molded around the joysticks controlling jets and grav-resist, and he took the shuttle up to two thousand meters, high above the ugly black silhouette of the gunship. "Raven Leader to ops room."

"Carrier," Petrov responded at once. "Crank your signal, Stoney, I'm hardly reading you over the spaceport trash."

The rimrunner was coming in over Thule Field, and Stone poured power into his transmission. "Better?"

"Better," Petrov told him. "Where's 9.4?"

"He's in ... and so's Blue Raven." Stone had cut into the Ravens' comm loop, and paused for a moment to listen to Cronin, crosstalking with his men and the gunship pilot. "Under control, Mischa. Am returning to the carrier. Leader out."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Thick armorglass slightly distorted the view out over Thule Field from the Apollo Lounge, but without the insulation the eardrums would have been bleeding. The glass trembled as the rimrunner came in over the plascrete wasteland, headed for a berth on the far side, three kilometers from the passenger terminal. Jarrat was forcibly reminded of the alleys between the docking

bays ... Chell. Thule had no such slum sector, but the din was the same, the pall of toxic exhaust, the lights in the night sky as the big freighter landed. Most new colonies refused to land them. The rimrunners docked at orbital platforms or bypassed the system and went on. But old colonies like Rethan, like Aurora, had been landing the big ships for two centuries. Tradition would be difficult to leave behind.

The Apollo Lounge was quiet in the early hours of the morning. The lights were low. Overhead, a scale replica of an improbable spacecraft with spindly legs and rocket thrusters was mounted against a five-meter image of a couple of boot prints in the gray dust of Earth's only moon. Jarrat had never been to Earth but he knew enough of its history to recognize a Lunar Module and the footprints of Neil Armstrong. Primitive spaceflight was the theme of the Apollo Lounge.

The whole terminal was quiet. Flights headed out had already boarded, while inbound flights were not due for several hours. But the terminal's facilities were open around the clock, and Damon Vaughan cut a line directly to the Apollo from the skypark. Reineck stopped on Concourse J only long enough to buy a big, baggy sweatshirt with the decal of a skier in midair over a West Appalachian glacier, and a hooded blue parka with the legend, '*There's no place like Aurora*' and an image of uptown's floating spheres. She had kicked off the spike heels, shoved them into the cargo pockets of the parka and tied up her hair. She looked, Jarrat thought, almost normal as they strode into the Apollo and took the table at the deepest, darkest point of the lounge.

"What are you drinking, Tyler?" Vaughan's wallet was in his hand as a waiter approached.

"Bourbon," Jarrat decided, and on an impulse, "hold the ice."

"Make it two," Vaughan told the bored, yawning kid in the odd, deliberately erotic imitation of Starfleet fatigues, too tight in the crotch and seat, and low enough in front to show a chest so smooth, it was probably depilated. "Leena?"

"Hot butterscotch schnapps, and keep 'em coming," Reineck rasped. The raincape may have held out the wind, but not the cold, and she was still pale under the veneer of makeup.

The bourbon was genuine, shipped right out of Earth, and so expensive, Jarrat would not have been drinking it if someone else was not picking up the bar bill. He watched Reineck and Vaughan closely, waiting for the questions to come. He could have predicted them.

"Okay, Tyler, I owe you," Vaughan allowed, cradling his own glass between both palms. "But I got a zillion questions."

"Call me Max," Jarrat invited. "And ask 'em."

"You went to ground here to stay out of NARC's way," Vaughan mused. "Fair enough. But NARC hit Death's Head months ago ... Max. You knew where to find us, any time you wanted us. Yet you're only looking for a job now, when NARC's arrived here. Why?"

The man was sharp. Jarrat was not about to underestimate him. "Moston," he said easily. "And because I didn't need the work till now." He shrug-

ged, leaned back and looked into the shot glass. "I had money. Who the hell works if they don't have to? When I got out of Chell, man, I thought I'd never have to work again! Then ... *phfft*." With his left hand he made a nose-diving gesture. "Suddenly, I'm back in the job market. NARC's here? Tough shit. I need work, *my* quick, or I'll be back at that goddamned club, on their meat rack!" He gave Reineck a glance. "Sorry, lady, not my style."

"Or mine." Reineck took a deep draft of the schnapps. "I told you, pretty boy, I got the hell out when I was still seventeen."

"Max," he invited for the second time, sure she would ignore it.

"Gambling?" Vaughan guessed. "You lose your stash at the tables?"

Jarrat took a sip of the bourbon. "Most of it. The rest, I blew on a place in Babylon." He gestured uptown, toward the spheres. "It's not quite Argentia or Arkadia, but I could afford it. Thought I could. Till I got a live-in, and gave him my credit card. Biggest mistake I ever made, and you know the worst thing? No, the two worst things. First, I got nobody to blame but myself, because I *do* know better ... second, there's nobody's jaw to break for it, cuz I don't turn on to pain."

The lease, in the name of Tyler, on an apartment in the Babylon sphere was a matter of record in Thule's computers. Vaughan and Reineck could run a background check — and they would. The maxed-out credit card would take too long to check. It was issued by a bank in Chell, ten days away via the tachyon band. Jarrat had been thorough.

"So here I am," he finished. "I'm a pilot, like I said. A good one, licensed, legit, nothing chancy."

"Cards." Vaughan held out his hand.

He handed over the whole wallet. It contained two hundred credits and three-fifty in colonial dollars, plus a few holosnaps and the cards. Vaughan need never know that the good-looking face in the snaps belonged to Curt Gable. The cards were perfect, licenses, permits, everything so neatly in order, Tactical could have run them. And Vaughan took the lot. He handed them to Reineck, and they vanished into one of the cargo pockets.

"I'm going to want those back." Jarrat insinuated a fine vein of threat into his voice.

"You'll get them," Reineck told him, "if they check out, and if you're on the level. If you're who you say you are, and what, you got a job ... Max." She regarded her empty glass with a frown and waved at the waiter. "You've always known where to find Scorpio?"

"More or less." Jarrat spoke unconcernedly. "I knew the *who*, not the where, and — Christ, lady, you make yourself easy to find." He chuckled. "I saw you on the newsvids, and you're plastered all over AuraNet. The society pages. Better than the crime-watch page, right?" He sat back, silent until the waiter had delivered Reineck's drink and returned to the bar. "You made it easy for me."

"Not so easy," Vaughan argued. "You had to know who to look for. Tactical think I'm an art dealer. Can you believe it? I deal in million credit holographic artworks, selling to clients in Arkadia and Barsoom, with more bucks than brain cells. As for Leena, well, she retired from the Companion's trade

when she'd had enough old men and underage, zit-infested juvies to buy Barsoom."

"Wrong," Jarrat said darkly. "I don't want to rain on your parade, guys, but you're dead wrong. Tac knows you, or at least they know Leena, and after tonight they know you. So does NARC."

"He's right, Damon," Reineck said hoarsely. "Jesus God, they tagged me! Means they've seen something, or some bastard's grassed on me. Fuckit-all!" Her voice rose and the wildness was back in her eyes. "We have to get out, Damon. Fast. I'm not staying here, not with a NARC carrier over my head, and Tac one step behind me."

Vaughan raised a hand, gesturing for her to keep it quiet. "You don't have to inform the whole spaceport. Okay, we'll get out. Scorpio owes us a few favors. We'll call them."

"When?" Jarrat leaned closer. "I mean, I'm counting on you to give me an intro to your boss. Soon as I'm through the door, you can be on the next clipper, who cares? But get me in first. Understand: I saw the NARCs coming. I could've let them have you."

It was Reineck frowning at him now. "So how'd you know they were NARCs? They weren't exactly in uniform."

"You kidding?" Jarrat chuckled. "Those two? They're a couple of riot troops. You can't usually see them for the armor, but I know where they drink, the both of 'em, when they're home."

"And home is ...?" Vaughan prompted.

"Venice. Darwin's World." Jarrat arched both brows at the Scorpio man. "That's where I'm from myself. But it's kind of hard to make a career on the shady side of the law, with the NARC Quadrant Command base on your doorstep. Those gorillas? Once or twice a month they drink at a place called Sensations ... and if you're drunk enough, and crazy enough, you can come on to them."

"You —?" Reineck laughed hoarsely. "You shagged a couple of NARC riot troops?"

"Like I said, if you're drunk enough." Jarrat gave a thought to Gil Cronin and Joe Ramos. He shook his head over Reineck and Vaughan. "You people must've been born under some lucky star. I meant to be at El Relámpago, tonight of all nights, to see if I could meet you." He cocked his head at Vaughan, gave the man a grin as brash as any Hal Mavvik's king shooter had worn. "Hey, I get a job, or what?"

The Thule money 'man' patted the pocket containing his cards. "If you check out. If you don't, you're toast."

"If I don't?" Jarrat echoed. "Lady, I'm Max Tyler, pilot of fortune out of Darwin's. I lucked out with a job with Hal, and had enough sense to split before the rest were swatted like bugs. Who else am I likely to be?" He made a face. "Just get me through the door. All I want is a cushy job, flying hot cargo for Scorpio on good money, for long enough to get me the hell out of Aurora. And if I have to work under NARC's nose ... I can do it if I have to. I've done it before."

"You're quite the character," Vaughan said, not quite mockingly. "Maybe

you got more guts than brain cells, but you're still alive. What the hell? We'll get you in. Then we're gone, Max. We're out so fast, you'll wonder if you ever knew us."

"When?" Max Tyler rubbed his hands together.

The Scorpio man was studying Leena Reineck with a deep frown. "Depends, doesn't it? On how long she's hot."

"Find out," Jarrat gestured with the glass. "Can I get a refill?"

"Find out how? Waiter!" Vaughan leaned closer.

"Shove her through an imaging system, anything made by Intel-Scan." Jarrat chuckled. "The passenger baggage scanners would do ... but every security alarm in the port'd go off." He fell silent as the waiter approached, and traded the empty glass for a double. "Either that, or hang out someplace around here, and hope the tag wears off before Tactical stumbles over you. Cheers." He saluted the grimacing Vaughan and drank. His voice was whisky-hoarse as he added, "Can't help you on this one, mate. Imaging systems are way out of my field."

Sternflares and running lights drew his eyes out through the vast armor-glass viewports. He watched the clipper shuttle launch with a throaty roar of engines, not the thunder of the rimrunner, but much closer than the big freighter. He was waiting for Vaughan or Reineck to put the pieces together, and had begun to think he would have to lead them by the nose when Reineck pushed back her chair.

The empty glass clattered down on the table. She was a little blurred as she told Vaughan, "I'm going to make a call."

A rank of hooded payphones marched along the left side of the Apollo. Reineck leaned into one of them, shoved a credit card into the slot and punched buttons. Jarrat lifted a brow at Vaughan, and the big man said grudgingly, "We got friends."

"You're going to need 'em, if you're going to get out of Aurora under NARC's beady eyes. It'd be easier to lie low groundside." Jarrat was digging. "Stay out of the spheres, and city bottom, come to that. This town's getting dangerous."

But Vaughan did not take the bait. He was watching Reineck, waiting for her to close the call, and as she made her way back to the table he got his feet under him. "You got the man or his machine?"

"He was there." Reineck peered at Jarrat. "I asked him how long these shitty tags last. He said, maybe two days, maybe a week, depends what they shot me with. Christ, Damon, they've got me." She hugged herself. "I won't stay ahead of the bastards for a week."

"Not without help," Jarrat agreed. "It's about two days since I saw them tag her. Your friend has access to an imager?"

"He's in a med lab," Reineck said distractedly. "Of course he's got an imager. He said I should wait till maybe fifty hours after I was tagged and then get scanned." She looked speculatively at Max Tyler. "You say they picked me up two days ago? There's forty hours."

A med lab? Jarrat was playing a hunch and felt his pulse kick up a notch. He wondered if Stone was aware of it ... and where Stone was. Reineck and

Vaughan were hunched together over the table, talking in undertones, and he took the opportunity to settle back, key on Stone. He opened the empathic channel a little and felt the thrill of his partner's sensations. The shuttle was headed out: he felt the vibration of big engines in his bones, and Stone was bleak, though not angry. He had his teeth into the job and reality was biting. Jarrat forced his mind back to the Apollo Lounge as Vaughan and Reineck turned toward him.

"We take a room," Vaughan told him, "right here, in the Gemini Over-nighter. Tomorrow ..." He regarded Reineck grimly. "We make a run for it. Head for Sondheim's, get some decent cannons, and if Tac shows its face, blow the bastards away. Find out if you're clear yet," he added bitterly, "and then we're *out*, Leena. Scorpio can hire itself some *bozos* to do this job while NARC's insystem." Vaughan looked darkly at Tyler. "You could rise fast, if you're stupid enough and lucky enough. You know we lost a shit-load of guys in Mostov. City bottom's one of our big places, and at that time of the night — damnit, Max, you'd swear 'Fleet or Tac or NARC organized it to screw us."

"So Scorpio's hiring," Reineck said in a sour tone. "You lucky, Max? You fancy your chances? Pick the job you want. Money man, mule, muscle, shooter ... right now they'll probably offer you Thule in a basket if you check out." Her face twisted. "Mostov cost us bad. I lost a lot of friends and some blood family."

She was local to this area, Jarrat remembered. If she had made her start 'on the rack' at Relámpago, home would not be far away. Jarrat heard an unspoken threat in her hoarse voice: if it were in her power Tactical, Starfleet, even NARC, would be made to pay. It was ironic that in this instance NARC was uninvolved, but the Angelpack in city bottom could not know why and how Mostov had happened until a Starfleet tribunal was done. The story would filter back to the colonies eventually, but the resentment was festering right here and now. It would make Thule a dangerous place for Tac and NARC alike.

So much the better that Tac was informed, and would become spontaneously blind to Reineck, Vaughan and Tyler, no matter how outrageous their flight. They would be tailed, not challenged. Not yet. "You know someone in a med lab." Jarrat finished his drink and stood. "It'll do. Give me back my cards."

But Reineck shook her white-maned head. "Not a chance, pretty ... Max. You stay right where we can see you. You don't get your cards back, so you don't sneak off and rat on us."

"I told you, Tyler," Vaughan said testily, "if you check out, you get your job. God knows, I'll give you a reference. If you don't check out, you're dead meat. If you turn out to be from one of Scorpio's competitors — and there's a herd of them, man, not just Tac and NARC — they'll make you wish you'd never been born."

"Then I got nothing to worry about," Tyler said blithely. "You, on the other hand, if I were you I'd be gnawing on my finger nails."

Forty blue-green Thule dollars landed on the table, and Vaughan was moving. Reineck pattered after him, barefoot and cursing, and Jarrat took the

opportunity to use the empathic link to check in with Stone. He let the shield down a fraction and cultivated a feeling of optimism, even of wry humor. From Stone he felt an anxious twist in the gut, a tightness in the chest, both of which gradually settled into a blanket of resigned acceptance.

The transit tubes ducked down into a labyrinthine underground. The whole spaceport was crisscrossed with them, freight and passenger lines, terminals, junctions with the city lines leading to Kansai, Argyll and the resort stations in the ski fields of the Appalachians.

The Gemini Overnighter was a transit hostel inside the spaceport gates, and well within the security compound. Passengers waiting for connecting flights could stay over without needing to sweat through Immigration. The more expensive rooms had a view of the city from eight floors up. Nothing in the hostel was luxurious and suites were unavailable, but the top-price rooms were wide, with the king-sized bed, wet bar, holovision, autochef, vidphone. Vaughan palmed the lock to seal the door. He had signed for the room, and only his palmprint would unlock it again.

Wine-red carpets and all, it was as good as a prison cell. The only way out was through Damon Vaughan. Jarrat was unconcerned. He cast a glance through the thick armorglass, thirty meters above the plascrete, and ginned brashly at the man. "You don't trust me?"

"Not quite yet." Vaughan threw his shirt at a chair and stretched his shoulders. Winter-pale skin sheathed hard-worked muscles. He still looked like a ballplayer as he leaned into the bathroom and set the water. "How much can it cost you, Max, to wait a day?"

"Unless a Tac squad comes busting through that door," Jarrat said glibly, "and takes me down right along with you, what do I care?" Only he knew, it could never happen.

"They won't," Reineck rasped. "There's too much crap from the spaceport. Tracking and weapons and robot systems and hotcores. I'm safe." As if to prove it, she shrugged out of the sweatshirt and peeled off the flesh-toned skinthin. She was glaring at Max Tyler every moment, eyes bright with challenge as she stripped to the skin and struck an arch-backed pose full of the chimes of miniature bells.

"Uh ... nice," Tyler said dutifully.

A growl of laughter issued from the bathroom. "Not your type?"

In fact, Jarrat was connoisseur enough of the human body in any of its forms to be impressed, but Max Tyler turned his back on Reineck, looked Vaughan over from head to foot and licked his lips as salaciously as he knew how. Vaughan was buff-naked, wreathed in the billows of steam from the shower stall; hung like a thoroughbred, with platinum and titanium jewelry pierced into his left lobe, both nipples and the delicate skin of his sac. And if he had any interest in the male of the species, Tyler was not to his taste. Jarrat felt an odd, simultaneous thrill of relief and disappointment.

"Leena, get in here." Vaughan held out his hand. "Tyler, stay put. Eat if you want, get some shuteye or watch the game rerun."

"Game?" Jarrat swiped up the remote for the holo.

"Playoffs, local aeroball," Reineck told him.

Against the odds, the Thule Snowtigers had made it through. Jarrat had surfed AuraNet to catch up with the colony's affairs, and Mischa Petrov would follow anyone's aeroball, anywhere he could find a game. Jarrat had seen enough of the home teams to at least know them. "Yeah, they played the Inquanoc Icebears last night," he said as the holo flickered on. "Don't tell me the score."

"As if I'd know it," Reineck said acidly. "Two words: who cares?"

Around a hundred thousand spectators in AuraComm Stadium appeared to care. The rerun was still in the first quarter as Jarrat turned up the audio, and the noise of the game, the bellow of the crowd, half-masked the sounds from the bathroom. Vaughan had left the door open to keep watch on Tyler, and Jarrat angled one long, curious glance into the shower stall, where improbable gymnastics were taking place, more impressive than anything on the aeroball court. Raoul Petrakis was right. Reineck wore him the way a boulder wore moss and, as they moved from one position to another, kept time to the hard, driving rhythm he had set. The clench of Vaughan's pale, muscular buttocks drew Jarrat's eyes, and a flood of unwanted hormones hit his bloodstream, white hot and demanding.

He smothered a rueful groan and turned his attention to the game. Stone would feel everything. He would know only that sensual scenes were unfolding ... and Jarrat was not included in them.

He was asleep, Stone was sure of it. The melange of feelings was confused, unpredictable, yet Jarrat's body was at rest. Thule time, it was just before dawn. The clipper *Rhapsody* had shipped out two hours before and at Stavanger Dock the tender *Selene* was preparing to leave. The Blue Ravens were back aboard the *Athena*; the ops room had powered down and was just processing their data. Stone was technically off-shift but sleep eluded him and he was killing time, editing a telemetry package which Bill Dupre's people would see in eighty hours or so.

A blip from the comm officer's workstation caught his attention. The station was on automatics. Aside from Stone, only two on-shift monitors, plus Curt Gable and the carrier pilot, Helen Archer, were in the ops room. Archer had been an insomniac for many years and Stone was not surprised to see her here. Gable was yawning through the end of his shift, and looked up as the comm officer's automatics blipped an alert. Data was coming in, and it was tagged as priority.

"Got something for you, Cap." Gable was watching a CRT. "It's ex-Starfleet, flagged for you or Cap Jarrat. Level four encryption."

Level four was high, yet the data had not been rated important enough to send it through by courier, which would have halved the transmission time. Interested, Stone joined Gable and Archer at the comm workstation. As the carrier's Second Officer, Gable was cleared to view any transmission, and Archer's security clearance was no less. Unlike most of the Starfleet crew, the colonel took an active interest in NARC business. She had transferred to

NARC when her son became an Angel statistic, and would remain with the department long after her current tour was up.

The incoming data was a package from Oromon, and Stone felt the overdue tugs of sleep withdraw completely. At NARC's request, Colonel Holder had left a squadron transport on station there when the *Olympic* was routed to Aurora, and Stone had been waiting for this data. Jarrat would have been wide awake, eager for it. Stone took a quick breath as he felt his own rush of interest intrude on Jarrat's dreams and wake him. He *felt* Kevin sit up, take a breath, rub the sleep from his eyes, and he forced himself back to his own reality.

92 Squadron, the Silver Falcons, were still at Oromon, and they were playing cat-and-mouse games with fast, armed ships headed into and out of a location in the ruins of Montevideo. They had pinpointed the place but not moved on it. Colonel James Helman informed NARC and his CO on the *Olympic* that he had summoned backup, ground support and air cover.

"There's no time to wait for your response, Colonel Holder, nor NARC directives. The agents on Oromon are aware of our presence. We've been assaulted several times. If we give them the chance, they're going to clean out the fridge and bolt."

"Damn," Stone muttered. "They let the bastards see them."

"It could work for us," Gable mused. "They'll shut down the arms smuggling operation. Supply dries up just as Scorpio looks at heading into a major war. Gives us the advantage."

"If," Stone added, "92's backup arrives in time to stop the smugglers busting out. If it doesn't, the Silver Falcons could get creamed and the smugglers just dig in somewhere else and start again."

Textual and video data was scrolling while Helman's audio continued, and Stone paused to read. 92 Squadron's backup was coming in from an Army carrier, the *Dauntless*, and was due twelve hours after this package was sent. Meanwhile, the Silver Falcons had gone to ground on the blind side of the smaller of Oromon's moons.

And Helman had lucked out. "We bugged a ship on its way out," he reported. "The craft was a Marshall star-hopper, one of the big ones, probably an Orion. They're quick, but not fast enough to outrun the tachyon band. God knows where it's going, but NARC might pick it up when it enters some port's scan range. I've appended the bug's frequency, and an override code. Shut it down before the smugglers notice it. You'll have to move fast ... but then, NARC does."

The codes and frequencies were embedded in the textual content. Stone was impressed, and made a mental note to mention Helman to Dupre. The man knew how to think on his feet, and he was amenable to working with NARC, which men like Brogan would never be. Curt Gable had 'come over' the same way.

"I'd better bump this through to Thule Field," Gable was saying. He pulled on a headset and swiveled out a chair without delay.

"Jim Helman's a good guy," Archer said thoughtfully.

"You know him well?" Stone wondered.

"Not as well as I'd have liked ..." She gave Stone a self-mocking smile. "We were in the same Aerospace Taskforce for a while, flying off the old *Titan*. He's quite good looking, in a broken-nosed, rugged kind of way. But he's committed, not looking around. His partner's a systems analyst for Cygnus Logistics ... also good looking. A blond iceberg, and also not looking around. I met them when Jim's other half, I forget his name, joined us at a 'Fleet aerospace convention.'" She smiled faintly at the memory, and stirred, "Speaking of pilots, Captain, our crew rotations are due tomorrow. They scored a ride on the tender *Miranda*."

The information would have come through the ops room while Stone was engaged in the Thule conflict, or in the setup for the deep cover operation. If the *Miranda* was on her way over, Bud must have deemed the problems on the engine deck 'beyond local repair.' Short of fetching in the fleet tender, the *Mitsubishi Aerospace Osaka*, the services of the *Miranda* were Budweisser's last shot at a quick-fix.

Interested, Stone pulled up the carrier's routine running data, and scanned the engine techs' log. They were still chasing the ignition problem in Number Two reactor, and it was eluding Budweisser also. He needed access to equipment the *Athena* did not carry.

"The *Miranda* gets in late, shiptime," Gable said as he sent the data through to Thule Field. "You got a friend coming in?"

"A veteran of the bust-up on Sheal. Still with Military Airlift, so the NARC application was easy." Stone tuned in to Jarrat and shivered as he felt the flow of tepid water over his back and flanks.

Dawn was unfolding over the city of Thule, and Jarrat needed to be wide awake. The coming day would be the most dangerous of all. Once he was accepted into the ranks of Scorpio the job would be easy, but the danger today was very real. Stone willed himself to concentrate on the ops room and the faces watching him.

"Lieutenant Evelyn Lang," he told Archer. "Gil Cronin wants a gunship pilot, and she's qualified. I've seen her work. I thought she had a lot of potential. She gave a contract shooter a run for his money right after the Death's Head bust. Kevin planted the idea in her mind ... come over to NARC."

So Cronin had gotten himself a pilot. Stone glanced at the flight status board. The *Miranda* was seventeen hours out. And all at once a yawn ambushed him. It was too long since he had slept for more than minutes at a stretch. Gable was frowning at him, about to ask what was wrong, and Stone jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the rough direction of his cabin.

"I'm going to grab a few hours while I can," he said around another yawn. "Update the *Olympic*, let Holder know we've informed Thule Field about a possible incoming smuggler. Let Janssen know ... and put Gold Raven on standby. According to Helman, his smugglers are fast and trigger-happy. They're not a target for Tactical, but if they want to try their chances against a gunship, they're welcome to. If," he added, "they're headed here at all." Another yawn drove him out of the ops room. "Keep me informed, Curt."

"Will do." Gable hesitated. "And, Jarrat?"

"Safe at the moment. Taking a shower, in fact." If he opened the em-

pathic channel a little, Stone was all too aware of the hot-cold-hot cycle of the water. "Today's when it happens, Curt."

He didn't say it: he either gets into Scorpio or cuts and runs. If he can. Gable knew the deal. He was studying Jarrat and Stone every chance he got, because his own sights were set on carrier command. Stone saw in him the makings of a good captain. Gable had the wits, the nerve, the good looks that were often critical to the job. And the vocation. Close to the end of his first hitch with Starfleet, Gable had buried his kid sister. His NARC transfer papers were filed a few hours after the memorial service. Curt showed no sign of being haunted by the kid's death, but when he scented the quarry a zealot light appeared in his eyes. Stone had seen it before — in Vic Duggan, in Jarrat himself. And in Evelyn Lang.

"Get some sleep, Stoney," Gable said quietly. "If anything comes up, I'll buzz you."

"Thanks." Stone stepped out of the ops room and headed for the lifts. He rode down with a group of techs and a sergeant from the engine deck, and on a whim he stopped the lift at the Infirmary.

The lights were low. Reardon was off-shift, but Harry Del was drinking coffee by one of the monitors, and watching video. Stone heard the audio track and joined him in time to see the last few moments of a message from Del's family. Tansy and most of the kids were still in Eldorado, under the wing of Tactical, and the city appeared in the background of the closing shots of the message. Del let it play out, and with a sigh returned the CRT to its usual data stream.

He regarded Stone with concern. "You look a little odd, Stoney."

"I feel a little ... weird." Stone threaded his fingers into his hair and massaged his scalp. "Time to do your doctor thing."

"Doctor or healer?" Del stood and beckoned Stone closer. "There's a difference. What ails you?"

"I don't know," Stone admitted. "Kevin's fine. I guess I'm feeling the pressure more than he is."

"He'd have felt the same when you went into Equinox." Del pressed him into the chair and settled both hands around Stone's skull. "It's always more difficult for the observer. When you're out there and doing, you're focused, too busy to notice the stress. Relax! You're strung up like a cable car."

Stone made a conscious effort to release the tight-drawn muscles and tendons. He had not been aware of the clench of his fists, and he deliberately uncurled his hands. "So do I monitor him or not?"

The healer was doing *something*. A pale saffron light seemed to invade the dark recesses of Stone's mind. Shadows retreated and he took a deep breath. "Monitor him," Del said quietly, "but ... look, I'm not going to say something stupid like, 'be objective.' But you could try trusting him."

"Trusting him?" Stone shamelessly wallowed in the relaxation.

"Trust him to do his job, and do it right." Harry released Stone's head and stepped back. "He was doing this for two years before you became lovers or empaths. He was doing it before you even met. Jarrat was damned good then, and he still is."

"Trust him." Stone got to his feet and gave the healer a wry, crooked smile. As usual Harry had nailed the problem.

"Lie down." With his coffee mug, Del gestured at the four vacant beds in the observation ward. "You're not going to get coffee, because sleep is what you need. I can't give you a pill, because you have to be open to Kevin, but I'd be a lousy doctor if I didn't keep an eye on you."

The beds were more comfortable than they looked. Stone's spine was grateful as he stretched out, but as soon as he closed his eyes he felt Jarrat in every nerve and sinew. Del was right. It must have been the same for Kevin, and though Jarrat had never mentioned it, Stone guessed what he had felt when the Warlock Company unit badge was laser-branded into Stone's skin. He took a breath, and another, courting some semblance of relaxation.

It was going to be a long haul.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The sense of rich satisfaction was deep as Jarrat's bone marrow as the Rand Eclipse arced into the visitors' parking lot, under a blue, white and gold sign emblazoned with the company logo: PharmaTech. The symbol was an ice-globe eclipsing the sun, and the company name was set in chameleon hues, changing color at every angle. Jarrat took the Eclipse as close to the visitor's entryway as he could, and as the jets whined down he popped the gullwings.

It was early on a summer's afternoon, and though the sky was high, clear and blue, the air was cold. He pulled a parka out of the back and shrugged into it before he swung out onto the blue-ice surface of the parking lot. The PharmaTech building was sixteen levels high, three times wider at the top than the bottom, with domed tropical gardens on the roof, willows weeping over the side, and a water-wall behind an armorglass veneer. The executive hangars were a skypark on the fifteenth floor. A silver-gray aerodyne drifted in as Jarrat stepped out of the Eclipse, and he craned his neck to look up.

At ground level the building was rooted into the plascrete at only two points. Through a vast, gold-lit cavern he saw buildings on the far side, a science museum, a holos theater, and beyond, the rank of spruce and pine marking the edge of the PharmaTech compound.

Through the ice-coated ground under his feet, Jarrat felt the faintest tremble, no more than a buzz. He gave a grunt and stamped his boot on it. The 'magic' of Leo Michiko's grav-resist architecture was buried under the parking lot: a repulsion generator that would have lifted a good-sized freight hauler was purring and throbbing, with two backups waiting to kick in when service-time came around, or in the event of a breakdown. The truth was, the PharmaTech building was simply anchored by two pylons, designed like

Greek columns covered with tendrils of ivy. The visitors' entry was inset into one of these.

The effect was so stunning, it pared away Jarrat's armor of cynicism, and he whistled. "Hey, great place to work," he said as the gullwings whined down. "How'd you plan to get in? I'm looking at smartlocks." He nodded at the entryway, with its palmprint reader, cardswipes and keypads.

Reineck gave him a hard look. "You don't know as much about Scorpio as you think you do, Tyler."

But I'm about to have a bunch of suspicions confirmed. Jarrat stuffed his hands into the pockets of the bronze metallic parka. "Hal and Roon and Grenville didn't tell me everything. I was just hired help, remember. There were forty guys ahead of me, including Assante and even the NARC guy. You, uh, got an in at PharmaTech?"

No answers were forthcoming yet. Reineck and Vaughan were playing it smart, and Jarrat could not blame them. He tailed them as Reineck hustled across the rime of ice in the ridiculous shoes, and only raised a brow as the Thule money 'man' slapped her hand on the palmprint reader. Vaughan punched in a six-digit code, and the door slid open obediently. Inside was a gray-walled reception area with an unmanned desk, a security drone, a building index. Passages led off to left and right, and colored lines wove patterns into their floors.

"Hey, you do have an in," Tyler observed. "Great. I get to work here, do I?"

"Not your call, Tyler," Vaughan barked as the door closed behind them. "You go where they send you." He jabbed a finger in the direction of a sign reading 'Biometrics.' "That way. Stay on the green line, and don't get ahead. I've got a gun on you."

"Jesus," Max Tyler groaned, "I saved your asses. What more do you want of me?"

"Us? Nothing," Reineck told him. "But if you don't check out and we let you waltz right in, our asses won't be worth beer money."

"Then again, neither will mine," Jarrat added as he followed the green line around a blind corner.

It led up a shallow ramp, around two more blind corners, and into an open elevator car. The shaft went down only, and he counted five levels before the doors opened onto an endless white passage with a single sign: Biometrics.

Multiple labs opened up along the passage, and Jarrat strode out of the lift car. "You want to tell me where I'm going?"

"Fourth on your right." Reineck kicked off the shoes, shoved them back into her cargo pockets, and folded the parka over her arm. The pure white hair hung in damp dreadlocks, the night's makeup was gone, and she looked furious. Barefoot, she shoved past Vaughan and was already calling ahead. "Todd? Todd, goddamn it!"

A head poked out of the fourth door on the right, which stood open to the passage. The man was short, with a high, creased forehead and short-cropped hair the color of mahogany. He wore a pale blue lab coat and if the

bloodshot, baggy eyes were any indication, he had spent the night partying.

"Leena? Jeez, I heard you two got busted! It's all over city bottom. NARC hit on the club, and you and Vaughan vanished."

"We got lucky," Vaughan said grimly, driving Reineck and Tyler before him. "Get in, all of you. Basso, shut the door. Lock it."

The little man did as he was told, but Jarrat was aware of anxious scrutiny, and offered his hand. "Max Tyler. You're a lab tech?"

"Uh, yeah." Todd Basso shook his hand, but suspicious eyes flicked to Reineck. "You wanna tell me, or do I guess?"

"He was at El Relámpago when NARC hit the place." Vaughan stalked the lab like a caged cat. "He knew the bastards on sight."

Basso's eyes widened, bug-like. "You're shittin' me. He recognized a couple of NARCs?"

"He fucked 'em, back on Darwin's World," Reineck snarled. "Get a grip, Todd. I've fucked NARCs myself. You get one of the pigs on his own, off the job. You slam the bastard down and get on top, pound him through the floor. Biggest thrill there is, short of putting a bullet between his eyeballs. Right, Max?"

"Like you say, Leena," Jarrat said acidly, and could not help wondering if he or Stone had been in that position, and when, or where. A series of one-nighters leaped out of his memory to mock him, and his willful imagination conjured Cronin and Ramos into Reineck's scene.

"Try it sometime." Reineck glared at Basso. "And while you're thinking about it, find out if I'm still tagged. I been wearing a radioactive tracer since Tactical marked me."

"Where?" Basso hurried into the back corner of his lab and set up the IntelScan machine. "Where'd you catch a NARC off the job?"

"Mars." Reineck dragged off the sweatshirt. "What's it to you?"

The man's eyes bugged out again, for different reasons. Jarrat watched Basso's throat bob repeatedly as he swallowed. "You, uh, don't have to, uh, strip down for uh, this." He was intent on a couple of points midway between the glare and the navel.

Vaughan laughed harshly. "Yes she does. Can't let a chance go by unseized. Basso! Just do your freakin' job!"

The Thule money 'man' stepped into the cavity of the IntelScan machine and Basso set it to perform three passes, looking for different signatures, substances, tracers. Jarrat straddled a chair and cocked his head at Vaughan, who had come to rest by a work bench.

"She's trouble," he said under the hum of the scanner.

"Big trouble," Vaughan growled. "That body pulled her out of city bottom, and it's going to kill her one day. She doesn't know how to turn it off. Nearly twenty years as a Companion in the spheres, what can you expect? It's all she knows. That, and dealing Buran."

The IntelScan machine was grinding through the last of three scans, and Vaughan disappeared for a moment into a store room. Jarrat listened, heard the sounds of a refrigerator, and rummaging inside. The scanner gave a negative reading as it shut down. Reineck stepped out of the machine's cavity,

playing to a captive audience as Todd Basso, stumbling over his own feet, fetched the sweatshirt and offered it to her.

Like the Companion she was, she tied it on around her hips and tormented the lab tech until Vaughan barked her name. Jarrat heard the sounds of jealous fury in the man's voice. So did Reineck, and she was not about to respond to it, save with defiance. She turned toward him and barked right back.

"What you want, Damon?"

His mouth thinned in anger. "You're clear." He jerked a nod at the Intel-Scan machine. "It was the two-day tracer. We got lucky again. You came up reading negative and we gotta get the hell out while we can."

"You, uh, you're not safe on the street," Basso dragged his eyes off the Companion with an effort.

"I know that. Jesus!" Vaughan could move fast when he wanted to. The gun was out, leveled on Jarrat's heart, before Jarrat realized he was in jeopardy, but Vaughan was saying, "Don't freak, Max. Protocols. They'd flay me alive if I walked right in there with you." He gestured at the floor. "Down. On your back, and look at the lamp."

It was a dazzling work light, and Jarrat swore as he did as he was told. It shriveled his irises. He felt two hands clench painfully into his hair to hold his head steady, and his body tensed. He half-saw Vaughan leaning down over him with something in his hands, and then a liquid splashed into both his eyes at once.

The blindness was immediate and total. Jarrat cried out in surprise, wrenched away, but it was too late. "Christ, what did you do to me?"

"I told you, don't freak," Vaughan growled, close by his ear. "You'll see again in three, maybe five hours. About the time you get your ID back, and your job. Protocol."

"Shit," Jarrat swore with feeling. In all the years he had been in either service, he had never experienced blindness, save in a simulation. And as any raw recruit knew, no one took VR sims seriously. A feeling of sheer helplessness overwhelmed him and he choked back a tide of panic that turned his belly. "Vaughan? Vaughan!"

Hands slithered over him, every inch of him, with the intimate knowledge of the professional. He slapped them away hard enough to make Reineck yelp. Vaughan's voice laughed out of the blackness. "Get your hands off him, Leena. You know he's not the type."

"The type?" Reineck snarled, though she removed her hands.

"If he turned on to women, you'd have hooked him." Vaughan's hands clenched into Jarrat's shoulders and lifted him. "He doesn't. You can't have every guy. Thanks, Todd. You ever need a favor, call me. Leena? Leena! You're driving."

And the sound of keys flung and caught, a harsh rasp as Reineck exhaled, before Vaughan was propelling Max Tyler ahead of him, out of the lab. Teeth gritted, head lowered, Jarrat swallowed the consuming anger and struggled to keep his footing as they headed out across the ice of the parking lot.

He rode in the back this time, and felt Vaughan beside him as the gull-

wings whined down and locked. Reineck took off fast. Jarrat's teeth gritted as the Eclipse entered the clearway, dodged traffic and hopped into the fast lane. Reineck floored the accelerator, and the Rand's jets gave a banshee howl.

He could not even guess where they were headed, but of several other things he was sure. Stone was tracking him as only an empath could; Stone was also bucking a fast reentry. They needed to be precise about the location, much more exact than he could be from the distance of the carrier. They were headed into an area where an error factor of ten meters might be critical.

Though Stone could not know Jarrat was blind, he knew something had knocked Jarrat right off his stride. The adrenaline rush Jarrat was feeling was not purely his own. The shuttle was buffeting as it dove into Aurora's thin atmosphere, and Jarrat easily keyed on Stone. He felt it all, down to the prickle of sweat in Stone's palms.

Careful not to alert Vaughan, he pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, hard enough to actually hurt. Stone would register it in his own eyes, and know something was badly wrong, but at the same time Jarrat summoned a deliberate calm. The signals would be mixed, confused, but Stone had become adept at reading them.

"Take it easy, Max," Vaughan said quietly. "It's only the stuff they drop in your eyes when they have to image the inside of your eyeballs for a medical test. It wears off. You're more likely to get killed by her crazy driving than go blind. Slow down, Leena!"

The Eclipse was leaning through a long right hander, and unless Jarrat was mistaken, it was climbing fast. More than likely, they were on Route 32, which led up into the Appalachians, and Jarrat took a breath as he remembered, Michiko Aurora had a studio in the Aspen region. And Leo Michiko's private secretary had placed him out of reach, at a top-level conference at a 'retreat' somewhere our here. Jarrat's pulse kicked up a notch.

"My ears just popped," he said sourly.

"Mountains tend to do that to you," Vaughan remarked. "Sit back, enjoy the ride. You should know where we're headed."

"Aspen." Jarrat shifted in the seat, listening to the howl of jets. "God, I hate this. I used to hate being a passenger with Roon, when he'd throw Hal's cars all over the road up the mountain. You ever visit the palace, Damon?"

"Never been to Rethan," Vaughan said disinterestedly.

"Too late now," Max Tyler said philosophically. "It's all gone. NARC trashed the palace. Loads of casualties, man. Only good thing is, the little Companion got out. The one the NARC bastard liked. They pulled him out of the rubble. Man, I could have gone for that kid." He smacked his lips. "You got anybody like him on the Scorpio payroll?"

"There's a whole bunch like Leena, both genders and the ones who blur the line." Vaughan's voice was arid. "Get on the payroll first, Max. You want to fly for Scorpio? Fine. Fly first, exercise your dick second."

Jarrat was dividing his attention between the car and Stone. The shuttle had smoothed out and was riding clear air, one long dive toward the glacier-hung slopes of the Appalachians. He would be braking down soon, looking for the car, and he could pinpoint Jarrat with great accuracy as they got close.

The destination of Aspen was as good as a confirmation of Kris Janssen's suspicions, but even now Jarrat had nothing he would take into court. He blinked repeatedly, waiting to recover any vestige of his sight, but the blindness was still suffocating as he felt the Eclipse begin to slow. It swung into a sharp turn, the jets whined way down, and the car rocked on its repulsion as Reineck brought it to a halt.

Cold, clear air flooded in as the gullwings rose, and Jarrat heard a profound quiet, unknown in any city. He pulled a breath to the bottom of his lungs and turned his face to the sun. This may be summer, but little warmth touched his skin. He knew where the sun was because that direction was less cold.

They hustled him out of the car and into a building. Heat and humidity came up fast; he heard a dull echo of walls, felt deep carpet underfoot, smelt polish, perfume. Then he was in an elevator. The door rumbled over, hydraulics growled, and the car went down for some time.

"Take it easy, Max. Have a little patience." Vaughan manhandled him out and into a room. "I'll make a few calls, get somebody down here ... don't wander away, now."

The door closed; locks clicked into place, and Jarrat was alone. He stretched out with his fingers and stepped forward slowly until he found a wall. Paint was slick under his palm as he followed the surface around to the door. He had some small orientation as he put his back against the wall opposite the door and slid down to sit on the floor.

Now he could only wait, and waiting was the worst. It was a little like this when he went into Death's Head. Hal Mavvik had been choosy about who and what he hired on, but the fake ID was impeccable and the references that time drew on the Black Unicorn bust. NARC had gleaned enough intel for Jarrat to make a call from a public vidphone at the spaceport, direct to Hal Mavvik's private line, and wait for a pickup. He brought Mavvik the best regards of an old friend who had been killed in the bust ... and a wedge of colonial dollars, Mavvik's cut of the deal that was going through just as the bust took place.

The cash, the dropped names, the inside information, were almost enough to convince Mavvik unconditionally, yet to be sure he fed Jarrat a solid jolt of Gryphon and asked every question again while the young shooter's mind reeled and his tongue almost defied words.

NARC was meticulous, thorough. Field agents 'qualified' on every drug short of Angel itself, and Jarrat stuck stubbornly by the training. He had slugged his way through Buran in the course of training, and he knew the routines, the disciplines. They made his tongue obey him until the blockers were given. The come-down was a mild headache, a cotton mouth, a knot in the belly and a deep hatred for the man who had fed him the Gryphon.

He keyed on Stone now, concentrating on him, deliberately feeling through Stone's nerve endings as the shuttle settled into a repulsion hover not far away from this basement room. He felt the brush of surfaces against Stone's jaw and knew he was in armor ... felt the twin joysticks in either hand, and the slight pressure against his palms. Stone was intent on him, and he

had picked this building out of a hundred others. Aspen was not a large community, but it was big enough.

If Stone were to feel a tide of panic, a storm of physical pain from Jarrat, the VM 104 could carve its way into the building, and a figure in NARC riot armor could walk through a hail of falling masonry, a gush of fire from ruptured pipes and shorted electronics.

None of this made the waiting easier. Jarrat could smell the tang of his own sweat as the door opposite him opened. Several pairs of boots stepped inside. He remained where he was, not even lifting his head. Fluoros flickered on across the ceiling, and he realized belatedly, he had been sitting in the dark.

"Mister Tyler." A man's voice, deep and well modulated, with an accent Jarrat almost recognized. It had a lot of the clipped vowels and nasal qualities of the Thule accent, but other overtones, annoyingly familiar. Jarrat was reminded of someone, but had no time to think as the man went on, "Damon tells me you're ambitious to join us, Mister Max Tyler, recently of Death's Head."

"That's me," Jarrat said tersely. "You knew Hal? Damned shame about him. NARC leveled the whole palace too."

"I knew Hal Mavvik," the voice said evenly. "I'll have you describe him to me, Tyler. You understand, I need to be certain about you."

"Sure." Jarrat set his head back against the wall, closed the blind eyes and summoned Mavvik, the palace, the Death's Head payroll, even the cars in the garage, to mind. He described everything and everyone in detail, dropped every name he knew, spoke of the sex shops, dance shops, dream shops of the city bottom where men like Roon went slumming, and where dealers like Charbonneau lived and worked. "Good enough?" he said at last, when his throat was dry from talking.

"Good enough." The voice was quirky with wry humor. "You knew the place and the people better than I did, Tyler ... yet you ran like a thief when Hal's back was against the wall. Why?"

"Self preservation," Jarrat told him. He cleared his throat. "I wasn't the only one that bugged out. Joel Assante got out ahead of me. He said Hal was crazy, a bloody lunatic, to slug it out with NARC, and I'll tell you, I'd worked alongside Assante. If he was leaving, I was right behind him."

"As you say," the voice mused. "In retrospect, both you and Joel were right. Hal lost everything, even his life, and there was no need for it. He could have pulled out of Chell, moved his operation to another city or another colony. Given NARC the slip and begun again."

"S'what Joel said," Jarrat agreed. He knuckled his eyes. "Look, tell me what you want from me. I gave your man Vaughan the whole story. What I'm doing here, how long I've been on Aurora. He took my ID, my cards, the lot ... and I let him do it, man. You should know, I could have paralyzed the bastard any time I wanted to, and the woman, and lit out of there with my stuff."

"You're very confident."

"I'm very good," Jarrat said, deliberately smug.

"I may require you to prove it," the voice warned.

He lifted his chin. "You want somebody beat up?"

The man paused for some time and then asked, "And if I wanted someone eliminated?"

Jarrat's shoulders lifted in an easy shrug. "I'm a pilot, but I've worked as a shooter occasionally. Not the king shooter, like Assante, but if you need somebody *eliminated*, well ..." He chuckled. "It's a nice word. Neat. Is it somebody I know?"

"You're very cynical, Mister Tyler."

"It's an advantage in this game," Jarrat said tersely. "Is that it? Some half-assed kind of initiation? You want me to waste somebody?"

"Not yet." The man paused, as if to study him. "I was told you recognized the NARCs who busted El Relámpago."

"S'right. Vaughan should've also told you, I'm from Darwin's, city of Venice. You know Venice?"

"I've been there."

"Then you know it's the NARC Quadrant Command base," Jarrat said easily. "The whole city's infested with them. You want to shaft a NARC? Dead easy. Find out where they drink and pick him up. Or her, if you prefer. NARC hires on both sides of the fence."

"The men who busted El Relámpago," the voice had gained an edge. "Who were they?"

"Riot troops," Jarrat said indifferently.

"Names."

"I don't know names. I was halfway shit-faced that night, so were they. I never asked, and they never said. I just remember being the meat in the sandwich between two big, good looking bastards ... and there they were in El Relámpago last night. It was only dumb-ass luck that I was there, or Vaughan and Reineck would've been on a carrier by now, pumped full of some narco crap and talking as fast as they know how. Look, do you want somebody wasted, or what?"

The man chuckled. "You're eager."

"Impatient and angry is closer to is," Jarrat snapped. This part of the performance was the most difficult to judge. Very carefully, he pushed his way to his feet. "I've been manhandled, blinded, locked up and freakin' interrogated. I should be happy about it? I'm tired, hungry, thirsty, and at the end of my patience, man. You want somebody killed, bring the bastard here, I'll wring his neck with my bare hands!"

Again, the chuckle, and when the man spoke again it was not to Jarrat. "In good time. Bourbaki? We're ready. Do it."

The hairs on Jarrat's nape stood on end and sweat sprang from his palms. He swallowed hard, knowing Stone would feel everything, whether it was going to be a beating, the invasion into his mind of electronic interrogation, or —

The prick of a needle made his skin tingle and smart, low in his neck, and at once his thoughts reeled. He was not sure what the drug was at first, but he thought, not Angel which was inhaled, nor Gryphon which was swallowed. His heart began to thud against his ribs and he slid back down the wall as if

he was overcome. Buran? The dope was expensive, uptown chic. Common in Thule though it was illegal.

"Now, Max Tyler," the voice said, distorting and warbling. "Let's do it all again. And this time you'll tell me the truth."

Jarrat clenched his teeth against a bubble of laughter. The drug was Buran, and the dose was much lighter than he had fought through in the training exercise. The man behind the darkness would never know, but Jarrat was in command as the questions started over.

"We'll start with your name, and where you're from."

"Max Tyler from Venice, Darwin's. I was born in the Fairview sector. You can't see the bloody NARC base from there ... s'why I liked it. Left Darwin's when I signed on ... Army." His voice was slurred. It seemed his tongue belonged to a puppet and he was controlling it with strings and rods. But it was doing as he told it, and within the honey-sweet shroud of the Buran and the blindness, his thoughts were clear.

"He's drugged," Stone said tersely. "But he's handling it. Heart's fast but steady. Feels like ... some kind of euphoric."

"Not Angel?" Gable asked, and the question was difficult. He knew Stone's history; he also knew, when carrier command came his way, he would be headed into these scenes himself.

"Good Christ, no." Stone's eyes snapped open. In the bright, cold light of afternoon, Michiko Aurora's ten-floor building was a fantasy in chameleon colors, shimmering against the blue Fox Glacier. Aspen sprawled away through its high valley, where the snow had cleared in patches allowing green Icelandic grasses and tiny yellow flowers to bask in the grudging sunlight.

But it was not enough to follow Jarrat here. A lawyer would argue that Leo Michiko's business premises were simply being used. The shuttle was riding repulsion two k's downrange of the Michiko Aurora building, and Stone could have told Gable to the last three meters where Jarrat was. He was in a subbasement under the parking garages; he was riding a mild Buran trip, nothing he could not handle ... and something was wrong with his eyes. Stone had been aware since the beginning of strung-out nerves, but never bald fear. He knew Jarrat as well as he knew himself. Kevin was a thoroughbred, and when the fight-or-flight impulse came, the explosion of adrenaline would hit Stone like a punch.

The time was not yet, and he returned to Harry Del's advice. Trust Jarrat to do his job. Trust him to be the best in this business, part of which was knowing when to get out and run. Stone was about to lift the nose, head the shuttle back to the carrier, when Petrov's voice growled,

"Raven Leader, I've got Colonel Janssen holding. You available?"

"Patch it through," Stone told him. "I think we're done here, Mischa. Jarrat's in, and we were right. They headed for Michiko Aurora, in Aspen." He waited only a moment for Janssen's call to come through. The shuttle was falling upward into the cold blue of the summer sky, and off to his right he

watched the Fox Glacier grow tiny with distance. "What can I do for you, Colonel?"

Signal encryption made the audio harsh, but the comm officer on the carrier had cleaned it up a lot. "It's a question of what I can do for you, Captain." Kris Janssen sounded grimly amused. "You gave Thule Field a bug-signature yesterday. We're listening to it right now, and if it's your runner, the last place he was seen was heading out of Oromon so fast, his tail feathers were on fire."

"Nice going," Stone applauded. "We owe Starfleet a beer for this one, Colonel. Send a six-pack to 92 Squadron."

"They bugged the runner on his way out? Slick," Janssen approved. "I sent our data to your ops room. You got it yet?"

It was coming up on Stone's CRT as she spoke, and Stone swore softly. "I'm seeing it, Colonel. Not liking it. It's the bug-signature all right, but it's headed for some location on Maui."

"Out of my reach, not to mention my jurisdiction," she warned. "Best I can do is alert Mackenzie Tactical, have 'em launch something."

"I know. Hold." Stone switched up to the NARC band. "Ops room, launch Red Raven, put Green Raven on launch alert. We're going to see if we can run it down."

"Will do," Petrov responded. "Watch yourself, Stoney. According to 92's leader, Colonel Jim Helman, it's one of the big ones, maybe a Marshall Orion. That's what we're seeing. Looks like a truck with a lot of carrying capacity, and the engines to do the job. If they've armed it and tweaked those engines, you could get a run for your money."

"Thanks for the concern." Stone's eyes skimmed the instruments. The Corsair was showing green on every system. "You got a trace on the runner, Curt?"

In the rear cockpit, Gable was intent on his own instruments. "Got it. They haven't identified with Thule Field. I'm listening to Air Traffic right now." He paused. "Thule ATC's called four times, no response. They're calling it Bogey 728. Threatening a Tac intercept —"

"No," Stone said sharply. "Identify, tell Thule ATC we've got it covered. No interceptors. This could get messy." It could get bloody.

"If I identify on civvy frequencies," Gable warned, "728's going to know he's got NARC Raven Leader up his tailpipe."

"Let him know," Stone said tersely. "He's still headed for a Maui landing." He turned the VM 104's nose up on the way to a vast arc into the east, opened the throttles and lit the afterburners.

The city of Thule lay on the west side of the Amundsen Sea, and beyond the rocky, icebound coastline no feature punctuated the ocean before the big volcanic island whose name was a prank. Only Maui's active volcano gave it any faint similarity to Earth's tropical island. The communities on Maui drew most of their energy from geothermal generators, and their income from the deep-sea trawler fleet. The bright, cold waters of Aurora's oceans had been seeded with krill before a food chain was systematically built during the last phase of terraforming. When Aurora's first colonists arrived, the seas were teeming. Koksoak and Mackenzie were among the first settlements, and after

two centuries a large part of Aurora's food still began on Maui.

Bogey 728 was dropping in fast. As Stone cut a blistering arc over the Amundsen Sea he was listening to Gable and Thule Air Traffic. Sure enough, 728 cut speed. They were holding up now, ten thousand meters above the shuttle from the *Athena*. As Stone leveled out over Maui and swung around the broken-backed cone of the old volcano, Gable gave a war whoop.

"They're launching backup of their own, Stoney! Three marks, headed out of the valleys behind Koksoak ... they must have a base tucked in behind the cannery, or under it. Looks like we'll get a scrap."

"Raven Leader," Gene Cantrell's voice called evenly, "we're tracking three craft out of Maui. Red Raven is on reentry procedures, cannot make your location for six minutes. Watch yourself, Stoney, or get the hell out. The Tactical air squad from Mackenzie is on alert, and we can keep 728 in sight, he's not going to lose us."

The three marks heading up out of the harbor city were light, civvy, but Stone did not underestimate them. "Tell Mackenzie Tac to launch, but don't get in the way." He heard the bark in his own voice. As he spoke, he had knocked the guards off the triggers and Gable had armed every weapon the Corsair possessed. Stone was only waiting for the three outbound blips to cut a course away from the populated areas before he triggered a spread of three Hawk missiles.

They were smart enough to acquire their targets and 'call home' for confirmation to destroy. The computer deck embedded in a kevlex-titanium sheath under the shuttle's pilot seats confirmed, and the Hawks committed. Overdriven, short-duration jets screamed up to peak thrust and three war-heads armed.

A billow of gasoline-yellow against the basalt-black volcano marked the death throes of one target, but the second rogue pilot was lucky, and the third was smart. By chance, a Hawk drifted into the field of the twin ex-Army chain guns that had been tacked onto a modified Marshall Skyvan, and a thousand rounds tore the missile apart with four hundred meters' grace.

The pilot of the Skyvan dropped a wing and threw his throttles wide open, but the desperate measure was not fast enough. The 'van was caught on the edge of the storm of windmilling shrapnel, and on long-range visual Stone watched a chunk of white-hot metal scythe through one of the stubby wings. The Skyvan began to tumble, and he lost sight of it as it bounced like a ball on repulsion, butting through the wave crests at zero-meters.

An automatic distress signal was already sending, and Stone turned his attention to the third rogue. Mackenzie Air Search would pick up the wreckage. The pilot would be in a cell in an hour. In the rear cockpit, Gable was capturing video for Central, and Stone had already acquired the third target in the glare of Aurora's small sun.

It was a Yamazake Lightning, modified, armed, and even armored. But the extra layer of kevlex had cost it top-end speed and agility. Though it had the body shape of the race plane, it did not maneuver quite like one. The pilot had thrown it on its back and poured every ounce of power he had into the engines, chasing the sun. As Stone watched, the Hawk went ballistic. His last

glimpse of it was a fireball off the crest of the volcano. The Lightning was away, already on the far side of Maui, and Stone nudged open the throttles to follow.

"Raven Leader," Cantrell called. "The gunship will be with you in five. Thirty seconds, Stoney, and Bogey 728 is going to see it coming. You want to leave the third rogue out of Mackenzie for Tactical? They say they're tracking it, just keeping the hell out of your way."

"Tell 'em, they have a go," Stone decided, and switched his CRT over to 728.

The Marshall Orion was big, a truck, easily able to carry a lot of armor, cannons, missiles, anything the smugglers had access to. And since they were flying out of Oromon, Stone thought grimly, and were surely headed into Aurora with a haul of weapons for Scorpio, they would have armed themselves with the first-pick of the same cache.

He stood the Corsair on its tail, swept in the wings and the afterburners torched again. The kick in the back of sudden acceleration was cushioned by repulsion, but Stone still felt the squeeze of his eyeballs. As the plane climbed like a missile he took the opportunity to seal his armor, moving onto internal systems, power and air. Gable had done the same, and Stone flexed his fingers in the black steel gauntlets.

Above him at eleven o'clock, the Orion was a wide, ugly silhouette against the deep, arctic blue. It could have been the unhappy offspring of a crab and a cockroach. As the distance between them closed red lights winked on among Stone's instruments.

"Heads up," Gable said in a low, even voice over the helmet audio, "they just launched ... looks like a bunch of Woomera warheads, the full rack of six. The bastards don't count pennies, Stoney."

Each warhead cost upwards of a half-million credits. The full rack just launched from the Orion would have swiped the frosting off the smugglers' profit for this run — but they would survive. Any one of those warheads could have spread the Corsair over a large swathe of Aurora.

Stone was not about to get caught. He heard Gable suck in a breath as he deliberately radar-painted the oncoming missiles, and watched them bunch together. The six individuals closed on one target still three thousand meters out. In the moment they acquired the Corsair, homing on Stone's weapons sensors, he launched a single Avenger from the Corsair's rack of four, and he had pre-loaded it with the clearance to lock on and detonate on proximity.

Then the gamble began in earnest. Stone felt the drum of his own pulse as he listened to Gable's harsh breathing and watched the CRT. If he jinked the shuttle around even a moment too soon, the numbers changed and all bets were off. If he waited too long and even one of the Woomeras made it through, he would be chasing the sun himself, trying to fly the missile out of gas. He knew the Corsair could do it, but for those seconds he would be terribly vulnerable to another volley from the armored freighter.

"Raven Leader." Cantrell again. "Gunship will be with you in four minutes. They've picked up the Orion. Join Red Raven, get under the cover of their guns."

The words were on the periphery of Stone's mind as he watched the last seconds flicker by. He held his breath and his right hand was feather-light on the joystick. The fireball outshone the small, cold sun of Aurora for a moment, and when it flew apart his CRT was clear.

"Got them," he whispered. "Got 'em all, Curt."

But red lights winked on, and a glance at the screen showed the Orion on an intercept course, wallowing through a cloud bank, its blunt nose turned toward the shuttle in a power-dive. It far outmassed the Corsair, and Stone had the prickling suspicion he was also outgunned.

"Rendezvous with the gunship?" Gable asked in a tight voice.

"If they let us, which they won't. I thought you were keen for a scrap." Stone was playing percentages as he turned the shuttle's needle-slender nose toward the Orion, swept the wings to present the smallest possible target, and opened the throttles wide. "You ever play chicken?" he murmured.

"When I was six years old ... with paintball guns." Gable groaned. "This is the part where I pray?"

"You know how? I'm impressed ... here we go."

Stone's voice never rose over a murmur, though the Corsair dodged and wove around a flock of tiny, dart-like Shrike missiles and the laser-bright stream of tracer marking the thousands of rounds that were hosing out of big chain guns. Then he was under the shooter's gunsights, skimming the flat belly of the Orion, and he cut speed, repulsion braking so hard, Gable swore passionately.

Again, red lights peppered the instruments as the skin of the shuttle superheated in the engine wash. Stone slammed on the grav-resist brakes. The stress on the air frame was cruel as the plane spun, almost inside its own length. The temperature in the cockpit was so high, now even the helmet instruments blinked red, but moments later they winked green again as the pilot of the Orion tried to put distance between himself and the warplane riding his tail pipes.

Stone's thumb stroked the triggers only once, and then he threw the Corsair up and away in an afterburner climb, chasing the blip on his CRT that marked the position of the Red Raven gunship.

The twin Avenger missiles were much too close behind the Orion for them to be outrun or evaded, and their targets were the sterntubes. The explosion was immense as first the engines and then the reactors detonated, and then the remaining warload and the cargo. A monstrous pressure-wave caught the shuttle and tossed it like a toy. Repulsion cushioned the airframe enough to save it, and throughout the buffeting Stone was still intent on the CRT, watching aft-scan video.

As he had hoped, three escape capsules punched out a second before the Orion began to blow. As the air began to clear in the wake of the freighter's vast death rattle he called, "Red Raven! Three bug-out pods! You see them?"

"Got 'em, Cap." The gruff voice belonged to Tino Foy, the gunship pilot. "They're headed for Maui. Don't have the range to make the mainland. Tac air squad also reports three marks on screens. They're asking if they should

make the pickup, but we can take you aboard and catch the pods in tractors. If you don't mind me sayin' so, Cap, you're in moderately bad shape."

"Coming up to join you." Stone was looking at the shuttle's inflight diagnostics, and Foy was not exaggerating. The 104 was streaming coolant from one engine and the other was so rough, Budweisser would have called it a 'shaggy dog.' But she was still in the air after punishment that would have put a lesser aircraft down, and she would fix, though Bud's crew would be cursing. "Pick up the smugglers, Foy, soon as we're aboard." Stone took a deep breath. He cracked the armor's seals, returning to external power and air. "Have your techs in the bay ... we're showing a little engine trouble."

"A little engine trouble?" Gable echoed in mocking tones. "Where'd you learn that maneuver? On the freeway at rush hour?"

"Playing chicken in ultralites," Stone told him glibly. "You're fine, so long as you know when to duck."

The shuttle was handling badly, its control surfaces getting heavier, the starboard engine overheating, the port engine growling. A thousand meters out from the looming slab of the Red Raven gunship he shut them both down and let the wounded Corsair rest on repulsion.

"Still with me, Lieutenant Foy?"

"Still with you, Cap," Foy called. "You're dead in the water?"

"And waving my arms around," Stone said ruefully. "You want to tractor me in? This pretty little thing's had enough for one day."

A mild jolt through the airframe told him eloquently when the gunship took hold of him, and enough instruments were functional for him to read the push and pull of the tractor. He shut off the grav-resist and powered down, sat back and watched the belly of the gunship expand before him to fill the sky.

The hangar was open. Armored techs were waiting, tethered on, and a maglev cradle had been run out. The shuttle wafted aboard like a feather in the breeze. As it set down gently Stone had closed his eyes and, since he had the opportunity again, reached for Jarrat.

Kevin was in that strange state between sleeping and waking, when the imagination ran riot. This was the lure of Buran. The dreams could be as erotic as Angeldreams, but were not necessarily sexual. Buran fantasies could be anything, anywhere, any time. What Jarrat was dreaming, Stone could not be sure, but euphoria flooded through Stone, as if music had burst in his cells. Kevin's pulse and respiration were a little fast, but this was normal when one was taking the ride of a lifetime.

If Stone had to guess, this particular Buran fantasy was about speed. He felt the flex of arms and legs, and his own body knew those sensations. This was how it felt to drive the fastest cars on the ground, and Stone knew where Jarrat's other passions lay. Classic weapons, fast cars. He relaxed a little as he shared the tendrils of the fantasy. If Kevin was still alive and sleeping off the Buran ride, he was *in*. His ID had checked out and the interrogation was over. He would wake up on the Scorpio payroll, and when he had the chance, he would call home.

The job had begun.

Stone popped the cockpit canopy, released the harness and lifted off the helmet. As he settled the headset Foy said smugly in his ear, "Got 'em, Cap. Three bug-out pods, reeling 'em in like fish."

"Good enough," Stone decided, and headed for the suiting room.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Like a tiger staking out its territory, Jarrat spent the whole morning watching faces, listening to voices. Marking out his prey.

He had the freedom of the whole building, or the whole city if he wanted it. Nothing about Scorpio was like Equinox, where Stone had been a prisoner of the corporate army system, and little about this syndicate paralleled Death's Head. Scorpio was a phantom, transparent as a glass mirage, shimmering just out of sight behind the routine business of the colony's most high-profile company. There was, Jarrat thought, no safer place to hide than in the open.

The Voice was absent when he woke, and so were Vaughan and Reineck. They would be long gone from Thule, and he did not expect to see them again before the final bust, when the wide-scale arrests were made, the loose ends tied off. Max Tyler had spent the night in the penthouse on top of the Kansai building where Michiko kept his 'in town offices,' and Scorpio's lieutenants accepted him readily.

He had no memory of being transported there, but his Rand Eclipse stood in the executive garage in the basement. The keys were in his pocket when he woke on a couch and found his eyesight restored, and his ID was back in his wallet, along with five thousand colonial dollars.

Vaughan and Reineck had not exaggerated: Scorpio had suffered such losses in Mostov, Jarrat saw an edge of desperation in the faces he began to study at once. This was a bad time to recruit, with NARC insystem and nobody willing to run risks, yet they were so badly wounded, they had to hire locally or ship in pros from other colonies, which would take too long.

The irony was odd, Jarrat thought: Jack Brogan's pigheadedness over Tok and Mostov that night had rendered Scorpio vulnerable, possibly for the first time in the syndicate's history. Its soft underbelly was showing, and even the mogul in command was compelled to take calculated risks. The Starfleet inquiry would take this into account when they passed judgment on Brogan, even though dumb luck was at the core of the event.

With a light breakfast under his belt, Jarrat took the elevators down from the executive levels to the offices where the company's legitimate business was done. And there, the tiger began to prowl. By noon, when the Buran-throb in his skull was no more than a nuisance, he knew every face in the building, and most of the voices.

He stalked his territory, conscious with every stride that he was hunting. And prey was far from difficult to find. Perhaps Jarrat was just lucky once again, but if he spent a month working with these people, he would find no better game than he stumbled over in the bullpen, the common office where everyone landed sooner or later, because the archive terminals, the coffee machines and autochefs were there.

The man was a basket case. His name was Lindgren, he was Thule born and bred, and he was killing himself slowly on a steady diet of vodka, junk food and Gryphon. He was somewhere in his mid-thirties, with winter-pale skin, worried brown eyes, bronze-blond hair tied back in a short ponytail, and his permanent scowl was wearing grooves in his face. He lived in east Kansai, just a short hop from his job in Michiko Aurora's offices, which filled the top ten levels of the tall, broad Wisting Company building.

Chuck Lindgren was an accountant with a problem, and drinking himself legless most nights was not doing anything to help. The scuttlebutt was, he was so far out of his depth in *something*, he was alive and at liberty by the skin of his teeth, though no one among the office staff knew exactly what Lindgren was drowning in.

Jarrat had never trusted office scuttlebutt far, but Lindgren was an irresistible case. He lived in a perpetual gray-blue funk, depressed, anxious, chain smoking and hungover. And he had been with Michiko Aurora so long, no one noticed if he crashed at the office, took his work home, slept on the couch all day or vanished for hours. The work was done right, on time. Beyond this, no one cared how Lindgren did it.

The Wisting building towered over Kansai, Tok and the blackened ruins of Mostov. From the roof, Jarrat could see the devastation, where fresh snow did not hide the scars of the firestorm. The whole zone was cordoned off. Early plans were for the site to be cleared completely and a single structure like Inquanoc to be built there: a whole city in a single building, an architectural fantasy riding grav-resist, home to a quarter-million people. The structure would be named Mostov as a memorial to the old city, and construction quotes ran easily into ten figures.

Michiko Aurora stood to profit vastly from the Mostov disaster, and Jarrat perceived something immoral about the deal, though it was entirely legal. No matter what else Leo Michiko could be accused of, he had not destroyed Mostov. He was an opportunist, but no court would convict him for this.

He owned The Voice which had interrogated Max Tyler out of the darkness. Jarrat knew this now. He had not quite recognized Michiko's voice at the time, but the accent he had found halfway familiar was the drawl of Marsport; the person Michiko's voice had reminded him of was Kip Reardon. The *Athena's* CMO was from somewhere close to the Chryse region, and even after many years away, much of the drawl remained.

Most mornings, work stopped for ten or fifteen minutes when Leo Michiko's face appeared on CRTs throughout the top ten levels of the Wisting Company building. He reported on business, share prices, contracts and bids, and went on to exhort and admonish the army of his legit employees. Jarrat knew The Voice at once, and studied the screen intently.

So this was Michiko. He was certainly Eurasian, with the honey-gold skin and almond eyes, black hair with brown highlights, and fine features which might otherwise be Greek or Italian. He was good looking, and he knew it. He traded on his charisma. Jarrat saw why the majority of the people working in these offices were infatuated with him.

So why did Chuck Lindgren wear a face sour as month-old milk when he watched the morning address? Jarrat might not have noticed Lindgren, but the mobile smog bank was a pace behind him and whatever the man was smoking irritated the sinuses. Jarrat's head was still throbbing faintly, but he had slept six hours after the Buran ride and the effects were spent. He had probably sacrificed a million brain cells, but he liked to believe he had them to spare.

He wrinkled his nose on the acrid smoke and was about to tell Lindgren to go away, watch some other monitor. The look of sheer hatred on the accountant's face made him swallow the words. He stepped aside to make space for Lindgren and his smoke, and divided his attention between the screen and the man beside him.

When Michiko finished his address, Jarrat turned, parked his buttocks on the desk beside the monitor, and gave Lindgren a speculative look. "So, who'd he kill?"

The man jumped halfway out of his skin. "What?"

"Michiko." Jarrat nodded at the monitor. "He wasted your lover? Your father? Your kid?"

"I don't know what you mean." Lindgren took a long drag on the smoke and squeezed his eyes shut.

"You should quit," Jarrat advised, "or switch to something harmless. So what's your beef with Michiko?"

Color leached out of Lindgren's face. "You saw?"

"Of course I bloody saw!" Jarrat gave him a brash grin. "If looks could kill, he'd be writhing in agony. What'd Leo Michiko do to you, if he didn't blow away your nearest and dearest?"

With a muttered curse Lindgren subsided into a chair and rubbed his face with both hands. "It's none of your business, Tyler."

"Suit yourself," Jarrat said easily. "Just trying to be sociable. You looked like you could use a friend."

And he deliberately started to move away. Before he had made it further than his feet, Lindgren said hoarsely, "You're right. I'm sorry, Max. I'm being a sonofabitch. I do that. My ex used to say I drive everybody away." He tossed the cigarette butt in the direction of a waste chute surrounded with similar litter. This one also missed. He looked up at Jarrat with a face like a kicked puppy. "It's hard. The Michiko thing."

"Something you can't talk about?" Jarrat guessed. And he felt the *bite*, the way a fish took the bait and the line wriggled, just before it went tight and the reel started to spin over.

Deep cover work was like this. You kept a low profile long enough to size up every individual within reach. It could take days, even a month to track down your connection, but eventually you staked out the weak link, and in-

variably you found one. The baited hook was cast, then you hoped like hell and stayed on your toes.

"You want to get out of here?" he asked unexpectedly.

The change of pace threw Lindgren off balance, which Jarrat had intended. "Can't. I gotta work."

"Do it later," Jarrat suggested. "Liz Kossof told me you take your work home with you half the time." His brows rose. "Means you don't have anybody back there waiting for you. Right?"

Lindgren blinked at him. "Liz talks way too much. But yeah, okay, Tyler, I live alone."

Because he was depressive, and miserable company, and Gryphon abuse did not help. The come-down was always rough on all concerned. Jarrat pasted on a smile. "So do the work at home, tonight. Take a break, Chuck, you need it. And as it happens, I have to make a flight over to Inquanoc in about ten minutes. Come along for the ride. They tell me it's a hell of a sight."

"I —" Lindgren hesitated. "Okay, I will. Thanks." He hoisted himself to his feet with a grunt.

He was terminally out of shape, and only the vodka put color into his cheeks. Liz Kossof had worked here even longer than Lindgren. She knew both Lindgren and his ex, an engineer called Craig who had once worked for Wisting; and she had no hesitation about sharing a man's deepest secrets. Jarrat kept this in mind and said nothing about Max Tyler unless Michiko already knew it.

"Why?" Lindgren asked as Jarrat helped himself to water from the cooler in the corner of the bullpen.

"Why what?" He offered Lindgren a paper cup, but the man shook his head and plodded to the coffee machine instead.

"I don't understand why you should give a shit about me," Lindgren said moodily. "Nobody else does."

The self-doubt made Jarrat wince. "I'm the new kid on the block, you know. Maybe I need a friend. You think of that?"

"You?" Lindgren gaped at him. "You're tall and *built*, with the hair and the eyes, and the buns." He shot a glance at Jarrat's rump and his Adam's apple bobbed. "Uh, sorry."

Jarrat laughed. "For paying me a compliment?"

"I, uh, I'm not coming on to you or anything," Lindgren said too fast, stumbling over the guilty words.

"Hey, man, relax." Max Tyler drained the paper cup and jerked a thumb back over his shoulder toward the lifts, across the wide, common office area where ten assorted secretaries, receptionists and company officers had gathered. "You want to come for a ride or not? I'm on a schedule, Chuck. How about this. You ride along, and I'll let you buy me lunch in Inquanoc. You know a good place?"

The man was eager. "You like seafood? I know a place with the best seafood this side of Maui. They fly it in fresh overnight, every night, and the wine comes in from Darwin's World. They have a real, genuine Hoyer Valley chardonnay, two years old ... and I'm babbling, aren't I?"

"Does it matter if you are?" Max Tyler tapped his chrono. "Grab your gear, Chuck. Let's get the hell out of this place."

They were in the lift, on the way up to the executive hangar where a company plane was being prepped, when Lindgren observed, "You don't much like working for Michiko."

"Depends," Jarrat said carefully. "If you mean working for Michiko Aurora, I can live without it. I don't like offices. I might show up on the payroll as a shuttle pilot, but I didn't sign on as a company man. I kind of ... work for Michiko. If you take my meaning." He gave Lindgren a wink and waited.

Several moments passed before Lindgren's eyes widened, and Jarrat felt the bait be taken. Chuck Lindgren had swallowed the hook. His face was beaded with sweat as he stepped away into the corner of the lift car and pressed against the brushed-metal wall.

"I knew it couldn't be this easy." His breath was short. "It couldn't be just lunch in Inquanoc, and maybe a few drinks, and get friendly later tonight. I just knew it had to be something bad."

"Like what?" The lift opened onto the wide, breezy expanse of a hangar housing a prince's ransom in aircraft. The cold was sudden and striking, but Jarrat ignored it. He turned his back on Lindgren and headed for his ride. "Me? I'm just looking forward to the seafood. I don't know squat about your business, Chuck. I'm a new guy in your ballpark, remember. They don't tell me their good stuff, not yet."

Footsteps shuffled behind him. Lindgren was following, but keeping well back. "You mean, you're not going to grease me?"

"Say what?" Jarrat stopped, halfway to an electric-blue and white Rand Cobra with customized airfoils.

The engine cowl was hazed with heat. It was ready to go, and without even looking he knew what was under the cargo hatch. There would be enough pure Angel to send the population of Inquanoc into orbit and keep them there for weeks. Jarrat had been on the job just a day — twenty hours, on this ball of rock and ice — and he had known he would score a dangerous assignment even before the ache in his head had properly cleared. He was on probation, and he was watched. Screw this up, and he was dead meat. The run to Inquanoc was potentially dangerous with Tac on the prowl, and NARC could be anywhere. Max Tyler was presently expendable.

"Chuck, I've got no bloody idea what you're talking about," Jarrat said in an exasperated voice. "I just fly for Michiko. Not for the company ... for the man. For the *other*, if you know what I mean. And if you don't know, then don't ask! I just thought, you're being so freaky, you must know what goes on behind the scenes here."

The spiel was another calculated risk, but it was a good one. If Jarrat was wrong, little harm could come of it. Lindgren would find himself taking an unscheduled vacation on the carrier, while Stoney explained to him how he had almost been set up by a NARC. But years in this work had endowed Jarrat with a fox-keen sixth sense. He did not believe he had misread Lindgren.

Brown eyes blinked dazedly at him, and Lindgren forced a laugh. "Jesus Christ, I thought you were going to toss me off the balcony."

"You thought I conned you up here to kill you?" Jarrat walked on to the Rand. The left gullwing was up. He reached in and popped the other side. "What for? What the hell did you do to Michiko?" He gave Lindgren a crooked grin. "You shag the wrong one of his Companions? Who'd you get pregnant? You're just an accountant!"

"Just," Lindgren said gloomily. He hesitated, a pace short of the Rand. "I'm being a fool. I shouldn't trust you."

"Look, maybe Michiko does want you in a hole in the ground," Max Tyler said evenly, "but nobody told me about it. If the order's come down from on high, it wasn't given to me. I'm just doing the regular run to Inquanoc ... and bumming lunch on the company. Or at least on you. If you're game, get in. If not, scram. You're making me late."

The left gullwing was already coming down, and Jarrat's eyes skimmed the control surfaces. He gave the jets a nudge, listened to the howl, and ran up his straps. Lindgren was still dickering on the other side of the Rand, and Jarrat waved him off.

"Another time! Back off, man, or the jets'll roast you. Gotta go!"

On an impulse, Lindgren flopped into the bucket seat with a grunt and fumbled with the harness. The gullwing dropped smoothly, and as it locked Jarrat folded the struts and let the Cobra float. He had no need to call for take-off clearance: the Rand's AI was already talking to Wisting Air Traffic, and his course and altitude had popped up on the palm-sized screen recessed into the dashboard console.

Moments later the Rand was out over Kansai, headed for Argyll and up, over the mountains into the northeast. They would cross Vancouver Sound at the apex of the Amundsen Sea, and follow the craggy line of the Falkland Hills to Inquanoc.

For some time Lindgren hugged himself and was silent, and then his voice rasped as he said, "You shouldn't fall in with me. When the sword of fucking Damocles falls, it could take your head off as well."

"Yeah?" Jarrat made a minor course correction. "Well, it's just as dumb falling in with me. What d'you think I'm running over to Inquanoc, bagels?" He chuckled. "Let me tell you, Chuck: if a Tactical squad pulls us over in the next half hour, you and me are going to be sharing a cell on the way to the shooting gallery."

"You're — we're carrying?" Lindgren's voice rose an octave.

"Course we are. Five, maybe eight kilos," Max Tyler said unconcernedly. "Pure stuff, none of your cut rubbish." He turned a brilliant smile on Lindgren. "The Big A. You thought we were running Buran? There's no profit in Buran. Every man and his uncle's in the trade."

A little more color had seeped out of Lindgren's face. "I guessed," he admitted. "It's the only reason a buck like you would be doing this. Top jet-jocks don't sign with an architectural design company."

"They don't?" Jarrat looked sidelong at the miserable Lindgren. "Hey, you still going to buy me lunch? Relax! There's no reason why Tactical should pull us over."

"There was no reason why Vaughan and Reineck should've been busted,

but they were," Lindgren muttered under the engine noise. "One minute Tac didn't know who they were, the next, NARC was on 'em." He shook his head savagely. "Nobody's going to be safe soon."

Jarrat's ears would have swiveled if he were a cat. With a sharp gesture he turned the Cobra over to the automatics and twisted in the seat to face Lindgren. All trace of banter was gone from his voice. "How the hell do you know? You're just an accountant for Michiko Aurora. What goes on behind the scenes isn't your business."

"And it *is* yours?" Lindgren had screwed up his courage. "Jesus! You work for Scorpio. I need my brains examined. I'm just thinking with my balls again. And they're going to get me deep fried."

"How about you answer what I asked you?" Jarrat's tone hardened. "I'm waiting, Lindgren. I didn't get into this game of Michiko's to wind up fish food. I thought you knew the score."

"I — I do," Lindgren stammered. "But not like you think."

"You're not on the Scorpio payroll?" Jarrat rasped.

"No! But I know things." Lindgren hugged himself again and looked away. "It's like I said before. When the sword of Damocles falls, it'll take my head off at the knees. You don't want to know me, Max. I got bad luck. I *am* bad luck. You're flying pure, uncut shit for ol' Leo? Fine. Good for you, more power to you. But I can still get you wasted."

"What the hell," Max Tyler demanded, "are you talking about?"

But Lindgren's mouth sealed into a stubborn line. "You don't want to know. Leave it alone, Max. Just let me buy you lunch, then get me back to work and don't hang around me anymore."

"Have it your way," Jarrat said tersely. He could afford to let Lindgren stew. The story would come out in its own good time.

The weather was growing complex in the east. The Cobra headed into light clouds and moderate headwinds as it left behind the urban tangle of Thule's coastline. Maui crept by below, and Jarrat took a fresh navigation fix on the radio beacons up by the broken caldera of Monte del Angelo. He had taken the Cobra off automatics as they crossed the Amundsen Sea, and now jinked the nose around in a minor course correction as he turned northeast, over Vancouver Sound. Lindgren remained silent, surly, and Jarrat did not intrude on the man's self-imposed shadows.

He saw Inquanoc from a long way out, tiny on a green and white horizon of checkered alpine grasses and snow fields, and whistled. "Christ, what does Michiko need to screw around with Angel for, when he can design this kind of thing?" Jarrat did not have to feign the amazement. He had seen images of Inquanoc, but nothing compared with the reality. He had seen nothing like it on forty worlds.

"If you only knew," Lindgren growled. He was sitting with his arms and legs tight-clenched and a thunderous grimace on his face. Jarrat could almost hear his teeth grinding as he glared at the spectacle of the city of Inquanoc. "Pretty, isn't it?" Cynicism drooled from every syllable.

'Pretty' was the last thing Jarrat would have said. Inquanoc was magnificent beyond an artist's imagination. It was built around a central, tapering

spire, a kilometer tall but only a tenth as thick at its widest part, and at four points, spiraling up the spire, spars reached out to the cardinal points like the branches of an impossible tree. Each branch was as long as two football fields, perhaps twenty meters thick, and to the branches were anchored crystal hab-spheres of every size, some large enough to house a town, others small enough to be the habitat for a single mansion.

The spire itself was patterned with vast viewports spilling colored light from offices, retail malls, holothaters, machine shops, hydroponic farms ... the industry and machinery supporting a city. Spread out at the foot of the pylon was a plascrete disk two kilometers in diameter and forty meters thick, with the spire at its hub. Set into the disk, Jarrat saw the aprons and taxiways of a regional airport, a road system, and everywhere, the teardrop shapes of entryways to an underground which must be as vast as the superstructure. The repulsion generators holding up the whole fantasy would be bunkered there, along with the city's air, water and waste cycling systems.

"It's incredible," Jarrat said honestly.

"Home to over a half-million lucky human souls," Lindgren said in the same cynical tones.

"Chuck, will you just quit your bitching?" Jarrat did not even glance at him. "Message received and understood, okay? You hate Michiko, you hate his company even though you work for it, you hate his structures, even though they pay salary good enough to keep you in a pad in midtown Thule, and you won't talk about it. If you're not going to make sense, don't talk at all, okay?"

He could feel the venomous glare eating into him as Lindgren growled, "If you only knew."

"I'm not likely to if you don't tell me," Max Tyler said tersely. "You know I'm only passing through. I never made any secret of it. I hate this freakin' ice-ball. I only came here to lie low while NARC trashed Chell, and with my luck, hey, whaddaya know? They're gonna trash Thule now. I told Vaughan and Reineck the truth: I'll take high-risk work for top pay, long enough to get the hell out — again."

"Where to?" Lindgren asked plaintively.

"Depends how much Michiko pays me, doesn't it? And what for, and how good his *special* security is," Jarrat said banteringly.

"I'm not kidding." Lindgren was watching the fantasy of Inquanoc as the Cobra swung around to come up on a private landing. "I want out, Maxie, before I get fed through a mulcher."

Maxie? Jarrat angled a glance at Lindgren. The man's mournful face was as plaintive as his voice. And his left hand crept out to rest on Jarrat's lean thigh. "Well, now," Max Tyler said, ruefully amused, "this changes a few things, doesn't it? Still, it all depends ... on if Michiko's security's good enough for me to get out of here without having my face plastered all over Aurora Tac's most-wanted pages. On if Michiko pays good enough, often enough, before NARC busts his ass. And they will, Chuck. You better be expecting it. Jesus God, they busted Equinox. You think Scorpio's going to do any better?"

The Cobra was cutting speed and drifting in like a feather, among the

'soap bubbles,' as Janssen called them. Jarrat could catch glimpses through the diamond glass pressure skins, and gave a low whistle as he saw tropical forests bright with exotic plants, white marble plantation houses and, in one medium-sized sphere, a town of filamentary apartment blocks which glittered like crystal chandeliers suspended from the crown of the globe, rather than sprouting from the base.

A clearance code broadcast automatically and the hatch of a private landing opened in the flank of a small sphere halfway up the spire. Jarrat took the Cobra into a small, dim hangar. He parked in the space where a light winked to guide him, and killed the jets. As the gullwings lifted he smelt gardens, felt a warm gale on his face. The cycling machines were returning the hangar to normal temperatures and pressures before an interior door opened.

"We uh, gotta deliver the, uh, stuff?" Lindgren asked.

"We just did." Jarrat nodded at the cargo hatch in the tail. "All we do now is get lost for an hour or two. I don't know the Inquanoc mule, and he wouldn't know me from a hole in the ground ... but he's got a set of keys to this car. It's safer if nobody knows nobody. You said something about buying me lunch."

The gardens Jarrat had smelt as the hangar blew back up to temperature were full of fruiting trees. Some were still in blossom, some already laden; many of them, Jarrat did not even recognize. Lindgren knew where he was going. He took the path coiling through the shrubs to the nearest transit terminal, twenty meters in a direct line from the sphere's pressure skin, but a good hundred-fifty meter hike. He was out of breath as Jarrat read the signage around the terminal, which welcomed travelers to Maitland. Each sphere was a city sector.

The transit system was not a pneumatic tube, but a flimsy monorail, where flocks of teardrop cars scudded in every direction on repulsion, guided by filaments, almost invisible against the diamond glass pressure skin. Cunning design made the interior of even the small spheres seem much larger than they were. The car sped up, over and around the skyline of Maitland, and Jarrat saw the whole sector with a glance.

Beyond the diamond glass, the air temperature was twelve below and a strong northeasterly was lifting powder snow and ice dust into miniature whirlwinds. Inside the spheres, the climate was subtropical across all of Inquanoc. Unlike every other city on Aurora, Inquanoc had no external component.

"You like it?" Lindgren asked acidly.

The transit car was slowing on approach to a building high enough to almost graze the inside of the sphere. Jarrat saw the bright signs of The Atlantic Restaurant, above and beside the landing. "Of course I like it! Who wouldn't? What I don't get is, why Michiko would get himself involved in the Angel trade, when he can do *this*."

Lindgren gave him a strange look, and when the car had bumped gently to a stop, he went ahead into the restaurant, where he seemed to know some of the staff. He still said nothing, but Jarrat would work on him. There was no rush yet, and he knew Lindgren was his connection. For the moment he

settled back to enjoy the wine, some of the best seafood in the colonies, and an astonishing view.

Green hills ran up to meet the pressure skin, their folds and in-curvations vastly increasing the surface area for woodland and wandering humans. Orchards in the north were still a blizzard of pink cherry blossom while, outside the diamond glass an ice storm was building.

The three escape pods from the Orion stood in the bays to the side of the gunship hangar. One was mangled almost beyond recognition. Shrapnel from the explosion had cut it in two, and if fugitives were inside, they were gone. A second was empty when it punched out, and Stone recognized the ploy: it was a diversion. If the Orion had possessed three crew members and twenty escape pods, the pilot would have blown them all.

The third pod contained a survivor, but he was so badly injured, Kip Reardon transferred him directly to the OR, and after two hours of surgery the man was sedated in a half-body brace. Stone had seen his scans, and the prognosis was dire.

He would live, but his spine was shattered when the escape capsule punched out. Its repulsion had failed, and soaring G-forces almost killed him. Fragments of bone, embedded in the main spinal cord, had partially severed the nerve in five places. Reardon had removed them and welded the vertebrae and the smashed limbs and ribs, but post-surgical scans indicated the gunrunner was dead as a fallen log from mid-chest down. He could breathe without the aid of a respirator, and his mended arms would function, but he would never walk again without biocyber prostheses, and Stone had heard all the stories. One lived with pain as a fact of life, and the odd semi-numbness of synthetic nerves. Clumsiness, breakdowns, delays getting spare parts, high repair costs, power cell failures ... security systems so sensitive, alarms brought armed guards when biocyber limbs tried to walk into a spaceport or government building.

He was in the Infirmary's ICU now. The sedation had worn off enough for the man to understand his condition. He was wide awake, on an IV which was feeding him painkillers to dull the edge of the agony in his arms and shoulders. Reardon had welded almost every bone, and the mends were still swollen. His fingers were sausage-thick and the arms lay unmoving on the sheet.

But his eyes were bright, shrewd. He knew he was heading for a thirty-year sojourn in a labor prison, and this gunrunner was by no means a kid. He was craggy, in his fifties or sixties. A career mercenary who should have gotten out into safer employment years ago. But by the same token he had the maturity to look Stone in the face and play the game by rules they both understood.

"You want to deal?" Stone offered.

The man's voice was a croak. "I might. What're you offering?"

"I can keep you out of a cell," Stone said carefully. "Right now there's an

amnesty deal on the table. It's Colonel Janssen's offer, not mine. Thule Tac, not NARC. But it'll protect you."

He had heard about it. News traveled fast via city bottom tom-toms, and must have spread like wildfire through both Michiko Aurora and Pete Denehy's PharmaTech. A flicker passed swiftly across the craggy features before the blue eyes narrowed. Stone could almost hear the processes of calculation.

"You're aboard a NARC carrier, but you're still in Aurora space," Stone said evenly. "Janssen's amnesty is unconditional. You were running guns, Oromon to Aurora. On whose contract?"

"Not so fast." The mercenary cleared his throat and grimaced as his bones and joints moved at all. "The way I heard it, Janssen's amnesty was for folks who had info about Scorpio. I don't fly for Scorpio. I know fuck-all about Angel. Janssen's deal does squat for me."

"It does." Stone paused as Harry Del stepped into the ICU. Reardon had gone off-shift, and the ward's only other occupant was an engine tech who had earthed a massive electrical discharge. Harry came closer, pulled up a chair, and studied the mercenary with interest. Stone chose his words very carefully. He did not want to put ideas into the man's head, words into his mouth. "We know exactly who, and where, Scorpio is," he said at last. "We know a hell of a lot more than you do, but we still need to nail down watertight proof that'll stand up in court against an assault from an Angelpack lawyer. Your testimony would at least *help* to provide it, and we know a good deal when we see one."

"I don't know nothing about Scorpio." The gunrunner's face twisted as pain assaulted him.

"Harry?" Stone asked softly.

"Truth." Del shuffled closer and set one hand on the man's numb leg. "He may be running guns, but not to a syndicate."

"Not directly, knowingly," Stone amended. He waited for the storm of pain to subside as drugs flooded the man's system. His eyes had dulled a little, and Stone asked clearly, "Put your testimony on record right here on the carrier. Tactical will guarantee your liberty and your safety. All we need to know is who you're flying for. And I should tell you, Doctor Del is an empath. He'll know if you lie. Guesswork and accusation won't get you out of the mess you're in."

"Neither will the truth, if it turns out my client ain't your man." The drugs had not dulled the mercenary's shrewdness. "I can give everything I've got, Captain, and still land on my ass in a cell for thirty years."

Stone took a deep breath. "All things are negotiable."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," Stone offered, "even if I'm wide of the mark, and your information doesn't directly involve Scorpio, I can still trade. Get your sentence cut to five or ten. I can also arrange for you to serve the time on Darwin's World, protected from the enemies you're going to make as soon as you trade with me. And I can ask Doctor Del to *heal* you, so you do your time and walk away on your own legs."

"Heal me?" The mercenary did not move his head on the pillow, but his eyes shifted to Del. "He said you're an empath."

"Also a healer," Harry said softly. He gave Stone a rueful glance. "One of the Rethan ... mutations." He did not say 'mutoid,' or 'queer,' but Stone saw the shadow in his eyes for a split second.

"I know about you." The gunrunner's eyes closed. For some time he breathed heavily, mechanically, and then he said, "I got nothing against your kind, Doc. The way I see it, the planet Rethan made you. If you were lab-designed, folks might have a reason for getting twitchy, but if you're gonna twitch every time you see something native to another planet, shit, you better run back to Earth and stay put."

Del gave Stone a curious half-smile. "As it happens, that's my case in a nutshell, Stoney." He gave the gunrunner a thoughtful look. "I can give you back your legs, man. What do I call you?"

"My name's Braith Germer." The gunrunner took a deep breath, trying not to expand his mended ribcage. "I been flying out of Oromon for three years, since we set up for business there."

"We?" Stone echoed.

The craggy face twisted into a parody of a grin. "Oh, no. You get only what you negotiate for, Captain. Don't you go assuming I'm about to betray my friends and kin. You didn't ask it, it wasn't part of no deal ... and you couldn't trade enough to put my mate and his kids inside."

"Fair enough, Germer." Stone looked down at Harry, and Del gave him a wry smile. "We already know there was a weapons cache on Oromon. When we get our hands on a few special items from the armory of your *client*, we'll find out where they came from. We know how they were transported ... I'm looking at one of the freight handlers right now. And the only loose end is the buyer. The contractor. Think about it, Germer. It's worth your legs, not to mention a functional dick and your liberty. Five years, safe under NARC's wing, is not so bad."

Germer was peering at Del. "You can do it? Fix me?"

"Oh, I can do it." Harry's right hand still rested on Germer's leg, and without the gunrunner's knowledge he had already explored many of the injuries. "It's no reflection on Doctor Reardon. He's one of the finest surgeons I know, but medical science still falls short. Where their art ends, mine begins. If you'll trust me, I'd like to do the work while you're still mildly sedated and getting painkillers. In a few hours you'll walk out of this Infirmary to get your own dinner in the mess hall."

"Not yet," Stone said sharply. "We get our part of the deal first, Germer. All I need is a name, and Harry's assurance you're telling the truth. When I hear it, I'll tell you how much I can do for you."

For a long, crackling moment Germer looked piercingly at him, and then he said, hoarse with pain, "PharmaTech. I've been arming Denehy's corporate army with a whole lot of toys Aurora won't let into 'civvy' hands in this colony. As if a corporate army's civvy."

"Under the law, it is," Stone told him. "Corporate armed forces are categorized as 'private sector security services,' and no colonial government will

let corporate armies have top-line military weapons systems legally.” Which only made armies like PharmaTech go underground, he admitted to himself. “And you’re out of a cell, Germer, under the articles of Colonel Janssen’s amnesty.”

“PharmaTech is Scorpio.” Germer’s eyes closed again, as if the lids were leaden. “Jesus H. Christ. I’ve been arming a fucking syndicate. Well, I can’t say I haven’t had my suspicions, but Denehy ... you know how it goes. He pays top-buck, dollars or credits, and you don’t look no further. Ask me no questions’n I won’t tell you no lies.”

“Speaking of which, Harry?” Stone prompted.

“The man’s on the level.” Del stood and shrugged his shoulders to loosen them. “The name doesn’t surprise me. I saw things, heard things, in Senator Brand’s house. I knew something was going on.”

“And Marcus Brand has to be at the core of it,” Stone added. He gave Germer a nod. “I’ll leave you in Doctor Del’s care, and I’ll inform Janssen she has another one to protect. You’re the second to provide building bricks for NARC’s case against PharmaTech.”

Del lifted a brow at him. “It’s still not enough, though. Is it? Germer only knows he was arming a corporate army with banned weapons. It doesn’t automatically mean PharmaTech is Scorpio. You’ll still have to prove the connection.”

He was right, but Stone was even then intent on Jarrat. He felt the buffet of an aircraft, knew Kevin was airborne ... he felt the lick of deep fascination and knew Jarrat was tracking something promising. “Give Kevin a chance. Unless I’m mistaken, he’s already onto something or someone. It’s a matter of time and patience now.” He clapped Del’s shoulder. “Fix the man, Harry. Let me know how it goes.”

As he left the ICU, Del was pulling his chair up to the head of Germer’s bed. Stone felt a shiver as his wayward memory took him back to the scenes in a dim, quiet room in the plantation house in the high valleys near Chandler and Bally. He would always be haunted, but they were not bad memories. Some of them were the best. He focused on Jarrat as he left Del and the gun-runner, and felt the sharp prickle of Kevin’s fascination; an unexpected lick of humor — a coil of annoyance. Jarrat’s moods were quicksilver, sometimes unpredictable, but today Stone was unaware of any anxiety or misgivings. Scorpio had accepted him into their ranks, and if the sensations of flight were any indication, he was already working.

“Long time, no see, Stoney. Or do I have to say *Captain* now?”

The familiar voice took Stone by surprise and he tugged himself away from Jarrat’s feelings with an effort. Tall, wide-shouldered, with the work-callused hands and sometimes disconcertingly direct eyes, she fit right in. She was comfortable in the blue-green NARC flightcrew fatigues and soft-soled boots. The Blue Raven unit badge was already on her shoulder. The NARC-*Athena* insignia was on her collar, along with lieutenant’s flags, and the name of E.K. LANG.

The tender *Miranda* had docked late last night, shiptime, and this morning Evelyn Lang was due to go on standby with the rest of Cronin’s company.

She looked tired — adjusting to the new time zone, Stone thought. Hopping from ship to ship between systems, fatigue was unavoidable.

“Don’t stand on ceremony, Eve.” He offered his hand. “Welcome aboard. It’s damned good to have you with us.”

“It’s even better to be here. Just a little weird, still. Give me a few days.” Lang clasped his wrist, and gestured with the datacube in her left hand. “I’m only swinging by the Infirmary to give your CMO my med files. Central’s scans were thorough. Turns out, I’m healthy.”

He appreciated the dry humor. “How’s NARC treating you?”

“Good. It’s a world apart from the military, Ston—Captain.” She shook her head. “It’ll take me a while to get used to the rank thing.”

“Forget the ‘Captain.’ We go back way too far.” He glanced at his chrono. “You got time for breakfast before you check in with Gil’s crew? Leave the cube on Doc Reardon’s desk. He was in the OR till late, you won’t see him around here till noon.”

“I have a half-hour, unless the ops room puts us on launch alert out of the blue.” She was on her way to the surgeon’s desk when she saw Harry Del through the observation window in the ICU. “Hey, Harry’s aboard! I thought he was still on Darwin’s.”

For a few moments Stone watched the healer work on Braith Germer. “He halfway quit NARC. Central always asks a lot. Sometimes they ask too much, and Harry got so pissed off, he took a case here on Aurora. Turned out, he blundered right into our business.” He gestured at the cryogen store. “His patient is a kid in a tank as old as God. I imagine he’ll tell you the whole story over coffee, when he gets through with this guy, Germer.” She had seen Harry work more often than Stone had. “Yesterday’s gunrunner,” Stone told her, “becomes today’s informant, and he’s damned lucky Harry’s aboard. Breakfast?”

The officers’ mess was quiet at this hour, right on shift-change. Stone chose the coffee, pancakes and syrup, and Lang punched for croissants and three kinds of preserves. They had taken a table in the corner opposite the bank of autochefs when she asked, “So where’s Kevin? I looked for him when I got in, but they said he was ‘on the job.’” She buried her nose in the mug. “Cryptic. NARC code, is it?”

“No.” Stone was amused. “Kevin’s on the job ... deep cover. He went into Scorpio a couple of days ago.”

The mug froze at her lips. She blinked at him over the rim. “The way he went into Death’s Head?”

“The way I went into Equinox.” Stone raised his own mug and saluted her with it. “This *is* the job, Eve.”

She gave an animated shudder. “Makes me glad I’m just a pilot.”

“Just?” He shook his head. “There’s no ‘just’ about it. The gunship pilots do a hell of a job. Don’t underestimate the risks.”

“I don’t.” She sat back, chewing mechanically, and regarded him soberly. “I don’t pretend to know how you do the deep cover stuff. Like everyone else, I’m just glad you do.”

“No one ever said it was easy,” Stone admitted.

"But ..." Lang gestured vaguely. "Couldn't you send in someone else? Someone who's, well, expendable, I suppose."

"Sometimes it would be possible," Stone admitted. "But a lot of the time whoever's buried in deep cover has to make decisions affecting the department, the colony, the law, perhaps thousands of lives. Those are command rank decisions. You'll be absolutely on your own, you can't call home to ask for authorization before you endanger ten thousand civvies or get into some wild scheme where your failure will 'compromise the integrity of the department.' Unquote." He paused to consider his job. "The point often comes when an agent without the rank has to walk away for want of the authority to make the decisions. Like I said, it's not easy ... and to a point, command rank officers *are* expendable, Eve."

"You're kidding me," she whispered.

"We're young enough to be innovative and take the kind of risks older, wiser heads wouldn't consider." Stone chuckled. "Kevin and me? We've survived longer at this rank than most others. And don't underestimate your own job. You're covering for Tanya Reynolds while she heads for home to take care of some domestic wrangle, and you know they're dumping you in the deep-end, with the elite descant unit."

"I met Tan last night, and Colonel Archer. They were playing poker with some of the techs." Evelyn cradled her coffee. "Tan's headed back on the *Miranda*. Fast-track to Darwin's, with a ticket on the next clipper back 'home.' If you call Earth home."

"Matter of fact, I do," Stone said with wry humor. "Have you heard of a place called London? Big, big city."

But Lang's dark-blond head shook. "I'm Rethan bred and born. First time I was ever offworld, it was to go to war. My tour on Sheal." She mocked herself with a lopsided grin. "I don't know much about Earth. If I tell you the truth, I cut a lot of history classes."

"Try and make the trip some day," Stone suggested. "Some of the colonies are a lot more exotic, but the new environments are still so artificial, the terraformed worlds don't have the variety you see on Earth."

"Rethan didn't need much terraforming," Evelyn said wistfully. "We had the good climate, the water, air, simple life forms. Plants and animals from Earth were right at home." She drained her mug. "The people, too. Speaking of whom, old Art Pedley sends his best. He's minding the store while I'm away. He has a couple of ne'er-do-well nephews who just walked into decent jobs, filling in for me and Simon."

"And Simon?"

Lang made a face. "He's grown up a lot in the last few months. God knows, there was space for improvement. The hit on our place shook him up, taught him you can be a statistic in an Angel war without ever once going out and looking for trouble." Her face darkened and she stopped.

She did not say, 'like Stevie.' She did not need to. Stone heard the words. He reached across the table and laid his hand on hers. "Signing with NARC is the best memorial a kid brother could have. Helen Archer came over from Starfleet when she lost her son. Curt Gable transferred when he watched his

kid sister cremated. You're in good company, Eve. These are good people, they'll make you welcome."

"They already have." Eve Lang was looking at the time. "Art and his brother's kids are taking care of Roadrunner, and Simon headed out for college at last. I'd given up on him. You and Kevin gave him a good scare, and that bastard Assante finished the job. You might —"

"Ops room, looking for Cap Stone." Petrov's voice on the comm.

"Give me a moment." Stone took his coffee to the comm terminal in the rear corner of the mess. "What's cooking, Mischa?"

Framed in the CRT, Petrov's thick face was annoyed. "There's a call for you, Stoney, coming in via Thule Tac. It's that bloody Quinn woman from GlobalNet, with some data you or Jarrat wanted, and she won't talk to me."

- The Russian was so furious, Stone lifted a hand to conceal a smile. "Put her on hold. I'll be there in five." The CRT returned to routine data, and Stone gave Lang an apologetic look. "Duty calls. I did ask Arial Quinn to trade data. It's coming in late, but we need it."

"The Blue Ravens are on standby anyway." Evelyn was on her feet, and swiped up the last croissant as she headed out. "Talk to you later, Stoney. Let me know how Kevin is." She gave him a crooked grin which mocked herself. "I guess I have a vested interest in him."

She was on her way to the gunship's ready room, where the flight crew, descant troops, armorers and techs gathered to pass the time until they were placed on alert. With luck, they would not launch on this shift. If the city streets remained at rest, the Blue Ravens might fly a routine training or test flight, and Lang would 'get her feet wet' without heading into danger's way.

The ops room was idling. The carrier's Executive Officer had just come on-shift and was still yawning over the night's running data. Stone glanced at the CRTs long enough to see that Budweisser had spent the night working with the techs and heavy machinery shuttled over from the *Miranda*. Another ignition test on Number Two reactor was scheduled for 11:00 this morning.

Petrov gestured with a mug, at the workstation beside his own. "She's on hold. You want coffee?"

"No. Thanks, Mischa." Stone pulled up a chair.

"Anything from Jarrat?" Petrov returned to his review of the night's bulk data.

"Nothing but good feelings," Stone reported. "The kid's lucky, he always was." He clicked the incoming call through to his CRT, and Arial Quinn's face appeared.

The GlobalNet journalist was heavily made-up and yawning animatedly, smoking with one hand and cradling a wine flute in the other, and if she was wearing anything but ochre-toned, Maori-design body paint was doubtful. She had been at a serious all-nighter.

"Stone." She peered at her own screen. "Who's the dickhead answering your phone?"

He cleared his throat noisily to abort a chuckle which would surely have rubbed Petrov the wrong way. "What's this about, Quinn?"

"You wanted to trade." She took a drag on the cigarette and her voice

roughened. "And I want my data, and my gear. I finally nailed my editor down for long enough to negotiate. It took a while longer than I'd figured. Rashevsky's been out of town. Over on Maui with some bimbo, if you want to know."

"You have data for me?" Stone had less than no interest in Matt Rashevsky's movements.

"All the dirt I could find on Senator Cassius Brand," Quinn told him, "and the folks associated with him, socially, politically, business, the works. His kid, the kid's momma, Denehy, the lot. It was one hell of a file-search. I turned the GlobalNet archive upside down and shook out the dust. You want the package, riding this channel?"

"Ready." Stone opened a datastream. "Go for it."

She hesitated. "I want my footage from Stavanger."

"You got it," Stone assured her.

"And my gear," she added challengingly.

"Everything legal." Stone gave her a hard look. "The rest's down to Matt Rashevsky and his paperwork. If he can come up with the documents, he can have his surveillance gear. If not, he'll be lucky if he doesn't get busted."

Arial Quinn grinned broadly, showing too many teeth. "I'd like to see it. The man's a bastard."

The data was streaming into Stone's cache, and there was a lot of it. He caught fractional seconds of video, audio, images, text. Even at high speed the package took almost a half-minute to upload before Stone said, "Got it, Quinn. You want your Stavanger vid as raw data, or you want the physical cube?"

"The cube," Quinn said without hesitation. "GlobalNet gets a lot of eavesdroppers, and they're using the same gear you confiscated from me. I don't like to transmit anything critical."

"And the data you just sent to me?"

She answered with an eloquent shrug. "Ancient history. I told you, I knocked a tonne of dust out of the archive to find this stuff. It was all broadcast or published so long ago, nobody but NARC'd be interested."

"All right." Stone stood back from the CRT. "I'll send the cube to your offices in Kansai. Thanks for your time, Quinn."

"Thanks for my cube, Stone," she barked, and hung up.

On the other side of the CRT, Petrov lifted a finger at the screen, and Stone permitted a chuckle. "She's a hard nut."

"She's a queen bitch," Petrov growled. "The data better be worth the trade, not to mention the aggravation!"

Stone was thinking the same thing, and as he settled to run the package Petrov took a call from Thule Tactical. He heard the words 'narco legislation,' and 'riot in Zabrisky Mall,' and his memory jogged. Today was the date set for the public debate in the citizens' open forum. A major scene was predictable.

Moments later an amber light winked on the flight status board. Blue Raven had just gone on launch alert, and Stone gave a thought to Eve Lang as he began to sift and dig through Quinn's data. This was as good a time as any to go hands-on.

A light snow was falling through the floodlights from the crown of the Chow-Ressmeyer building in south Kansai. Chuck Lindgren's apartment was on an inexpensive level, close enough to the hangars and garages for the floor and walls to vibrate with the engine noise of the building's through-traffic. Jarrat found it annoying, but Lindgren had lived here too long to even notice. And he was more than half drunk, which also dulled him, made him infinitely manipulable.

The apartment was *ordinary*. A few genuine antiques of Earth's Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries were overpowered by a flock of garish threedees which left no doubt as to where Lindgren's tastes lay. The nudes were in poor taste, very male, very raunchy. Jarrat had examined them as Lindgren's lights came up, and angled an arch glance at his host. Lindgren flushed, but he had been drinking steadily for the last hour. His blood alcohol level squashed any inhibition.

He was on his way to his evening's normal legless condition, and Jarrat had been encouraging him. The more he drank, the more his tongue loosened. His work was in his pocket, a single datacube that would be forgotten tonight. From the office, he had led Jarrat from one watering hole to another.

As they left the first, Jarrat switched to juice and held his hand out for the keys to Lindgren's battered Volvo Yasumi. It was a much older model than the Yasumi Jarrat had mildly vandalized in a city bottom parking lot just days before, and he was surprised. According to Kossof, the resident office loose-mouth at Michiko Aurora, Lindgren earned good money. Yet he drove a beater and he lived alone in a cheap apartment. Jarrat was curious.

The man flopped onto the couch under the a/c and balanced a glass precariously on his middle. "Lights, dim for godsakes," he yelled at the apartment's semi-smart system.

As Jarrat parked himself in a recliner opposite the windows, with their view of a veil of snow in the floodlights, the lamps shut back to a soft glow. A heavy tremor through the walls and floor announced the arrival of a car in the garage. Something in the kitchen vibrated loudly, and Jarrat swore. "Why don't you get yourself a decent place, Chuck?"

"Would if I could." Lindgren laid his forearm over his eyes. "Can't."

"Why, for godsakes?" Jarrat demanded. "You got the money."

"Haven't," Lindgren growled. He heaved a sigh. "Got fleeced in the divorce. I told you about my ex? Craig. He bolted awhile ago. Cleaned me out and shot through so fast, I was dizzy."

"He bolted because ...?" Jarrat prompted.

For some moments it seemed Lindgren would not answer, and then he sat up with an effort, leaned his elbows on his knees and looked long and hard at Jarrat out of dark, booze-dulled eyes. "Why? Why should you care a shit about me? Why should I tell you about me?" He was not drunk enough yet to lose his sense of priorities.

Jarrat shrugged. "I kinda like you. And if you're coming with me when I

get the hell off this ice-ball, how dumb would I be to get clipper tickets without knowing what I'm getting for my half of the deal?"

"Me?" Lindgren echoed disbelievingly. "You like *me*?"

"Why should you be so surprised?" Jarrat reached over and helped himself to a shot of vodka.

"But ..." Lindgren gestured vaguely at the perfect bodies in the lewd, garish threedees. "You can have the Companions." He gulped. "The, uh, Scorpio Companions. Michiko's houses are full of 'em."

"Like Mavvik's palace," Jarrat agreed. He settled into the depths of the recliner and lifted his boots onto the coffee table between himself and Lindgren. "Y'know, Chuck, I never cared for Companions. I've known a few, but how d'you ever know if they're on the level? They could hate you, you'd never know it. You know what I'm saying? Like Reineck. Her ass has been on the market for so long, I'd be just another customer, and she's had thousands. She could *use* me, and then take a wedge of my money." He was remembering Reineck's stories of being with NARC men, and wished he could be sure he had never been caught in such scenes. He shook his head slowly. "I get off on being sure about who I'm with, and what he feels."

"But they're all drop-dead gorgeous," Lindgren said lamely.

"Gene-tweaked, augmented, freakin' fake," Jarrat added. "Not my scene, Chuck. Like Reineck." Like Jesse Lawrence and Lee, come to that; but both Jesse and Lee had found a way to be honest and decent in the midst of a difficult, often unpleasant trade ... and both of them, Jarrat reminded himself, were out of it now.

"Like Cameron Yih," Lindgren was saying in a growl. "Jeezuss, have you seen him? He's been so tweaked, it's not funny. They did something to him, I dunno what. You never saw a boner like it, and the collagen implants, tits like cherries, lips like ... like ..."

"Like I said, tweaked and faked," Jarrat said, as if Lindgren had just made his point for him. "Call me a pervo, but I prefer the natural man." He looked Lindgren over and nodded. "Of course, you could quit the smokes and drink a whole lot less."

"I'll think about it," Lindgren promised. He wore a deeply disturbed expression. "You're really leaving? When?"

"When Michiko's paid me enough to start over someplace safe!" Jarrat chuckled. "Could take a while. What's your worry? NARC?"

But Lindgren's tousled head wagged an emphatic negative. "Them? I don't got nothing to do with Angel."

"You were with me when I delivered."

"As a passenger," Lindgren argued. "I didn't know what was in your trunk, goddamn it! Not till it was too late."

"Like NARC's going to believe you?" Jarrat laughed cynically. "Think about it, Chuck. I'm bad company."

"You're also leaving," Lindgren added, "soon. And it can't be soon enough for me." He hesitated a moment longer and then appeared to fling caution to the winds. His eyes were wide, dark, desperate. "I have to get away, far away, before he finds out."

"Before who finds out what?" Jarrat's brow creased. This had to be the jackpot. He had been feeding booze into Lindgren for almost two hours. The man's legs seemed to be hollow, but eventually even Chuck had to succumb, and when he did, with the right massage the truth would come spilling out.

Lindgren's face creased into lines of agony. His hands clenched into his hair and tears leaked from beneath tight-squeezed eyelids. "I'm in such a mess! You shouldn't even be talking to me!"

"But I am." Jarrat moved over onto the couch and slid an arm over Lindgren's shoulders. "Too late now, Chuck. Can't go back. You have to tell me, so we both know what we're up against. Am I right?"

Every gram of the man's weight leaned into Jarrat's side. "You're right. Okay, Max. But don't blame me for what happens. When you're so deep in the shit you can't keep your head out, remember, I told you to get the hell away from me!"

"I'll remember," Max Tyler said dutifully. "So?"

"So ... Craig left me," Lindgren began, stumbling over every other syllable, "because I got involved. Because it's dangerous. Because you have to have shit for brains to do what I did. And when I'd done it, I couldn't undo it, and Craig couldn't live with it, and ... God, I'm in a mess." He heaved in a vast breath. His chest shuddered and his fingers clenched into Jarrat's knee. Jarrat waited, let him drag his thoughts into order and gather his courage, and at last Lindgren said, "You know what I do for Michiko Aurora?"

"You're an accountant," Jarrat said quietly.

"You know what it means?"

"Tax returns, refund claims, personal tax, income tax, corporate, payroll and provisional tax, budget structures, quotes and estimates?"

"More or less." Lindgren sat up and pressed his knuckles into his eyes. "But when you do it at top-level for Michiko himself, which I do, you have to have access to the security sectors of the computers. I, uh, I suppose I was eavesdropping one time. I was on the network and Michiko was running his private stuff in a model, a financial simulation. You know what that is?"

The truth was, the accountant had just lost Jarrat. Stone might have known. The family had money, and they controlled it with an iron fist, though since the 'bust-up' between Stoney and his parents so long ago, not a credit ever leaked down from that source. Stone could not possibly know what was being done with the family fortunes, but he had grown up in an environment where money was a fact of life.

"Financial simulation," Jarrat echoed. "I never even heard of it."

"I'd be surprised if you had." Lindgren was sounding tired. He had exhausted himself emotionally and the booze was hitting him hard now. "It's like a wargames sim, like a VR battlefield. But instead of the heroes and enemies being armies, planes, warriors, they're companies, projects, governments, new legislative measures. You follow? A guy like Michiko uses a financial model, a sim program, like a crystal ball. He plugs his info into it and lets it run forward through however much time. If he's good enough, he plugs in the political climate, insider info about his competitors in business, his creditors, everything. Even megatrends in advertising and fashion. What's *chic* in

building this year? What will the bozos on the street be *told* by the fashion gurus on GlobalNet to wear, and eat, and listen to, and live in, next year?"

"Damn," Jarrat said softly. He should have known it was something like this. "So Michiko had all his data plugged in, and he used the mainbrains to run this sim, because you'd need the power of the whole Ibex network to run the model fast enough."

"He got what he wanted out of it. He deleted the show behind him, but he forgot the AI, which'd only deleted the sim from *visible* memory ... why should he know the boring stuff?" Lindgren said philosophically. "You keep your drones handy for that." He tapped his own chest. "See, I knew something weird was going on, on the network, cuz I'd been plowing through a load of work at a good speed, and suddenly, *whump*. The network went dog-slow, dog-rough. Only time it ever happens is when some idiot's using the mainbrains to play VR games over the network. Which isn't legal, but they do it anyway, right?"

"I can imagine." Jarrat took a breath. Jackpot. "So, being terminally curious, you just had to stick your nose into places it shouldn't have been. And you saw...?"

Lindgren shivered. "Michiko deleted everything right behind him, but the man's not a computer freak. He's the best designing architect in the colonies, but he keeps a staff of menials to run the machines. Drones like me. No creativity in it, see? So he doesn't know how the memory cache on the new Ibex machines works."

"And you do." Not a question.

"Of course I bloody know. I worked with the Ibex techs to configure the network. So, being terminally nosy I poked into the network's ram-resident temps. That's how you recover stuff you've deleted in error. It's still there, not visible, but *viable*. The AI uses spare computer cycles to cache data. The whole system updates to holographic memory, cube memory, maybe once in a half-hour. That's when it purges dynamic memory, so if you're quick, and real smart, you can pull it all back."

"You pulled back Michiko's deleted files." Jarrat was impressed. It was enough to get Lindgren 'eliminated,' as Michiko liked to term it. He whistled. "When was this?"

"Ten weeks ago," Lindgren said miserably. "And I'd have bolted if I'd had the money. But Craig didn't leave me enough to get a ticket out *and* set up a new life. New ID and everything. He couldn't believe what I'd done, and he figured I was dead meat ... he didn't want to get dragged into it with me."

"Your partner figured, if he took off on his own, fast, he could claim he didn't know squat about it? Wise," Jarrat observed.

"Maybe he was," Lindgren admitted. "But he took everything that might have been his, gutted the bank accounts, canceled the credit cards and sold the car, took half the antiques ... just up and ran, and I don't even know where he is." Lindgren's face twisted. "I'm stuck in this shit-hole of a place, and I just *know* they're going to find me."

Jarrat frowned at him. "How? I'm not a computer freak either."

"Through the AI." Lindgren knuckled his eyes. "The techs come out from

Ibex to service the mainframes every four months, and when they do, they'll run the log. The whole access history, everything. I'd snuck into sectors where I wasn't supposed to be, Max, and I jiggled the AI to get it to spit back the ram-temps of Michiko's sim. And I, uh, exported it to a cube."

Jackpot indeed, Jarrat decided, though he understood why Lindgren was running scared. "You didn't quit Michiko Aurora and run?"

"No money to run with," Lindgren rasped. "I got a few weeks, yet, before the Ibex technicians get here. I'm working all the hours God sends, getting the credits together. I thought, I'll be out with maybe a few days to spare. But I can't afford the clipper, not if I'm going to set up a new ID, fake a set of credentials. They *cost*. Christ!"

"So what's your worry?" Jarrat rubbed the man's back soothingly. "Sounds like you've got it all worked out."

Dark brown eyes drilled bore-holes into him. "You don't know much about mainbrains, do you?"

"Not a lot," Jarrat admitted. In fact, he and Stone left the systems to the people who spoke their language. McKinnen, Budweisser and their departments. But he could guess Lindgren's point.

"If those machines even start to flutter," Lindgren was saying, "if they even suggest jacking around, the company calls in the techs. We're one of Ibex's best accounts, so the fix-it guys come out fast. They adjust the maintenance schedule back and perform the whole service." He hugged himself, rocking back and forth. "Man, I could be so screwed! I could be wasted so fast, I couldn't even scream for help, and it could happen any time, any day."

Little wonder he had been freaking for weeks. Jarrat took a deep breath. Lindgren was in agony now, waiting for Max Tyler to run too, and perhaps even run right to his boss and turn in the miscreant. Instead Jarrat frowned deeply at the man and asked, "You still have the datacube with Michiko's sim?"

"Yeah." Lindgren's voice shook. "It's the only thing I have to bargain with, isn't it? Gives me a bullet to shoot at Michiko, when his goons come after me."

"Me being one of the goons," Jarrat said dryly.

"No! Well, yes, I ... suppose." Lindgren scrunched his shoulders.

"Why did you make the copy?" Jarrat wondered.

"Because there was so much in the sim, it'd take hours to run it all, and I was interested. I didn't even know what I was looking at till I'd had a chance to run most of it," Lindgren said in his miserable tone, "and by then it was too late. Craig was right. He said I took everything we ever had and shredded it to confetti."

The departed ex-SO might have been right, but Jarrat's brain had shifted into high gear. "You might have an escape hatch, Chuck."

"A what?" Lindgren froze, in the act of reaching for the vodka.

"A get-out. A way to survive," Jarrat mused. "You remember the AI dumped into your mainbrains by Tactical a while ago? There's your escape hatch."

"The amnesty?" Lindgren's voice rose. "There was hell to pay when it happened, man! All your company jacks and your Scorpio goons running

around like decapitated chickens. They shut down the mainframes and isolated the AI, like that." He snapped his fingers. "Like a virus. But a lot of us got the message."

"You didn't contact Tactical?" Max Tyler's brows rose in surprise.

Lindgren blinked at him. "There's nothing specific in Michiko's sim about Scorpio. It doesn't name names, or dates, or places. It's full of *money*, and patterns. Shipments, schedules, routines. Okay, it talks about mules and bagmen and hush money, but these are the variables, man, not the values, you know what I mean?" Lindgren was exhausted, his voice growing flatter, duller by the moment. "The sim calculates shit-loads of these variables. Hundreds. It talks about raw stock, lab costs, pure-A, cutting costs and lab work, minders, goons, security, mules, dealers, money men. All this is plugged into just this *one little corner* of the sim, see? The rest is about politics and legislation, Tactical, senators — Christ, even the swing from summer down into winter! Turns out, they sell ten-dot-whatever percent more 'A' in winter than summer. Makes sense. This place is an open grave, eight months in the year." Now, Lindgren did reach for the vodka. Jarrat caught his wrist. "The rest of the sim was all business." He forced his mind back onto track. "It was stuff about Inquanoc and the spheres, design work, contracts, cost estimates ... cost of ores and machining, third-party licenses, construction tractors, repulsion generators, reactors — and not forgetting the bloody liability insurance, which really killed everything for Michiko."

"Liability insurance?" Jarrat echoed.

"The payout," Lindgren growled, "if and when a structure goes down. Crash and burn." He puffed out his cheeks. "They had a failure in the construction phase out yonder." He pointed vaguely, deeper into the Cygnus Colonies. "The Nielsen Lode, maybe sixty, eighty hours beyond the frontier. Freespace," he added helpfully.

Jarrat knew where it was. According to Colonel Janssen, the Michiko Aurora company had suffered badly in a deal gone wrong on a frontier mine, but apparently she had not been aware a sphere had 'failed.' As Lindgren said, crash and burn. No wonder Michiko was swimming in red ink. If Denehy had not come in with 'donations' and the support of PharmaTech, the company might have gone under right then, even before the circus on Oromon ... a circus which was the front, Jarrat was dead-sure, for a weapons smuggling operation.

"The sim even factored NARC into the model." Lindgren sighed, rambling now. "What would happen to business if NARC show up here, which they just did ... you know Leo's about four weeks from bankrupt?" He asked this as if the information were worthless.

"He's what?" Jarrat twisted to look at him.

"The costs blew way out after the Nielsen thing." Lindgren made a grab for the vodka and got it this time. "The company is kaput, Maxie. It's a dead duck, has been for eons. It's all in the simulation, projected forward over the next fiscal year. Leo uses the model like a crystal ball, like I said. Only thing keeping his company afloat is —"

"Scorpio bucks," Jarrat finished, "and the company is the perfect mask

for Michiko. He can hide in public, as a legit businessman. Tac can't get close enough to investigate him ... you know about the agents who tried? Janssen buried four of her best and brightest."

The color faded from Lindgren's cheeks and he chugged vodka like water. "I watched it happen, Max. Accidents. Most died in crashes, and falls, and malfunctions. Except the Scorpio people from upstairs were stalking around the bullpen with these smug faces, and the kids who died'd been *snooping*. You just knew they had to be Tac people. They stuck their noses in everywhere, asked all the wrong questions ... or do I mean the right questions? Too many, anyway. Enough to get a guy dumped off a parapet or caught in a garage fire." He was going down fast, starting to snore while still half awake. "Snooping's a dumb-ass thing to do 'round a guy like Michiko."

Snooping? Jarrat smiled wryly. "Wake up, Chuck. Wake up!"

"Huh?" Lindgren stirred with an effort. "Wha—?"

"You know your mainbrains better than anybody, short of the Ibex techs who installed them." Jarrat shook him by the shoulders. "Can you hack your way in, get access to the Scorpio files?"

The dark eyes widened. "Don't have to hack. Know the backdoor. Whad-aya wanna do that for?"

"Because," Jarrat growled, shaking him again, "if you beef up the financial simulation you stole, get the *values* to put into the variables ... name the names, fix the dates. You got your amnesty, kid. Witness protection, new ID, the bounty. A new start, after Scorpio goes down."

The idea seemed to yank Lindgren back from the brink of his drunken stupor. He licked his lips. "You gotta know the risks."

"Hey, I'll cover for you," Max Tyler offered.

"You would?" Lindgren slurred. "Why in ... nameogod?"

"Amnesty, bounty, witness protection," Jarrat said loudly. "I can get out the same way, Chuck. You and me both. Fresh start, on Tactical funding, with Janssen's blessing. You game? I'll help you."

The Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Dangerous."

"I told you, I'll cover for you. You worried about Michiko's goons? Hey, you've got a bloody good one of your own."

"Christ," Lindgren whispered, and it might have been a prayer.

"I'll get you out of there," Jarrat swore.

Lindgren blinked owlishly at him. "You're on, Maxie," he said, slurring every syllable. And he passed out so fast, Jarrat barely had time to catch the vodka before the bottle fell from his hand.

"Well, now ... I'd call that jackpot," Jarrat said to himself.

He plucked a throw-rug from the back of the couch and tossed it over Lindgren's legs. He had left the brown leather jacket by the door, and he shrugged into it on his way out of the odd apartment. Lindgren's keycards were in his wallet, and Jarrat took this too. Moments later he was in the lift, making the short vertical journey up to the garage where a battered Yasumi stood in an arctic draft.

As he left the apartment he opened a chink in the empathic shields, and chuckled. Stone was *there*. So close, Jarrat might have reached out and

touched him. The kick of fascination, the adrenaline surge of knowing he had almost cracked it, were so powerful, he had woken Stoney out of a sound sleep.

He cultivated a sense of urgency shot through with rueful humor as he stepped out of the elevator. Again, the signals would be confused but he and Stone had learned to interpret. From his partner, he felt a surge of affection, a certain mocking humor, a rush of something that might have been frustration. Jarrat permitted himself a grin and said softly, though Stone could not possibly perceive words, "Not long now. Feels like I'm halfway home."

Snow flurried in with every gust of the northeaster. The very tail of the ice storm Jarrat had seen building outside Inquanoc was hitting Thule now. The streets of midtown would be deserted, while city bottom hummed with nightlife and the spheres basked in their artificial, self-contained environments.

Yet Jarrat looked at Inquanoc now with different eyes. Crash and burn ... failure on the spheres ... ruinous liability insurance. Colonial law was a mirror of Earth's own law. Sometimes it was more open, flexible, but often it had to be tighter. If a sphere like Argentia or Barsoom were to fall out of the air, the disaster would be incalculable, and as soon as the screaming was over the colonial government would be looking at the builder to make amends.

The Volvo lifted off with a growl of untuned jets and the wheezing cough of reluctant repulsion. Jarrat nursed it into the air and out, into the veil of snow. He headed away from the spaceport for several minutes, waiting for the wide-scale interference from the massive radars to clear. As he found himself in the deserted air lanes over Hirosaki Park he lost altitude and drifted down into a parking lot where the Volvo shared the ice-rimed wasteland with only a dozen other cars.

Ice fog gathered around the air cycling machines serving the tropical house. The dome itself was opaque with crystals on the inside of the glass, and seemed to shine with a weird blue light. In fact it was reflecting the blue tree, picked out in neon, and the sign right below. The Jacaranda Restaurant was one of Cassius Brand's favorite haunts. He had met Harry Del here, what seemed a lifetime ago.

The cold was like a knife. Jarrat left the Yasumi and hurried across the smooth ice, which also reflected the neon and shone like a summer lake. He felt numbness invade his nose and cheeks before he had slithered into the foyer, and held his hands to the roasting draft from a space heater. The entryway was double-doored, and a recording asked patrons to 'Please wait for the warmth before proceeding.'

A vast, dim cavern welcomed him as he stepped inside. Most of the light was cast by life-size holomodels of tropical trees, the most outrageous of which was the jacaranda itself. The blue flowers were almost luminous, and as he looked closer an audio track informed him the tree was native to South Africa, but flourished also across Australia. It liked a hot, dry climate, and a grove of them could be viewed in the dome.

"A table for one, sir?" The desiccated voice belonged to a man of Cassius Brand's age, tall, robust, and bored out of his wits.

"One, for coffee and dessert," Jarrat told him. "Leave a menu. I have to make a call first."

"Table nine, with a view into the tropical house?"

"Fine." Jarrat was already intent on the payphones by the desk.

He called Tactical first and waited on hold through several minutes before Colonel Janssen appeared. Her eyes narrowed, looking for trouble in the scene behind him, but Jarrat waved her off and asked for a patch through to the carrier. He was back on hold, but the call went through quickly, and Curt Gable's face appeared.

"Hey, Jarrat! We were wondering when you'd remember to call home. How goes it, Cap?"

"Better than we'd hoped," Jarrat told him. "Stoney around?"

"I'll buzz him now. He's on downtime."

Stone was in his cabin, and took the call there. He had been asleep, and Jarrat groaned. Stone was drowsy, tousled, bare-chested. If it were anyone else on the line he would have selected voice-only, but he was as eager to see his partner's face as was Jarrat. "Hey," he said, a soft growl.

"Hey yourself," Jarrat murmured, close to the audio pickup. "You look good enough to eat. I woke you?"

"Maybe ten minutes ago. I thought I was dreaming at first. Knew something was happening ... but it feels good." Stone sat up and dragged a hand back through his short dark hair, which tousled it more than the pillow. "You find something?"

"I found plenty," Jarrat told him. "Record this, Stoney. I'll give you the digest version, but there's still a lot to tell."

He covered all points briefly and promised Stone the datacube Lindgren had kept as insurance. Stone whistled as Michiko's business unfolded in verbal shorthand, and as Jarrat fell silent he asked shrewdly, "When're you going to do it, Kevin?"

"Tomorrow," Jarrat said grimly. "Soon as I get Lindgren sobered up enough to do his job. Then, we're out."

"Time to set an extraction point," Stone decided.

The exact location for the pickup was always left floating until the agent in deep cover had examined his options. "How about right here?" Jarrat stepped aside to give Stone a view of the restaurant. "I'm at The Jacaranda in Hirosaki Park. You remember it?"

"We left Harry there," Stone mused. "Large open zones, low building line, and about the lowest population density we're going to find in inner Thule. It'll do. Tomorrow?"

"Probably early afternoon," Jarrat guessed, and chuckled. "Lindgren's going to wake up with the granddaddy of a vodka hangover. Monitor me from late morning, mate ... it should be dead easy, but just in case, launch me a gunship. You'll *fee*/when it's time. And put Gable in the air."

"I'll put Raven Leader in the air," Stone corrected with a certain bleakness, and Jarrat felt the twist of his belly. "It won't be a replay of Death's Head."

"Damned right, it won't," Jarrat said brashly. He took a breath as Stone's

emotions slammed into him hard, and groaned. "Stoney, don't do this to me. Not now. Trust me."

Stone sighed expressively. "I do. Tomorrow, Kevin."

"Tomorrow," Jarrat whispered. "Stoney ..." He shook himself as the power of Stone's deep feelings overwhelmed him.

"Hold that thought," Stone told him, gruff with affection.

The screen darkened and Jarrat took back Max Tyler's credit card. He blinked away Stone's face and focused on the dim cavern of the restaurant with an effort. Stone's feelings still rolled through him, more real than anything he saw or heard, and for the first time in a long while he struggled to lift the empathic shield.

"Absence," he told himself as he swiped up the menu and scanned it without really seeing it, "makes the heart grow fonder."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Early morning shadows were blue as glacier ice across Aspen's pristine snow. In the shelter of the vast crescent of the Appalachians, the high valley facing the Amundsen Sea was smog-free, with a small population, no industry, and a sky almost free of traffic.

One of Leo Michiko's four homes stood on several hectares of prime Aspen real estate. It dated from the early colonial period, a sprawling structure of triple-glazed windows and solar domes, faced in locally-quarried bluestone tiles and roofed in thick white shingles. Serried ranks of black spruce and fir surrounded it on three sides, and on the fourth it commanded a view of the town and, beyond, the vales bordering the ocean. In patches the snow had melted off, and constellations of tiny yellow alpine flowers turned eagerly to the sun.

The thunder of jets echoed back off the mountains as Stone fell in toward the house. A landing beam had turned on for him, and he saw a clear space below, between the side of the house and the dark trees. The VM 104 Corsair hovered at a hundred meters as he performed a thorough sweep with every scan system he possessed, and in the front cockpit Curt Gable made cynical noises.

"There's only maybe ten bodyguards in the house," he observed, "and every one of them armed."

ULF-resonance showed them clearly, sidearms and all. The same images were on Stone's screen, but he lifted his eyes from the comm relay terminal and studied the house visually. A vertical blind had opened; a man's face looked out, dimly-seen through the triple layers of glass.

"Seems we're expected." He swept in the wings and nudged the shuttle

down into a space just large enough to accommodate it. "Stay with the plane, Curt ... Raven Leader to Blue Raven gunship."

"Right here, Cap." The voice was low and even. Tanya Reynolds had already headed for home aboard the *Miranda*, and Evelyn Lang was on the Blue Raven gunship's flight deck. "Holding up at five thousand, four k's downrange of your location. Nothing moving groundside."

"Come closer," Stone told the pilot. "Let 'em see you. Get close enough to shake their windows, then pull out to five hundred, right over Michiko's front yard, and stay put."

"It'd be a pleasure." Lang chuckled darkly.

The night Assante hit her home in Ballyntyre was the first time she had actually butted heads with an Angel syndicate. She had neither forgotten nor forgiven and to her, Stone guessed, all syndicates were the same. Death's Head, Scorpio, it made no difference. She was hunting for a subtle kind of payback, and not merely for her kid brother.

The jets were whining down but as the canopy rose, rather than the startling quiet of the mountains Stone heard the incoming rumble of much bigger, much heavier engines. The gunship drove in from the south and Lang lost altitude steadily until it seemed the sensor probes and gunports along the keel would graze Michiko's roof.

Faces appeared at several windows, and the glass did vibrate. One of the faces belonged to Leo Michiko, and as Stone lifted himself out of the cockpit he saw the man's naked outrage at the intrusion. Michiko could be as furious as he liked, but he would know without any doubt, NARC had descended on Aspen in force. There would be no coup here today.

The cold was as fierce as the sky was blue. From the footwell Stone pulled a heavy silver-blue parka, and pulled it on over the shoulder holster of the Austin.44 before he climbed out of the cockpit.

He felt no misgivings, clambering down the side of the shuttle, hard-point to hard-point. He still wore a headset, and plugged into the loop as he stood back from the plane. "Reading me, Curt?"

"Five by five," Gable told him. "There's no trace of local jamming ... looks like they're going to be polite."

"Raven Leader to Blue Raven 6. Put four of your boys in the jump bay, Gil ... we're just playing it safe."

"We're already on standby, Cap," Cronin informed him.

"Wait for a go from Gable." Stone turned toward the house. "But I don't think you'll get a jump. Michiko's many things, but not a fool."

He was pacing toward the door, and it opened before him. A granite-faced servant gave him a filthy look but stood aside to allow him in through an oiled-oak, eight-panel door which must have been shipped from Earth itself. Such woods grew so slowly, no colony had bothered to plant them. The first colonies were two centuries old, and in that time a natural oak would still be little more than a sapling.

The house was quiet, dim, and Stone smelt nothing noticeable. He touched the headset as the door closed behind him. "Raven Leader to Blue Raven gunship."

"On station," Lang responded, "with four in the jumpbay. Monitoring your audio, Cap."

"Copy that." Stone gave the hallway a single appreciative glance. He had been in similar houses, but not since he left Earth and Mars. The Marsport and Chryse colonists in particular admired materials which could not possibly be Martian.

The wood of Michiko's colonial-period house was probably local pine, genetically engineered, short-lived, fast-growing. The whole house seemed to be constructed of timber and glass. The walls were dense, thick, and insulated to withstand vicious winter temperatures.

The sound of feet on the stairs opposite the door announced Leo Michiko, and Stone was curious to see the man, face to face, at last. He was not as tall as Stone had expected, but he was more good looking in the flesh, and the fury which he had tightly reined sharpened his features, gave him a catlike quality. Michiko could be dangerous, Stone thought. There were diamond facets to him which neither Denehy nor Brand possessed. He was casually dressed in dark green slacks and an ivory-white turtleneck sweater; and conspicuously unarmed, Stone saw. The ebony hair was sleek, unbound and falling to his shoulders. On his right hand was a ring with a single jewel, the biggest blue diamond Stone had ever seen, and in both earlobes, the gem's smaller cousins.

"Mister Michiko, my name is Stone," he said, but did not offer his hand. "I won't take much of your time."

"Because I don't have much to give you," Michiko said tersely, and Stone heard the clipped consonants and nasal vowels.

The accent was familiar at once. Kip Reardon spoke with a softer version of it, from the Chryse region. Michiko gestured for Stone to go ahead of him, into a study at the front of the house. A bluestone fireplace dominated the north wall, and real flames burned there, though their source was a rack of gas jets. Before the hearth were two cherry-leather chairs, and under the vast windows, a desk with its workstation folded down into the soft black leather surface. The walls were lined with framed images, some holo, some slowly animating, and in them Stone saw many of the structures which Michiko Aurora would rightly claim as their showcase pieces.

From the desk the view over Aspen was breathtaking, but Michiko turned his back on it and accorded Stone a glare. "Make it brief, Captain. I have time to spare but none to waste. Tell me what you want of me. Naturally, I'm ready to assist NARC in its investigations, but I fail to see what you think I can do for you."

Stone surveyed the view with a nod. The only bruise on the landscape was the blue shadow of the gunship on an otherwise perfect field of fresh snow. "You live very well here, considering."

"Considering what?" Michiko snapped. "I have no intention of playing word games with you. Either say what you mean, or I'll bid you good day and you can call my secretary, make another appointment when you've worked out what you need to know."

Like Denehy and Randolph Dorne, he was good, but Stone had heard

an unmistakable razor's edge in Michiko's voice. "You live well here," he repeated, "considering you're currently around twenty-eight days from declaring Chapter Eleven ... your company's bankrupt."

"Rubbish," Michiko said dismissively. "Who told you that? My company maintains a delicate but perfectly survivable fiscal balance. I suggest you use your ... special powers," said with a sneer, "to access the colonial records and see for yourself."

Stone's brows lowered. "I did," he said baldly.

"Then you know where my company stands."

"Ankle deep in a steaming pile," Stone said in the same raw tone. "You want to tell me about the Nielsen Lode?"

The catlike Eurasian eyes might have burned into Stone. "It's a mine in Freespace. What about it?"

"You're playing games now, Michiko," Stone observed.

The man drew a long, deep breath and exhaled it before he could trust himself to speak. "I lost a lot of money there. It's a matter of public record. My shareholders were informed."

"Not of the whole story." Stone watched the shadow of the gunship pass over the snow-cruised front lawn. A few warm days, and the alpine grass would show through. "You fed your shareholders a version of the Nielsen Lode fiasco ... several reams of rationalization about freight fees, cost-hikes in materials, labor strikes, building permit wrangles."

"All perfectly true, and extremely expensive," Michiko snapped.

"But you left out the biggest cause of loss." Stone was watching the man's face closely. "You had a failure in the hab-sphere you were building for the mining colony. You want to tell me about that?"

For a bare fraction of a second the tiny muscles around Michiko's mouth and eyes twitched. Then the mask was back in place. "You want the details? Ask Nielsen, Mortlock and Steiner, Incorporated."

"I sent a data request last night," Stone said levelly. "You know as well as I do, it'll take at least fourteen days to get a tachyon band reply. You've nothing to hide? Then share data, Michiko."

The fury seemed about to escape, before Michiko pointed to one of the pair of leather chairs by the hearth. "Sit. It's not a pleasant story, nor one I enjoy telling, and you already seem to know it."

In fact, Stone knew no more than he had learned from Jarrat last night via a phone in The Jacaranda Restaurant, and what he had pieced together from the hours of video and audio supplied by Arial Quinn. He was only guessing, but his speculations were loaded, and he knew he was close enough to the mark to rattle a man of Michiko's calm. He sat, watched Michiko fiddle with the remote to turn down the flames, and the man said at last,

"As you know, the repulsion generators failed on the recreation sphere. Eighteen construction workers were killed instantly, forty more were seriously injured. Ninety casualties were recorded among the Nielsen employees caught by the debris. We were trying to cut costs. We ... I'd been forced to consider what at the time seemed viable alternatives. Freight fees, labor difficulties and all the rest ... I took a calculated risk, to operate the sphere on two repulsion

generators. It was a ten-thousand-to-one shot against us losing the sphere. The backup went bad while the primary generator was shut down for scheduled, routine maintenance.” Michiko’s brows raised at Stone. “I settled out of court. Nielsen never had a complaint to make against me or my company. The survivors, families, all claimants were well compensated. As I said, I lost a fortune.”

“In fact, you lost so badly,” Stone added, “you would have folded if you hadn’t had influential friends.”

Michiko’s fists clenched. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but does the acronym for your department not stand for Narcotics And Riot Control? Or has NARC suddenly taken to auditing businessmen, collecting taxes, watchdogging the colonial share markets? Legitimate business is none of your concern, Stone. Now you’ve crossed the line, and if you don’t get back onto your own turf, this interview will conclude.”

“The trouble is,” Stone said musingly, “it’s a gray, wide, blurry line, with legit business on one side and dirty money on the other, and the two cross over. Like your investment in Oromon ... where we just flushed out a major blackmarket arms bazaar that’s spent a year or more supplying PharmaTech with weapons systems they shouldn’t have. Which puts Pietro Denehy in a delicate position ... yet you connected yourself with Denehy when he bailed you out of massive financial losses on Oromon, and before, when you lost the sphere at the Nielsen Lode.”

Color flared in Michiko’s normally pale olive skin and the muscles around his eyes twitched just once more. “You know a great deal, Stone. You doubtlessly have your proofs.”

“A whistleblower inside your company,” Stone said evenly, “and a survivor from the freighter we blew away a couple of days ago. Add their testimony to Janssen’s dossier —”

“And you still can’t connect me to Scorpio,” Michiko said, shrewd as an old, one-eyed crow; but his voice was hoarse, as if his throat had constricted. “All you can accuse me of is losing money and being affiliated with a patron who stood by me in a time of crisis. For many years Pete Denehy has been like a ...” He smiled. “Like an uncle to me.”

“You speak with the same accent,” Stone observed.

“Accents have been legislated against? It’s now illegal to come from Mars?” Michiko leaned toward Stone, elbow on his knee. “You come from Earth. Isn’t that the accent of England? London, perhaps? I could tell you of places, Stone, where an Earth accent would get you tossed out of a bar, after they had mopped the floors with your face. They call your kind *Earthers*, and the Earthers’ elitist mentality is just as unwelcome as the ‘heritage lunatics’ who bedevil the colonies.”

“Like the Janssen family.” Stone sat back to study Michiko. “Kris Janssen hates your guts for what you’re doing to Aurora.”

“I’m building Aurora,” Michiko said dismissively. “The first families would make the colony cling to the past and live in the ground.”

“Whereas you’d leave the poor folks in city bottom and put the rich, like your friends Denehy and Brand, in the spheres ... except the liability insur-

ance you've been loaded down with since the Nielsen disaster has put the lid on your plans." Stone was needling.

"Rubbish," Michiko snapped. "I told you before, my company rides a fine line of balance."

"Christ!" Stone almost laughed, and was on his feet. "Your books don't balance. Your oars are in the water only because of your patron, Denehy, and he's arming as if he sees a corporate war coming, and he's doing it under the guarding wing of Senator Brand, who had colonial law changed to protect the bastard! And you," he added.

Michiko had not moved a muscle. He looked icily up at Stone and said very quietly, "The burden of proof rests on NARC. If you possessed even half the data to which you allude, you wouldn't be sitting in my home, insulting me. You'd have issued the warrant for my arrest. I'd be in a cell while my lawyers thrashed out the terms of my release."

Deliberately infuriating, Stone looked at his chrono. It was 8:56 local time, and on a world with a twenty hour day, noon was just over an hour away. For just a moment he opened a chink in the empathic shield, and Jar-rat's feelings hit him powerfully: frustration, wry amusement and a degree of sheer disgust ... if Stone had to guess, Kevin was baby-sitting a guy suffering the paroxysms of the worst hangover of his life. Lindgren was probably kneeling with his head over a toilet.

"You want proof? Give me a couple more hours," Stone said glibly, allowing a trace of his amusement to show through. He regarded Michiko curiously. "On the one hand, I have to admire you. I've never seen anything like the artistry of your design work. But Janssen makes a strong argument: the spheres are a financial nightmare. Even rich colonies like Aurora get sick, carrying the load. Poor ones would go belly-up, dead in the water."

"Survival of the fittest." The catlike quality was back in Michiko's face. "When the weak expire, their dead flesh nourishes those who have the strength to survive." He stood and returned Stone's scrutiny, glare for glare. "Survival comes at a price, as you know from personal experience, Stone." He nodded. "I know about you. Cass Brand told me a little about you, when he imported the healer."

The word 'healer' was spat out through clenched teeth and Stone sighed. The prejudice against empaths was far from uncommon.

"The price of survival," Michiko was saying, "can be high, but those individuals who regard the future, and prosperity, as their right, not some privilege, are prepared to pay it." He cocked his head at Stone. "The Janssens and their friends among the heritage lunatics may not like the fact I redesigned this colony, but they are quite aware Inquanoc is the way of the future. My cities will be the homes of Mankind on a hundred colony worlds so inhospitable, the air is barely breathable, the heat or cold beyond bearing. My cities give human beings the freedom to live and work anywhere."

"If you can ever get your books to balance," Stone added, "and with the liability insurance you're paying on every hab-sphere since the Nielsen Lode incident, the only way you can jiggle the numbers back into the black is with dirty money."

"Dirty money," Michiko mimicked. "You're trying to intimidate me into saying something to implicate myself with an illegal cartel. A narco syndicate. Give me any reason why I should do your job for you." He lifted his chin. "Earn your own pay check, Stone. But I'll paint you a picture, if you need illustrations and charts before NARC can learn."

"I'm all ears." Stone admitted to a dreadful fascination.

"You're wasting your time," Michiko said acidly. "NARC is the single most crass waste of public funds in the history of law enforcement and if the senators of Earth had the sense they were born with, they would shut you down tomorrow. You're trying to abolish Angel? Stupid. The only people who succumb to Angel are the losers, the prey, creatures who would be carrion on any predator's hunting ground. You can't protect pathetic morons from themselves, Stone. You can *try*, and in the trying you guzzle down funding which would be better spent in other areas, such as education, to name one topic." His eyes blazed. "It isn't poverty that keeps people in city bottom. It's stupidity and idleness ... and the same moronic inadequacy makes people breathe Angel into their brains. You spend your lives trying to protect halfwits from themselves. The self-imposed battle, the Angel war, is what built the empires, and tore them down. Not the Angel itself. You want to know how to get rid of the Angel syndicates?"

"Tell me." Stone's anger was rising as he thought of Riki Mitchell, a depressed, isolated kid who made one mistake. Of Tim Kwei, almost erased from existence by Equinox lieutenants who pumped him full of Angel and dumped him with the trash. And Stone could not help recalling his own days in the dumpster. In his ears was Vic Duggan's voice, late one night after too much beer, when the booze had lubricated Duggan's tongue enough for him to talk about his partner. Dominic was addicted when a drunken campus party prank went hideously wrong. Someone cut the 'treats' with Angel, and nothing Duggan could do would keep Dom from Angeldeath. His mouth was dry as cotton and anger made his blood surge as he waited for Michiko to make his case.

"If you want to get rid of the Angel syndicates," Michiko rasped, "tear them down like the barbarian empires they are, all you have to do is legalize Angel. Put it in fancy wrappers like bubble gum and condoms, cigarettes and dreamsmoke sticks. Put it on the shelves in convenience stores at sale prices. Buy two pops, get one free, with a message on the packet. Warning: inhaling contents will kill you." He made a sweeping gesture with both hands. "Legalize Angel, and the syndicates would blow away on the wind. They would have nothing to trade on."

Stone felt a chill. "And how many kids would you sweep up out of the gutters, and the city bottom sex shops, every morning?"

"The same number you're sweeping up now," Michiko said indifferently. He turned to gaze out at the gunship which was drifting over the black spruce, not a half-kilometer away, its engine noise muted by the house's dense insulation. "You'd sweep up the losers. The prey. They're doing the gene pool a great favor when they snort Angel into their empty little brains. Weed out the carrion, and the next generation will be stronger. Get rid of NARC, pump

their funding into free public education, then see who's happy to languish in city bottom and fester."

"You believe all that?" Stone asked quietly.

"Implicitly." Michiko cast a dark-eyed glare over his shoulder. "And you don't? I would have thought you had the brains to know the truth when it jumped up and bit you."

"The truth?" Stone echoed. "You make an interesting case, Michiko, and it's a hell of a philosophy. Cruel, harsh. Predatory. I've no doubt it's shared by the likes of Denehy and Brand, but I could bring you a hundred others who'd argue with you till hell froze over." He shook his head slowly. "I wish it were so simple. I might actually wish you were right."

"You know I am," Michiko rasped.

"No. It's not the same down at street level." He gestured at the incredible view through the burgundy-draped window. "Living here, and in the 'soap bubbles,' as Janssen calls them, you have no idea what it's like to live and sweat in a dead-end."

"Oh, please," Michiko groaned. "Spare me the 'working class hero' argument. It was obsolete centuries ago, Stone. The fact is, there *are* no facts you can ravel into proof that I have anything more to do with Scorpio than the knowledge of its name."

"It's certainly been impossible for Tactical to secure proof since your friend arranged for Aurora Tac to be crippled," Stone said bitterly. "How convenient."

Cat's eyes studied Stone. "I wasn't the only one who benefited."

"I didn't say you were. But you were the only one who took your complaints to city hall and had Janssen served with an official cease and desist order. You were the only one who had to have an agent stand up in a coroner's court and explain how, one after another, young people were dying in your employment."

"Accidents," Michiko said nastily. "A garage fire ... solvents. A crash on takeoff, a fall from the roof. You must have seen the Thule coroner's statements."

"I saw them," Stone agreed. "I might even have believed them, if it hadn't been for the common denominator tying all the fatalities together. Every one of your deaders was one of Tac's best."

"Spying on my company. It's an illegal activity in Aurora. I'd have assumed you knew this. Janssen harassed me until I complained formally, and it was colonial law, not me, that stopped her."

"She told us." Stone lifted a brow at him. "Still, 'her kids,' as she calls them, died in your employment."

"Statistics," Michiko told him, as if he were speaking to a retard, "can be made to say anything. Did you know, most accidents happen in the home; sixty percent involve falls, and of those, seventy percent of falls occur during dressing. To put it another way, most people who die in accidents kill themselves trying to put on their underwear. Statistics," he added in a mock-tolerant tone.

Stone had been expecting the response. It was exactly the argument a

good lawyer would have made. If Janssen had any hard evidence to prove the accidents in which her agents died were set up, she would have at least hauled Michiko into court on serious charges. Instead, she backed off. She knew the Tac kids were murdered, but evidence was thin on the ground and she was running scared.

"It's too bad about your plane." Stone changed gears fast and without warning, gambling on his ability to throw Michiko off-stride.

It worked. The man's brow creased. "My what?"

"Your plane." Stone nodded upward, toward geostationary. "You reported it stolen, at the exact moment the Stavanger Dock was blowing itself apart. A Yamazake Sylph is one damned expensive toy."

"Oh, that." Michiko's mouth compressed. "As you said, it was stolen. It was taken from the premises of a small local competitor I recently acquired. Don't concern yourself. It was well insured."

"I'll bet it was," Stone said wryly. "How very convenient."

The live bait wriggled on the hook. Michiko was standing in the light from the windows and Stone saw his pupils dilate for a moment. A man could not hide the response. Michiko was as good as Denehy, but he was only human. "Meaning?" he demanded.

Stone shrugged. "The Yamazake connects you to the attempted murder, *in lacus*, of Marcus Brand ... an angel victim from way back."

"Only in your mind," Michiko rasped.

"We've been wondering since then," Stone went on as if Michiko had not spoken, "why in any world Marcus should be a target so important, somebody set up the hit using cheap muscle and an expendable plane. The hit was organized in a big hurry. It almost worked ... but not quite." He paused to watch Michiko's face again. "The Brand kid's still alive, and we have equipment coming from Darwin's to retrieve him. It's going to be interesting. You'd like to comment?"

The mask of Michiko's face was wooden. He turned back, feet braced, fists on hips. "I don't care to say another syllable, Stone. The weight you feel on your shoulders is the burden of proof. You're good, I'll hand it to you. You're top-quality trash. But I'm not intimidated, and I'm not going to implicate myself. Go get your proof, if any such thing exists outside NARC fantasies."

Stone accorded the man a brash grin. "Like I said, give me a couple of hours." He withdrew to the door of the study, and as it slid open on silent servos he turned back to Michiko for one moment. "You remember the AI Kris Janssen slipped into your mainframes and Denehy's?" He gave Leo Michiko a wink and stepped out.

He felt the man's eyes burning holes in his back as he made his way out of the house and back to the shuttle. The Aspen air was pure, cold as ice, almost blue. He pulled it to the bottom of his lungs, felt it prickle there, and opened himself to Jarrat.

The Corsair's canopies were up and Gable was sitting on the side, helmet off, headset on, listening to the loop. He had heard every word spoken in Michiko's study, and the quick anger Stone had felt was mirrored in the pilot's

eyes. The Blue Raven gunship was still on station, and over the headset Stone was listening to background audio from the carrier while his whole body keyed on Jarrat.

Tense as a runner under the gun, Jarrat was flying something infuriatingly slow and eccentric. If he was in the air this morning, it could only mean he had sobered Lindgren up enough to get him moving, and the day's work agenda included only one item.

"Raven Leader to all Blue Ravens," he called on the NARC security channel. "Stand down from the jump bay ... but do not desuit. We're not returning to the carrier."

"We're not?" Cronin demanded.

And Lang, on the flight deck: "Where to, Cap?"

"Thule," Stone told her. "Go up to five thousand and wait for us. Hold up short of the city perimeter. No need to spook the natives."

"Jarrat?" Curt Gable asked shrewdly, reaching for his helmet. He had been watching Stone's face. "It's on?"

"I ... think so," Stone said cautiously. "It feels ... tight." He climbed up to the cockpit, and reached down into the contour of the seat for his own helmet. On a whim, he stopped right there. "Suit up, Curt."

Gable blinked at him. "You expecting a shooting match?"

"I don't know," Stone admitted. He angled a dark glance at the house. "Knowing these people, I'd expect almost anything. So we suit up, and prep the weapons systems."

"Christ," Gable groaned, "here we go again."

They were in the riot armor fast, working in the blue shadow of the plane's wing and ignoring the faces at Michiko's windows. As Stone settled the weight of the helmet and screwed in the umbilici the canopy was coming down. Under Gable's nimble hands the jets came alive, and Stone's eyes skimmed the instruments in one glance before he brought up the repulsion.

He was level with Michiko's roof when a blip from the comm panel caught his eye, and he gave an expressive grunt. "You see that, Curt? Signals leaving the house, level seven encryption."

"I'm recording," Gable assured him, "but I know a thing or two about encryption, Cap. I doubt we'll get into them without the key."

"Which is packed in a machine, an Ibex comm portal," Stone said grimly, "installed aboard a Rand Spectrum in Pete Denehy's private landing in Argentina."

Again, Gable groaned. "Like I said, here we bloody go again!"

Jarrat was thinking the same thing as he set the ailing Volvo Yasumi down in Chuck Lindgren's usual parking place and ushered the man into the offices of Michiko Aurora. Lindgren was still green to the gills, but he had swallowed enough vitamins, caffeine and painkillers to be on his feet and working, and by some miracle he remembered what had happened the night before.

The cube on which was stored the simulation he had blundered into was

in Jarrat's inside pocket, and Lindgren looked like a rabbit about to run. His own office was off one side of the bullpen, and his workstation tapped the mainframes directly. He was not part of any network, for purposes of security. Michiko jealously guarded his business, and Lindgren was right about his life expectancy, if his secret got out.

The bullpen was always busy, but Max Tyler's face was well known by now. Kossof, the office loose-mouth, watched him appear in company with Lindgren and head for Chuck's office. She wore an incredulous look, as if she could not quite believe Tyler had struck up any kind of relationship with a loser like Lindgren.

The accountant's office was interior, windowless. Daylight fluoros in the ceiling provided ambient light; a potted garden filled one corner, a vertical two-meter aquarium another. Fans hummed, delivering a stream of cool air as the lights came up and the door slid over. Deliberately, Jarrat palmed the lock. Kossof could guess whatever she wanted.

He fetched a cup of water from the cooler and handed it to Lindgren, who was still sunken-eyed with dehydration. Lindgren drained it, crushed it, lobbed it at the disposal and gave Jarrat a hangdog look. He was having second thoughts, and Jarrat smothered a curse.

"You don't want to back out now, Chuck," he coaxed. "This is the only shot you're ever going to get at freedom, safety. A new start, on Janssen's buck, like we said last night. Remember?"

"I know," Lindgren said unhappily. "It's dangerous, Max."

"So is crossing the street." Jarrat woke the workstation from its sleep cycle with a tap on the tablet.

The CRT faded up, and an AI voice said in saccharine tones, "Good morning, Charles."

"Charles?" Jarrat echoed.

"It's my name, remember?" Lindgren flopped into his chair and tapped in a six-digit code which logged him in, gave him direct access to the mainframes. "Jesus Christ, what am I doing?"

"You're making a bid for freedom." Jarrat sat on the desk by the CRT and set his right hand on Lindgren's shoulder. With the left, he opened his jacket and let the accountant see the butt of the Colt AP-60. "If I need to, I can cut out a wall with this baby. You don't want to know what it does to the human body. Trust me, Chuck. Just do your thing one more time, and then we're gone, permanently."

He had been coaxing since dawn, spinning plans for Lindgren. The hired Rand Eclipse was still in the basement garage. They would take it back to the spaceport, turn it in, and Max Tyler would call a cab. There, he and Lindgren would technically vanish off the face of Aurora. A ride over to Tactical, an internal call through to Janssen's hotline, and they were safe. Lindgren had hung on every word. He had spent so long in a sweat of fear, he was eager to cede responsibility. And Max Tyler's plan was a good one.

It all began in this office, and Lindgren had already logged in. The mainframes were his to roam around in, and as Michiko's accountant, he needed access to levels which were off-limits to most others. Working in these restrict-

ed levels, and being terminally curious he had stumbled over, eavesdropped on, a great deal. He had worked with the team that set up these Ibex machines; he probably should not have known the backdoor they had left behind them, but he did.

All AI designers wrote in a backdoor. No hardware or software was ever perfect, and when a million-dollar mainbrain gridlocked itself, a backdoor permitting access to a service tech reduced the embarrassment factor. Lindgren had watched over shoulders when the Ibex crew were setting up. He simply wore a blank, bland face, never let them know how much he understood, and they believed a mere accountant could not follow them.

They were wrong. And this, Jarrat realized, was far from the first time Lindgren had snuck in by the backdoor, like a student adjusting his grades. "Why don't you fix the activity log?" he asked softly as his coconspirator wormed steadily into a deep-buried routine where he could actually ask the AI to reveal passwords and logon codes. "You could just erase the record of you getting access to Michiko's sim."

"Tried," Lindgren said from between clenched teeth. He had drunk so much coffee, his nerves were frayed, so much orange juice, his belly was an acid-bath. "There's hardwired failsafes, Max, to stop smart-asses like me doing exactly that. If somebody could rewrite the activity log, no system would be safe."

"Yeah ... duh," Jarrat murmured. "It's not my field."

The system's AI was giving Lindgren the information he wanted even now: Michiko's personal logon code, which would give Lindgren access not to the company documents, but the next tier. The Scorpio files. Jarrat watched the man work steadily, and Lindgren was hopping all over the mainbrain, chasing data threads.

"This is dangerous," he groaned. "Oh, Christ, this is dangerous." But his fingers never paused.

"Dangerous?" Max Tyler wondered.

"If Michiko or one of his top goons is on right now," Lindgren muttered, "and if we're accessing the same files, and if he goes for a file I grabbed first, the system will hesitate, two, maybe three seconds. If that isn't enough to tell you somebody else is using the file, the AI's going to withhold update rights, and that tells you in plain fuckin' language, somebody else's got dibs on it." He sucked in a breath. "Jesus, I must be crazy."

"How long?" Jarrat pressed. "Quick as you can, Chuck."

"I'm doin' it quick as I can!" Lindgren had begun to tremble. "Get me more coffee. Shit, I dunno ... five minutes, and I should be out."

The coffee was hot enough to burn his mouth, and he ouch'd, swore, gulped it down. The caffeine jolt hit him moments later and he had the shakes back under control. But the process took much longer than five minutes, and Jarrat had begun to listen to the sounds of a commotion in the bullpen outside.

If Michiko or a Scorpio insider was 'on' right now, and if they had realized what was happening, no alarms would ring, no lights would flash. But the intrusion would be traced to this office, and Jarrat was uncomfortably

aware, they were in a dead-end. This cavern might give the illusion of daylight, but it did not even have a window. Instead, Jarrat began to examine the ceiling and floor. Buildings were always a honeycomb of crawl-spaces, conduit, trunks for air, power, water and waste. There were always ways out, and the Colt which lay heavily against his ribs was his insurance.

At last Lindgren began to dump vast amounts of data into a blank cube, and still Jarrat had heard nothing from the bullpen. Lindgren reversed course through the labyrinth he had taken into the AI's internal systems, and finally logged off. He was sweat-soaked, rank-smelling, and from the workstation he headed directly to the bathroom. Jarrat heard the sounds of retching and heaving before the door closed.

He popped out the datacube, and it slipped into the inside pocket of the brown leather jacket, beside the older cube. He had more than enough to take down Leo Michiko, and as soon as the bust began, and the Michiko Aurora and Scorpio mainframes were in the hands of NARC and Tac specialists, Denehy and PharmaTech would follow.

Time, Jarrat thought ruefully. He settled his shoulders against the wall by the door, closed his eyes and lowered the empathic shield to reach for Stone. In a scant moment, he gave a soft gasp of surprise.

Stone was very close, and if Jarrat turned toward the rush of his partner's feelings the way a plant turned to the light, using the empathy like a compass, he knew he was looking in the direction of Hirosaki Park. Stone was already at the extraction point ... and he was in good spirits, Jarrat felt.

Through Stone's limbs he felt the faint repulsion-buzz in a light airframe, which placed him in the shuttle, and through another man's skeleton he felt an odd, cool-light-bulkiness which any NARC riot jumper would recognize in a moment. Stone was in armor.

And Stone was aware of the two-way feedback loop as Jarrat tuned into him. Sensations and emotions began to bounce back and forth, and Jarrat knew Stone felt the scintillation of an adrenaline rush that said *time to get out*, as well as the high spirits and almost smug satisfaction of having gotten clean away with something ingenious, and dangerous.

An acknowledgment bounced back in the form of anticipation, pleasure, a prickle of excitement, a flexing of Stone's fingers on the twin joysticks and fire controls. Jarrat indulged himself in a chuckle.

He was only waiting for Lindgren, and he knocked on the bathroom door. "Anybody alive in there?"

"Barely." Lindgren looked sick as he appeared, sheet-white with blood-shot eyes. "I think it was okay ... I think we got away with it."

"Time to leave," Jarrat suggested. "I've got the cubes. Call yourself in sick. Let Kossof see you. She'll tell the whole office you were so shit-faced last night, you can't work today. I'll volunteer to take you home, and we're gone. Next stop, Thule Field to hand in the car, then Tac HQ, and it's over for both of us."

Lindgren wiped the cold sweat from his face with the backs of both hands. "Go for it, Maxie. I'm right behind you."

The plan was so airtight, it was perfect.

Perfect plans were the ones that came to pieces fastest and most dramatically. Part of Jarrat was not even surprised when he walked out of Lindgren's office, and the first face he saw — in the middle of the bullpen with a group of three men Jarrat knew as Bourbaki, Ronson and Wei, Scorpio lieutenants from the building's higher levels, up above the offices — belonged to Pietro Denehy.

Both he and Denehy froze for the space of several heartbeats. Six half-way plausible arguments shot through Jarrat's overdriven mind in this time, and out of all of them came one common denominator: let Denehy make the first move, because he could destroy himself with it.

The syndicate men turned toward the accountant's office, where Max Tyler was framed in the open doorway, Lindgren hunched behind him. The hoons were armed, but they were bunched together, getting in each other's way, easy targets, and Jarrat had already marked his targets though the Colt remained in its holster.

Denehy said only one word, and Jarrat would never know if he said it reflexively, or after a rush of inspiration or calculation. It was the one word which might bury the NARC man and at the same time leave Pete Denehy himself immune from comebacks from either side of the fence. The word exploded from his mouth.

"Jarrat!"

The name was a trigger. Bourbaki's crew were shooters, drivers, little more than hired minders, but they were highly enough placed in Scorpio to know Michiko's business. Denehy would surely have briefed them about the carrier, the captains, the threat of NARC, and they knew the name.

The Colt was clear of its leather while Michiko's hoons were still scrambling to get out of each other's way. Liz Kossof was the first one to start screaming as the AP-60 blew out a fortieth-floor window and an arctic gale screamed in, twenty below zero, filled with ice dust and howling out of the northeast.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Adrenaline scorched Stone's nerve endings and set his heart pumping, the pulse hammering in his ears. He knew the instant Jarrat's plans went askew, though he could not guess how, or why.

The shuttle was riding repulsion high above the park. Below, he saw the tropical house with its four-star restaurant and the wasteland of parking lots that should have been the extraction point. Between The Jacaranda restaurant and the Wisting Company building in Kansai were five kilometers of mid-town Thule: business, commercial, residential, the air traffic lanes and the

eight-laners, groundside, headed for the spaceport. Unless a packwar was in progress, it was a bad place to take gunships and warplanes, but Stone was out of options.

"Blue Raven gunship!" The Corsair was coming about as he hailed the pilot. "We've got trouble. Follow me in, stay close, and for godsakes keep out of the civvy lanes."

"Right with you," Lang said tersely, and the massive, ugly gunship turned on its axis. "What's wrong? I can't raise audio from 9.4."

"Neither can I," Stone told her evenly. "Give him a chance."

The empathy was clearer than audio. In every nerve, Stone felt intense cold. It burned his lungs as he inhaled, stung his throat, and he felt repeated shocks through his wrists, intimately familiar: Kevin was firing multiple rounds. His targets were going down — Stone felt each surge of some emotion between relief and satisfaction.

High above the air lanes, he hurried the shuttle toward the towering Wisting building. "Come on, Kevin." Muttering to himself. "Where's your audio, goddamn it?"

"Like you told Lang," Curt Gable said quietly, "give him a chance. He's got to be a little busy right now."

Busy was an understatement. The Colt kicked again, and again, and the cold was stunning. As the shuttle drew closer Stone's sensations sharpened, better than any locator beam. He knew Jarrat was high up in the Wisting building, on the east side, and as the shuttle dropped in toward the tower he saw the gaping rupture in the mirror-glass surface of the windows, where shots from within had torn through.

Cars and planes were fleeing the executive garages in every direction, and Stone let them go. The Scorpio shooters with any brains would be vanishing into the slime under any rock they could find, but if Jarrat had the data he believed he had, the Aurora system would be locked down in an hour and Tac could pick up the bolters one by one. If it took days, weeks, it no longer mattered when Scorpio was gone.

"Blue Raven," he called.

"One thousand meters behind you," Lang whispered in his ear, "pick your spot, Cap, and I'll close up to minimum safe maneuvering. You got him?"

"I have him." Stone's hands were feather-light on the joysticks as he took the shuttle down, level with the window, nose-on, and swung the gun-camera over to peer through the shattered armorglass.

The office lights were still on. The scene was daylight-bright. The blown-out window opened the office to the prevailing wind, and a miniature storm had already wreaked havoc. Four bodies lay strewn about by Jarrat's shots. One was halfway out through the window, a second sprawled over a desk. CRTs, autochefs, chairs and potted palms had fallen, but Jarrat himself was braced against the wall, dead opposite the window. The Colt was in both hands, leveled on some target to his left, and he was in a gale right off a glacier.

As Stone watched he fired off another round, and in the lull this bought him he snaked a hand into the breast pocket of his shirt. Kevin still had the

R/T, and Stone gave thanks for this at least. He had been about to kick on the public address and crank his receivers out to max, which would alert the whole tower to NARC's presence. At the moment most of the Wisting building remained unaware of the battle, though this was about to change.

"9.4 to Raven Leader." Jarrat held the little gold cigarette lighter close against his mouth. "Get me the hell out of this place, will you?"

"What do you need?" Stone glanced at the CRT. The gunship was maneuvering in, so close to both the Corsair and the building, Stone was impressed. E.K. Lang was one of the best Military Airlift veterans he had served with.

Jarrat had heard the gunship's engines a moment before, and as the big slab shape, porcupine-spined with sensors and guns, dropped into view, he yelled over its noise, "You could pick us up off the roof, Stoney, but from here on up it's Scorpio territory. They won't let us just walk out, and I've got a passenger along for the ride. Give me four Blue Ravens in here, right now."

"You got it." Stone nudged the shuttle up and out of the way. "Got a job for you, Gil. Jarrat wants four of your boys in through that busted window, ASAP. Can do?"

"No problem." Cronin was on standby, watching Stone's video on a comm relay terminal in the dark cavern of the jump bay. "Ramos, Taft, Bridger, you're with me."

Without being prompted, Lang turned the gunship, lifted it to put the jump bay on a level with the window, and jinked the pitch over to fifteen degrees. The four Blue Ravens would cut their weight to zero kilos and dive on repulsion. Stone had often seen them work before, and as Blue Ravens 6 and 7 led them out, he was getting video.

The mirror-black locust shapes of the riot armor flitted through the swirl of ice fog which had rapidly formed where the building's heat and humidity bled away through the ruptured glass plates. Cronin was the first out of the gunship, first into Michiko's space. His shoulder armor grazed the window and tore the aperture wider. Behind him, Ramos punched out more with a flick of one steel gauntlet.

The gun-camera zoomed into the office as Cronin tumbled in midair and landed lightly. The rotary cannon on his forearm was hunting for targets before his boots set down, and he was ripping off several hundred rounds as Stone called,

"Blue Raven 6, you got resistance?"

"Not any more," Cronin said acerbically. "Bunch of wannabe shooters holed up in a lift car ... Wisting needs a new elevator."

"Company security or Scorpio?" Stone asked.

"Company security would've tossed the cannons and hit the deck, soon as they saw NARC," Cronin said sharply.

"Hey, Gil, just checking," Stone chuckled. "No cockups, no comebacks, am I right? You see Jarrat?"

"Him and one civvy, nothing else moving. Four deaders out front, his ... bunch in the lift, mine, could be five, could be six." Cronin's floods kicked on full and he panned the helmet camera around the interior of a ruined office.

The pictures crackled up on the shuttle's CRT. "I'd call the location locked down," Stone decided. "9.4, are you receiving?"

"Receiving ... and bloody freezing." Jarrat's voice had begun to shake. "Scorpio's not going to force their hand, Stoney."

"You want to clean out the nest while we're here?" Stone asked.

Jarrat had clearly given it some thought. "Waste of time and a big stink on GlobalNet. All the big wheels would've taken off like bats out of hell when you showed. You saw 'em bugging out of the garage upstairs? Damn, I missed Denehy. He was *here*, Stoney, right in this office. He grabbed his chance and ran while I was taking care of the shooters. And Michiko wasn't in the building. He's in Aspen today."

This much, Stone knew. He had left Michiko's mansion in the Appalachian glacier country sixty minutes ago. On the screen he watched via the long-range lenses as Jarrat stooped, grabbed a handful of his passenger's jacket and hauled the nerveless, panicked civvy to his feet. "Extract?"

"Get me," Jarrat repeated, voice shuddering in a twenty-below wind, "*the freakin' hell out!*"

"Blue Ravens, standby to extract," Stone said ruefully. "Blue Raven gunship, prep to take the shuttle aboard, soon as they're out."

He held station, cameras running, as four armored figures gathered at the window. Jarrat and his passenger were dwarfed as Cronin and Ramos embraced them. The civvy was shouting, or screaming, as Joe Ramos keyed up his repulsion. He wafted up out of the window into a storm of ice dust swirling in the down-draft from the gunship's engines. Jarrat's face was set like granite as he clung to Cronin's armor. A moment later the Ravens were falling up toward the open jump bay.

Satisfied, Stone shut off the gun-camera and jinked the shuttle around to the hangar in the big ship's belly. He let the automatics take it, and concentrated on Jarrat. Clear as a bell chime, he felt the odd sensation of weightlessness as Cronin went up on repulsion, then the solid kick of a return to normal gravity as Jarrat jumped the last meter onto the deck of the jump bay.

As the shuttle hangar sealed Stone was already out of the Corsair. Blue Raven's techs hurried up to secure the plane, and Stone swore as he cracked the seals, peeling out of the armor piece by piece.

Over the headset he heard the flight deck, Lang talking with Petrov and Cantrell in the ops room, and at last the pilot called,

"Cap Stone, you still with us?"

"Right here," Stone told her. "Return to carrier."

"Copy that," Lang responded, and to the gunship's running crew, "Seal hatches, secure for orbit. Jump bay, shuttle hangar, report."

"Jump bay is sealed." The bass voice belonged to Joe Ramos.

"Hangar is sealed," Stone said dutifully. A moment later the deck beneath his feet gave a telltale rumble as massive engines cut in. His armor was in a heap under the infolded wing of the Corsair. A crewboy was waiting to store it, and Stone settled the headset. "Kevin?"

"In the suiting room," Jarrat said with a certain mocking humor.

"Welcome back." Stone was leaving the hangar, headed aft along the

gunship's flat belly. To right and left were gunnery and sensor bays, all turned over to auto as the ship pulled out. "How's your passenger?" A wide hatch opened into the suiting room, and as he spoke he saw Jarrat and the civilian, both standing beside an air cyclor which was blowing hard and hot.

The civilian was freaking, but he was doing it quietly. "Relax," Jarrat was saying for the third time in Stone's hearing. "You're out, Chuck, you're safe, it's over. You want the amnesty? Call Janssen."

What the civvy wanted was a swift shot of tranks, Stone thought. He was on the point of calling for a medic when the man slumped onto a bench by the lockers and seemed to deflate. Jarrat laid a hand on the sagged shoulders, and looked up at Stone.

"Chuck Lindgren," he said levelly, while his eyes spoke eloquently to his partner, "Captain R.J. Stone."

"I'm gonna throw up," Lindgren said by way of greeting.

"Through that door." Jarrat took the man by the shoulders, lifted him, turned him around and propelled him toward the latrines which flanked the gunship's infirmary. Lindgren made a dive for the nearest stall and Jarrat gave Stone a rueful grin. "He's still hungover. Last night was quite a bender. But he was sober enough to come up with these." From his pocket he produced a pair of datacubes, and dropped them into Stone's palm. "We just nailed Michiko, Stoney."

Stone rolled the cubes like dice and studied Jarrat with warm, affectionate eyes. "You did good. Damned good. And fast."

"Lindgren made it easy," Jarrat said dismissively. In a rare moment of privacy he gave Stone his hand, and Stone took it, clasped his wrist warrior fashion. The skin was still cold as ice, but Jarrat ignored the chill and Stone said softly, shrewdly,

"The bastards doped you. What was it?"

"Buran. What else?" Jarrat took a breath, held it, breathed out in a long sigh. "It was okay. I still have a few functional brain cells left. Michiko could've made it a heavier pop, but I guess he halfway believed the cover story after Vaughan and Reineck brought me in. Speaking of whom, they're out, gone. Do we know where?"

"They're small fry, Kevin. They'll get caught in the same nets we set for Michiko. I talked to him this morning."

Jarrat's brows rose. A crewgirl brought the coffee he had sent for and he paused long enough to sip and shiver animatedly. "I got enough to bust the man and his syndicate wide open."

"He's an ... interesting character," Stone said musingly. "Driven, and with something of the idealist about him. Michiko's a long way out from your usual syndicate shark." He reached over to pluck several strands of wayward tawny hair back from Jarrat's cold face, and Kevin smiled. The expression reached way down into Stone's insides and touched a nerve there. "Can you hold that thought awhile?" Stone whispered, and one gray eye winked. With a vast effort Stone forced his mind back to work. "Michiko gave me the distinct feeling he knows a whole lot more than we could tear out of him with red-hot pincers."

"You get audio?" Jarrat sat on the bench where Lindgren had subsided and cradled the coffee in both hands.

"Every word," Stone affirmed. "Why don't I get a medic to wait for Lindgren? There's somebody on the flight deck you want to meet."

For a moment Jarrat blinked. Then, "Eve Lang?"

"She's been flying for Blue Raven a couple of days." Stone had caught the eye of a paramedic in the infirmary, and beckoned. "Gil has only good things to say about her, and I looked over the first mission logs. First times out are always the hardest. She'll do well."

The paramedic took station by the door, and Jarrat quit the suiting room with gratitude. The whole bay was cold. He had been exposed to Aurora's summertime bad weather for long enough to have developed a healthy dislike of this colony.

The lift was going up when he said, "I almost had Denehy. Damn! He dove into cover, Stoney. I could drop the shooters *or* I could stop him, not both. And if I didn't take the shooters, I wouldn't live long enough to get out. Denehy's fast for an old fart. Or a young one. Before I'd put the last shooter down, the bastard was in the executive lifts, headed for the Scorpio levels above the legit offices. Then a bunch of shooters showed up in the company lifts and I didn't have time to spit."

"Cronin got trigger happy," Stone observed,

"They took a few shots at him and his boys," Jarrat told him. "You snipe at riot troops, you deserve what you get." He gave Stone an apologetic look. "I should've brought Denehy in, if not Michiko."

"Not the way luck decided things were going to work out today." Stone gestured with the datacubes. "You're out alive, unhurt, with the goods ... sounds like a great deal to me. Pete Denehy's next on my agenda."

"Next?" Jarrat laid one cold hand flat on Stone's chest, over the slow beat of his heart.

"Well ... second, after *that*," Stone agreed.

The elevator opened onto the flight deck, and ahead of the pilots the arctic blue of Aurora's sky had dimmed to mauve. The stars were chips of ice, and several CRTs were already tracking the carrier. In the left-side seat, Evelyn Lang turned around and gave Jarrat a crooked grin. She held out her hand, and he took it.

"Glad to have you flying with us," he said honestly.

"You have a lot to answer for, Jarrat ... Cap," Lang told him, and glanced down at the NARC fatigues, the lieutenant's insignia. "We have some serious catching up to do."

"After the bust we'll get together, split a bottle of something decent." Jarrat had leaned over and pulled up a flood of tracking data.

"What are you looking for?" Lang wondered.

"I already found it." Jarrat had frozen the display, and tapped the screen. "Five assorted cars and planes bugged out fast, right about the time you would have showed up on the building's ATC monitors. Then a sixth, not three minutes after Denehy got away from me."

"You want them traced?" Lang was already working. "I can coordinate

with Thule Field. Give me twenty minutes, I can tell you exactly where the bastards went."

"Do it," Stone agreed. "Especially get after the last bolter."

"It had to be Denehy." Jarrat finished the coffee and took a seat at the engineer's station, which was idling as the gunship headed home. He drummed a tattoo on the work surface. "Did you get anything from Oromon?"

"Plenty." Stone set a hand on Jarrat's shoulder, dealt him a companionable squeeze. "File the assignment report while I run this data of yours ... then I'll show you mine."

Jarrat looked up at him with a grin. "I'll hold you to that."

"Well, hold me to something." Stone's eyes drifted low on Jarrat's body. He felt a sharp flicker of response before both of them secured the empathic shield, as Del had taught, and turned their minds to work.

The gunship was docking before Chuck Lindgren considered his belly stable enough to be trusted. The paramedic gave him a shot, and he trotted after Jarrat to the hatch. Dwarfed by eight Blue Ravens even though they were out of armor, Lindgren appeared simply dazed. The words 'You're a NARC, a freakin' NARC,' were on his lips every time he looked at Jarrat, as if he still could not believe he was on a carrier. He was escorted to the Infirmary, and Jarrat was glad to see him go.

"He's been a pain in the butt," Stone guessed.

"He was a challenge," Jarrat allowed. "Handle with velvet tongs ... and rubber gloves. Still, he knows his field, and if it wasn't for Chuck and his terminal curiosity, I'd be in Scorpio weeks longer." He stopped to read the flight status board by the wide entry to the Blue Raven hangar. "We have a courier coming in."

The Starfleet courier *Hebe* was due to dock in four hours, and it had shipped out of Darwin's World just over forty-two hours before. "McKinnen should be on it," Stone mused. "And if we're lucky, she'll have trawled DAC for enough to bust Denehy."

"So we got 'em both," Jarrat said with a certain dark satisfaction.

Stone slung an arm over his shoulders and steered him away from Blue Raven country. "Have you eaten yet?"

"Not since Lindgren's been heaving his guts up," Jarrat admitted.

"Then, come and eat while you file the report." Stone punched for the lift. "You met Leo Michiko?"

"Yeah, but only while I was blind. And before you fret, don't. It was just something like medical atropine."

"Just?" Stone echoed. "You want Kip to take a look at you?"

But Jarrat shook his head. "I'm fine. The Infirmary's the last place I want to be." With a familiar grin he ducked out from under Stone's arm and stepped into the lift, which was half-full of engine techs.

The ops room was still powered up, with both Petrov and Cantrell hovering over a CRT. Evelyn Lang's compilation of tracking data was coming in, and Stone read off the screen, "Denehy headed like a missile to the PharmaTech building. Five gets you ten, he's dumping data and gutting mainframes right now. Covering his ass."

"Wouldn't you?" Cantrell demanded. He gave his hand to Jarrat. "Welcome back, Kevin. Looks like you scored big. Cubes, Stoney?"

Stone passed them over, and Cantrell dropped them into the nearest readers. "Do we still have surveillance on Michiko's place in Aspen?"

"I put sensor drones in the valley," Petrov told him. "If the man even sneezes, we'll hear. If he moves, we'll know where. Tactical has him marked, and Denehy. We won't lose the bastards ... not unless they're smarter asses than we are."

Both datacubes opened smoothly, and on one CRT Stone watched Leo Michiko's financial simulation unfold. If he had expected complex graphics or anything visually stimulating, he was disappointed. Columns of numbers danced through the screen. They might have made sense to an accountant, but Stone admitted, to him they were so much gibberish.

"Grab Lindgren, drag him in here," Jarrat suggested. "He speaks this language. You want to eat, Stoney?"

"Yeah. Get me the steak and mushrooms." Stone was preoccupied with the contents of the second cube, which were streaming through another CRT. This made more sense. The Scorpio files were about the movements of money, raw materials, pure Angel and the cut product; sales figures in credits, dollars and grams; the payroll, schedules and venues; costs, including fleet, payroll and plant.

"Michiko's done us a favor." Jarrat was attending to the autochef, but watching the CRT as intently as if an aeroball final were being played. "He's got the mind of a designing engineer. The Scorpio files are as meticulous as legit company documents. Hal Mavvik's operation was inspired guesswork." He handed a laden plate to Stone. "Eat."

With the ops room busy, they moved to the half-lit cavern of the adjacent briefing room, and Jarrat turned a screen to face him. He was eating as he assembled the mission report, a blend of text, narration, Tactical file pictures, carrier data, captured audio, Stone's and Cronin's video, Lang's tracking 'solution' for Denehy's flight out. The story was simple enough, from Jarrat leaving the Tactical building in the Rand Eclipse hired by Janssen, to the bar crawl last night. His narrative and Stone's dovetailed at beginning and end.

Still eating, he sat back to review the report before the package was bumped on to Central. Bill Dupre would be reading it in four days. By which time, Stone thought with grim satisfaction, the Scorpio bust would be history.

"How in hell does anybody make sense of this?" Petrov was muttering as he reran sections of Michiko's simulation.

Jarrat set the data to transmit and swiveled out the chair. "Haul Lindgren's butt in here ... and take notes, Mischa. The guy's a basket case, but he's good at what he does. We owe him a few favors." He pulled his hands across his face and stretched his shoulders. "If you don't mind, Gene, I'm going to grab some downtime while I can." He gestured at the screen displaying flight schedules. "McKinnen should be coming in on the next courier, and I've a feeling it's going to be a long night."

"Go," Cantrell agreed. "I'll give you a buzz when she gets in."

The greater part of the emotion Stone felt from Jarrat as they made their

way to their quarters was simple relief. He knew the feeling. Even a smooth deep cover assignment was a minefield, and sometimes the adrenaline surge of an event *almost* gone wrong was difficult to shrug off. A flood of fight-or-flight hormones spent themselves in a struggle to get out alive, but an easy escape left them surging.

The cabin lights were soft, and Stone turned his back on the CRT. Let the carrier take care of itself. Both Michiko and Denehy were under surveillance, and neither of them could dump data fast enough to cover their tracks. The final pieces of the puzzle were surely coming in on the *Hebe*, and Stone recognized downtime when he saw it.

He wanted Jarrat in his arms, warm, lean, hard, safe. He wanted to seize Kevin's pliant mouth, crush him in an embrace, breathe the warm male scent of his skin, his hair. Jarrat had no complaints. He came eagerly to Stone and the slender arms tested Stone's ribs.

The empathic shields lowered, fraction by fraction, and Jarrat took a long deep breath. "Christ," he whispered against Stone's neck, "you can get to crave this. Other people don't even know what it feels like."

"Other people," Stone growled, "don't know what they're missing." He laid his mouth on Jarrat's again, met his tongue, caressed it and felt the kiss reverberate through his own nerves. Arrows of excitement rushed through his groin, scintillating in nerve endings which had been neglected, denied, too long.

Bare skin came alive under Jarrat's fingers, prickling, and Stone's head fell back, his eyes closed as he absorbed the sensation through the pores. Kevin thumbed his nipples, rubbed and rolled them. Stone let the shirt fall from his shoulders and took Jarrat's face between his hands. Gray eyes looked questioningly at him, but Stone did not say it. He *felt* it, and saw the corners of Jarrat's mouth lift in a faint smile. *I love you*. The tousled head nodded, and then Jarrat stooped and sucked Stone's right nipple into his mouth. His hands were everywhere and Stone's thoughts spun, hot and dark, behind closed eyelids.

"Too long," Kevin whispered, pressing Stone into the bed.

"You must have been surrounded by Michiko's tame Companions." Stone caught him, pulled him down.

"Not surrounded." Jarrat knelt beside him, laid him bare to his thighs, and sat back to consider his plunder. "The Companions were there, but ... you saw the AuraNet videos of Reineck? The Companions were mostly the same. Michiko likes them as artificial as he prefers his environments. If the Companions weren't gene-tweaked or augmented, they weren't working for Scorpio. Not," he added, "like *this*." And he put his head down to swallow Stone, crown to root.

With a sharp cry, Stone arched up to meet him. He held Jarrat's head to the task, not forcing but encouraging. Threads of delight braided with torment, leaving Stone scalded, his nerves filled with the curious echoes and re-echoes of Jarrat's own sensations ... as if his own mouth were full of hard, blood-hot flesh, his own nose musk-prickled.

At last he urged Jarrat away before it was too late — but Kevin knew this

too. The gray eyes were dark, teasing. Jarrat's hand folded about the hard rod of Stone's cock. "You know what I want."

"I ... might just know what you want," Stone admitted.

Jarrat's chuckle only mocked himself as he stood and slid off the black jeans. "Lindgren used to ask me why I had no interest in the Companions. He never guessed I have someone."

"Myopia," Stone suggested, with heavy eyes watching Jarrat fetch a glass of wine, a tub of gel, a washcloth smelling of cedar and spruce. He was magnificent, Stone thought, and for a moment he glimpsed Jarrat as another man might have seen him. He saw the cougar which Jesse Lawrence had once glimpsed, as Jarrat prowled back to the bed. And then Kevin set the wine on the night stand, and pounced.

If Stone had wanted to, he could have easily have overpowered him. Jarrat was a strong man but his leanness translated into speed, agility, bursts of physical strength which could be surprising. Stone's own strength was different; his physique was designed for power, his muscles trained for raw effort. Neither man underestimated the other, and Stone knew how stubborn Jarrat could be. Once he had inspired Kevin to wrestle, Jarrat would push every sinew to the limit.

This was not the place, nor the time. Stone slithered, maneuvered, challenged him to a game of stealth and wit rather than strength. The game was an old one. It never mattered who won. This time laughter defeated Jarrat. He had too keen a sense of the ridiculous to wrestle for long, and Stone pinned him so easily, he could hardly call it a victory.

"Got you," he told Jarrat, growling against his ear.

"Got me." Jarrat was still laughing. The sheet muffled his voice. Stone had one knee on his back, and Kevin deliberately went limp.

"To the victor, the spoils," Stone observed,

"We who are about to die," Jarrat intoned, "salute you."

"About to die?" Stone took the slender hips in both hands and physically lifted him to his knees. Kevin was not complaining.

"Isn't it what they used to say? In the Roman arena?" Jarrat spread his legs and took his weight on knees and elbows.

Stone reached under and dealt him a cold, gel-slick caress from the tip of his shaft to the bud of muscle at the heart of him. He felt Jarrat's shiver of excitement through his own nerves, and his voice was not steady as he said, "You're not in the Roman arena, mate." He slipped his fingers inside. "But if you want to salute a brother officer —"

The single finger Jarrat raised was not quite the military's idea of a salute, and Stone laughed. He leaned down, left a sharp bite-brand on Jarrat's right hip, and Kevin was still gasping when he was filled. Stone could not be still as Jarrat's body gripped him tight. The energy of the hunt, the chase, was still driving them both. In the mind's eye was the frozen cityscape of Thule, the moment of freefall when Jarrat was forty levels above the street, blind in the ice fog and the blizzard of the gunship's fierce downthrust.

The coupling was too urgent to last long. Jarrat's slim hips humped back to urge Stone, and the chase was on again, a hunt for release this time, for

pleasure which echoed on and on, like thunder in the high valleys. Stone threw back his head, face creased in the moment of sublime self-awareness, flooded with Jarrat's sensations until he could barely tell where one flesh ended and another began.

Musk wreathed them, the tang of fresh sweat, the mown-hay scent of Jarrat's coming. Stone rested on him for some moments, and as Kevin began to show signs of returning to life, he slipped away to the side. Jarrat groped for the washcloth and lobbed it back over his shoulder. "To the victor, the chores."

Stone dropped a kiss on the brand he had left on Kevin's hip, and did the honors with what grace he could find. Jarrat curled up on his side, stretched out his spine, and reached for the wine.

The semidry white reminded Stone of the restaurants of Venice, Chryse, Barcelona. They were quiet a long time, and the glass was empty when a soft chime from the CRT informed them of the arrival of the *Hebe*. Stone gave an eloquent grunt and sat up. "You might want to catch up with the goods from Oromon, and the society-page crap from GlobalNet. Quinn came through late. I had to sift a lifetime's worth of soap opera to find a few jewels."

Jarrat stood, stretched till Stone heard his spine crackle, and reached for his jeans. "If McKinnen's on the courier at all," he warned as he fetched a coffee and headed for the CRT.

She was. She also refused to address business until she had showered, changed, eaten and talked to Reardon and Del. The tiny cargo hold of the *Hebe* was overloaded with gear from Del's lab in the NARC compound, and the freight loaders had not known which crates were fragile, what could be stacked, what should be top-loaded. It could, she warned Petrov as Stone listened to the comm loop, be chaos, and McKinnen refused to accept any responsibility.

"Oh, joy," Stone muttered, and fell face-down on the bed. "Give her a couple of hours, Kevin." Blindly, he held out his hand. "Lie down, catch forty while you can."

A familiar, welcome weight bounced the mattress beside him. Stone had not slept properly since Jarrat went into Scorpio, and his brain was longing for sleep. His thoughts unraveled pleasantly but he never lost his sense of time. He knew he had been asleep a little over ninety minutes when the soft audio track of the CRT woke him. Jarrat was watching his edit of the video supplied by Arial Quinn, a fifteen minute cut of more than six hours of file footage. With a groan, Stone pulled up the sheet and turned over, but he was awake now and listened to the audio.

The stories were trawled from the bottom of the archive. Senator Cassius Brand had married twice, once when he was expected to produce an heir, the second time when he was in his late sixties. Neither marriage lasted long; only the first produced a child. The boy's mother was Hunter Santini, a daughter of one of the first families. She married Brand when she was just seventeen, and they divorced when Marcus was six years old, without a battle for custody. Cassius was forty-three, and if they had lost their rapport he might have seemed more like her father. The society wedding was a major 'event' in

Thule; the divorce barely rated a mention, though Brand was in the news constantly.

He became a senator comparatively late, at an age when many people were at least considering retirement. Until his seventieth year, he was an economist and investment counselor, a forty-year career built on a degree awarded by University of Aurora, Thule. Spokesmen for UAT called him a 'gifted and ambitious student.' The Brands were not an especially wealthy family, but Cassius secured a ten-digit personal fortune before he was forty. His name was linked with scores of women and as many men, both notorious Companions and eligible heiresses. A society match was only a matter of time. Thule salivated. For years Brand was linked to every eligible bachelor of either gender. At last, seemingly in an act of defiance, he chose the teenage Hunter Santini.

The made-in-hell marriage was doomed from the beginning, but Santini was soon pregnant, and Marcus was born when she was just four months past her eighteenth birthday. The couple did not share a home. Hunter had her circle of late-teen friends, and Cassius was increasingly involved in colonial politics. The paparazzi hounded them, spotlighting Hunter Santini-Brand's wild partying. She lived to be only thirty, and died instantly when a pilot with a blood-alcohol level four times over the legal limit flew their Yamazake Katana into the slopes of Mount McKay, on approach to one of the resorts near Aspen. Marcus was twelve. The boy stood by his father at a crematorium on the east side of Argyll, and seemed merely puzzled. Cassius, then almost fifty years old, wore a disapproving mask. The Santini family seemed to have expected this for some time: there were tears, but no surprise.

Still, the paparazzi swarmed around Brand, first trying to link him with lovers, then with organized crime as his business interests expanded. His political affiliations became tangled, and he was involved in savage court battles. As an investment counselor, he had advised and invested on behalf of Thule's most affluent individuals, including the first families, the descendants of the pioneer fleet. They had trusted him for decades and were horrified when he entered dealings with industrialists from out of system, whom the first families characterized as 'trash.'

These were the years when Cassius Brand became an active member of the Angel Reform Society, a body of civilians, corporate executives, celebrities and academics, spread through almost every colony. This was the citizens' committee which mooted and lobbied the 'NARC bill,' and Brand's signature was among the first on it, many years before he became the Senator for Thule, and before Marcus became an Angel statistic. Belonging to the Angel Reform Society was politically correct. Powerful points could be scored in business just by appearing on the membership roll. The committee still existed somewhere in NARC's shadow, and Brand remained nominally a member.

Many of his business associates were unknown to NARC, but Pietro Den-ehy's name and face soon appeared in Aurora's GlobalNet newsvids. PharmaTech had moved out to Aurora, and Brand helped to secure permits, licenses, incorporation, tax breaks. By now Marcus was in his early twenties,

and had been sent to the homeworlds to do his higher degree. He was tromping doggedly in his father's footsteps, reading economics at University of Mars, Chryse, where GlobalNet's affiliates kept track of him. The kid was part-way through his Master's when Cassius Brand struck up his long personal association with Denehy. And Marcus was keeping bad company, according to GlobalNet. He was always at the wrong parties, with the wrong people.

The next GlobalNet feature Quinn had found was the furor, back home in Thule. The kid was reported DOA at Angel of Kansai, but before the death certificate was hardcopied, Cass Brand's surgeons had raced in with their own equipment. They had Marcus on life support before they began brain scans. Three days later — while Cassius and the Angel of Kansai administrators launched into a legal war about improper certification of death, and 'wrongful professional incursion' which would go on for years and create a feast of paparazzi fodder — Marcus was sealed into the only available cryotank.

It was old but serviceable, and the medics rated it Marcus's only chance of survival. The body was clinically dead, but the brain had not yet quit. The 'crash crew' at Kansai Emergency had not tried to resuscitate. Marcus had only days to live, and he would have lived them in constant pain. And, then as now, Angel of Kansai had no policy of tanking Angel victims after the death certificate had been signed.

The 'death' of his son marked a turning point in Cassius Brand's life. He delegated increasingly vast segments of his business to underlings and vanished from Thule society for months at a time. Six years after he brought Marcus home *in lacus*, and following a six-month disappearance, he unexpectedly married. She was Valda Rönniken, two years older than Cassius himself, and one of the chief research pharmacologists at Denehy's company. The marriage lasted five years, but for nine years more Rönniken remained one of Brand's closest associates until she left Aurora to take up a position as one of the directors of PhamaTech's Mars facility. During these years Brand retired from business and became the Senator for Thule.

"And the factor GlobalNet didn't have hold of, and still doesn't," Stone said softly as the video edit ended, "is, Brand was getting sick. Bergman Syndrome. When he'd vanish, he was getting treatment, and you can bet Valda Rönniken wasn't his wife, she was his doctor."

Jarrat turned the chair around to face Stone and leaned back to stretch his shoulders. He was in the blue silk kimono Stone had given him last time they were on furlough, before they shipped out to fly with Jack Brogan's 'Bad Company.' His long legs were crossed at the ankle and the kimono was light, loose, inviting. But Jarrat's mind was focused on the job. Stone knew that look, and let him think. For himself, he was dressed in sweats and the soft-soled Tactical boots he liked. He fetched green tea while Jarrat played the Braith Germer file and, as if he were keeping the best for last, ran the Michiko interview.

A pageant of expressions crossed his mobile face, from interest to fascination to anger. At last he looked at the data appended to the audio track and swore softly as he saw the record of densely encrypted signals headed out of Michiko's house in Aspen. Those transmissions were gibberish without an

Ibex comm portal, which could only mean Michiko was serving fair warning to Denehy: *NARC knows*.

Little wonder, Stone thought as Jarrat closed down the last file, that Denehy was at the Wisting Company building within an hour, cleaning any physical trace of himself from the Michiko Aurora offices, dumping data, providing the palmprints that would scam the mainframes, lobotomize the system before NARC specialists could get hold of it.

"It's good enough for me," Jarrat said at last, "even if McKinnen came up blank at DAC."

"And we know she didn't." Stone handed him a cup.

The green tea was cool. It went down in one draft before Jarrat got to his feet, handed Stone the robe and began to hunt for the clothes he had dropped anywhere. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Mars," Stone said darkly. "All roads lead back there, or from there. *Something* happened, or didn't happen ... a long time ago."

"And the repercussions are still making people run scared," Jarrat added. He gave Stone a speculative look. "We need to go talk to Harry."

"About a tank." Stone drained the mug, left it by the CRT, and took Jarrat's face in his hands. They kissed, hard and deep, and then Stone left the cabin ahead of Jarrat.

The Infirmary was quiet. Braith Germer was gone, and though Chuck Lindgren was sitting up in one of the beds in the observation ward, he was engrossed in work requiring two laptops. He did not even notice Jarrat pass by into the lab where Reardon had installed Marcus Brand's tank.

"He'll be taking Michiko's sim to pieces, translating it into sense," Jarrat said quietly as the lab's door closed over. "How are you, Harry?"

Del was equally as engrossed as Lindgren, and the service panels were off the cryogen tank. A mess of spaghetti-cables spilled out and fed into the four machines he had sent for, from Darwin's. The empath only grunted as Jarrat and Stone appeared, and gestured at the chaos of machines, leads, probes and monitors.

"Careful what you step on."

"What the hell is this stuff?" Stone demanded. He did not recognize any of the gear.

"Most of it, I designed myself." Del was preoccupied with the work. "I built these contraptions way back on Rethan. You can't get anything like them, even from IntelScan."

"Sell the patents and retire," Stone suggested aridly.

The empath angled a glance at him. "I've thought about it."

"Any progress?" Jarrat was peering through the transparent plate, looking at the young-old face within. Angeldeath was never easy. The months preceding it could be worse than a terminal disease. Jarrat shook his head over the young man. "You can get him out?"

"Oh, I can get him out," Harry said thoughtfully, "so long as I can get this antique apology for a mechanism to hold itself up long enough to scramble through the retrieval procedure. Bud and I have been scrounging for spare parts, rigging things, even making components. I'll hand it to your engineer:

he had to make the *tools* before he could make the parts! He's good."

"When will you do it?" Stone wondered.

"Bring him out?" Harry stood up and massaged his neck with both hands. "I'm almost ready to give it a shot. I want Bud here to monitor the machinery, and Kip here to monitor both Marcus and me ... I'll be linked with the boy even before he's halfway through retrieval, and there's a real element of danger."

"Christ," Jarrat muttered. "Don't put yourself at risk. It's a great thing you're doing for the kid. His old man should be on his knees thanking you ... and Stoney and I could use what Marcus knows! But it's not worth your life. Or your sanity," he added with a thoughtful glance at Stone.

But Harry was frowning deeply over Marcus. "I don't think it'll go so far, but I'm not fool enough to do the job without Kip and Bud right here. This is what nature designed me for." He gave Jarrat the ghost of a smile. "I am what I am, I do what I do, or I'm ... just a freak."

"You're the only guy, in or out of any lab, anywhere, who's halfway to an Angel blocker," Stone added. He set a hand on Del's arm. "Don't compromise your work, or the future, for the sake of one kid and a bitter old man."

"Melodramatic, Stoney," Del accused good naturedly.

"Is it?" Stone was not so sure. Thoughtfully, he passed a hand back over the short-cropped hair capping his skull. "I'm not so sure."

Del sobered, considered the question, and at last could only shrug. "I won't take unnecessary risks. Trust me, Stoney ... I've no more wish to quit this mortal coil than you have, and you and Kevin both fought to live, fang and claw. Determination is the only reason you're still here."

"Ops room, looking for Cap Stone or Cap Jarrat." Curt Gable's voice intruded quietly from the comm by the door.

"Get lost," Harry told them with a familiar grin. "Let me work. Kip's getting some rest. He was in the OR for three hours with an accident case. And Budweisser's still trying to solve some ignition problem before the tender pulls out. It's going to be hours before I can yank this kid out of the deep-freeze ... and when I do," he added, his voice becoming shadowed, "I'll be linked to a brain that's only half-aware, while Kip gets the body back on life-support before it quits again. Remember, Marcus is *dead*, the body itself is so busted up, it wants to stay dead, though there's a lick of brain activity left. The brain is the last organ to die. Everything we're doing is defying nature, tampering with what's natural." He studied Jarrat with a puzzled, even disquieted look. "You were never actually dead. Almost, but never quite gone. But Marcus was ... is. I'm not actually sure. There's a question I can't answer, Kevin, Stoney. No one can."

"Go ahead," Jarrat invited, though he and Stone were on the way out.

The healer's brows rose. "The kid was dead. They resuscitated before brain activity quit and tanked him. Twenty-five years in cryogen." He paused. "What happens to the mind in that time? Are mind and brain the same? Or is there a part of us which is more than cells, molecules, electricity. The part of a person we could call their soul, or spirit. The part of us," Del sighed, "which might survive after death."

Stone was aware of a faint shiver. He knew what Harry was saying. "Who the hell knows? You're saying, you might retrieve Marcus and wind up with a vegetable? The brain lives but the mind's gone?"

"Exactly." Harry folded his arms across the loud island-print shirt. "If I tell you the truth, Marc Brand has become something of an experiment to me. I've no idea what I'll find when I get into his brain. Or if he's still in there. If there's no surviving personality, I'll back out, tell Kip what I found, and we'll let the body expire naturally. Cassius only needs to know Marcus didn't survive the retrieval. Blame the old tank. No one needs to be held accountable, no matter what he said that day. He would have denied it to the death, but you two had rattled him, gotten him thoroughly shook-up." He laid both hands flat on the tank. "The body's alive, and there *was* brain activity. This is all I know. But to the best of my knowledge, no one's ever been tanked so long, after resuscitation. There's no precedent. Kip and I are down to sheer guesswork."

"Then guess," Stone said thoughtfully, "but like Kevin said, don't put your life or your sanity on the line, Harry. It's not worth it."

On that sentiment, he stepped out before Del could argue. Lindgren's bed was empty; the laptops were processing and voices mumbled from the adjoining office. Jarrat took the opportunity to escape before the accountant could return.

The CRTs were still busy but the ops room had been powered down. Stone took a moment to catch up with affairs on the street in Thule, but all was quiet. A 'summer storm' was coming in. The bottom had fallen out of the barometer, and nothing pacified the city faster than thirty-below temperatures and wind-borne ice crystals which would lacerate a man's face and strip his lungs to blood.

Stone had seen many things on Yvette McKinnen's face, but never glee. She wore a smirk, not a smile. Behind her, Curt Gable was so intent on a CRT, he had not even seen the captains come in.

"We lucked out," Stone guessed.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," McKinnen retorted.

"DAC-Venice didn't pick up the AI?" Jarrat asked sharply.

She gave him a mock glare. "There's no need to be insulting. Colonel Dupre doesn't even know I interrogated DAC-Venice. He thinks I returned to Darwin's for special equipment from my own lab and Del's, and it's not wholly a lie. Harry's machines made it here relatively unscathed, though I had to stop the Starfleet freight loaders reducing them to wreckage." She indulged herself in a smile of triumph. "Call a briefing. Take the data return from Scorpio, add the material accessed from GlobalNet and the gunrunner, then factor in what we have learned from Data Access Corporation, and —"

"Scorpio is busted," Jarrat growled.

"It's so busted, McKinnen added smugly, "closure should be a mere formality."

"Don't get out your rubber stamp," Stone warned. "Denehy and Michiko are not the kind to give in gracefully. And as for Brand, I haven't been able to wring a word out of him in days."

"He's old, sick, and afraid for his kid ... push," Jarrat observed, "is about to come to shove. He gets his son back, or he doesn't, and right now, I think Cassius Brand has a different bundle of priorities. Scorpio, politics, business? None of it matters any more." He lifted a brow at Stone. "Denehy and Michiko were trading signals, military-grade encryption, as you left Aspen. We've had the buggers spooked for days."

"Like you said, push is coming to shove with a vengeance," Stone agreed. "Curt, get Petrov and Cantrell in here. Doc McKinnen, I'll ask you to set up a presentation."

"Already edited," she said, smug again. "I took the whole thing to pieces on the way back over ... one has to do something on a courier, or go mad with boredom."

Gable gestured at one of the CRTs. "I've been watching Lindgren's stuff, while he's working. Reardon's got him in the Infirmary till his panic attacks settle down." He tapped his chest. "The guy's a cardio case. But his work is damned fine. You're going to want to see Michiko's sim, since it's been translated into people-language."

"Briefing," Jarrat decided. "An hour?"

"Two," Stone said thoughtfully. "Give the Ravens a chance to get in, flightcrews and all. This one could get ugly. They have a right to know what's going down."

"Two hours," Jarrat agreed. "And the *Olympic*, and Tactical?"

"If they can get over here." Stone's teeth worried his lip and he paused to watch the CRTs which were repeating tracking and surveillance data. "Michiko and Denehy are still in Aspen and Thule, but there's a lot of coming and going around PharmaTech ... and Inquanoc." He took a breath, held it. "I have the proverbial bad feeling."

"Call Holder and Janssen, Curt." Jarrat glanced at his chrono. "Briefing, two hours, right here."

The pilot had on a headset and was already intruding on Petrov's downtime. "Where will you be?" he called after Jarrat and Stone as they stepped out of the ops room.

"Running Doc McKinnen's data," Stone told him. "We want to get a jump on the briefing." He gestured at the CRTs which displayed both NARC and Tactical data. "Anything unusual even twitches around Denehy or Michiko, anything at all, we want to know about it!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The AI which had insinuated itself into the DAC-Venice archive was closer to a virus than a surveillance drone. McKinnen had based it on an existing program, tweaked it with a few ideas from Tactical's rogue AI, and sent it into the DAC mainframes disguised as a legit messaging service. DAC never knew they had been infiltrated; and it was not the first time it had happened. The footprints of previous insurgents were everywhere. Someone had been erasing files on a wide scale, and the Data Access Corporation knew nothing about it.

The earliest documents returned by McKinnen's AI were fifty-six years old, and Jarrat was surprised, though he realized he should not have been. Leo Michiko was much older than he looked ... and the name on his birth certificate was not Leo Michiko.

Around the table in the briefing room were the descant unit leaders, the gunship pilots, the carrier pilot, the department heads or their deputies. Rear-don and Budweisser were busy with the Marcus Brand project, but a lieutenant from the infirmary and a senior crew chief from the engine deck were present. They were as intent on the CRTs displaying McKinnen's presentation as were Archer, Lang, and Colonel Eric Holder, who had shuttled over from the *Olympic*. Kris Janssen was conferencing from Thule; a videodrone hovered discreetly behind the seated officers, and her face was framed in one of the CRTs.

The quiet around the table was profound as McKinnen's data unfolded. Jarrat had seen it an hour before. Now, he stood back out of the lights with Stone. Behind Cronin, Archer and Lang, he drank coffee and studied the face of a man he knew simply as The Voice. Michiko was at right of the screen; data marched endlessly on the left while McKinnen's voice narrated the story her AI had uncovered.

Leo Michiko was half Japanese, half Italian. His birth name was Inoshiro Carvoni and the new name was registered not on Earth or Mars, but in Thule. The name of Michiko was untraceable in the homeworlds without a background search extending to Aurora. If he were pressed on the subject, Michiko would doubtlessly claim an oversight, since a person could be redocumented for just a hundred-credit processing fee. But Jarrat doubted it was an oversight. Michiko would have been eager to outrun the name of 'Carvoni,' otherwise he would never have left the homeworlds.

He was born in Marsport, where the Carvonis were civil engineers, one generation out from Earth. The parents must have despaired of the young Inoshiro. He was a wildchild who grew up into a thug, with a long Tactical

rap-sheet, and few of the offenses were trivial. He was busted twice during his college days, once for 'flying stoned,' and a second time on sex-related charges. He hired the entertainment for a campus romp, and half the Companions were underage.

The 'sex kids scandal' made the headlines in Marsport and Chryse, where Carvoni was expelled from UMC, two years short of his degrees. He had been majoring in architecture, with a minor in repulsion physics, but when he was dumped by UMC, no other polytechnic on Mars would touch him.

The universities of Earth were already too expensive for a colonial kid from an ordinary family to even think of attending, so Inoshiro Carvoni signed aboard a colony ship, bound not for Aurora but for the raw new world of Providence, deep in the Cygnus Colonies. Individuals with the guts to accept a hard life on the frontier were given the chance to start over. Few questions were asked, few documents asked for or generated by Colonial Immigration Services.

Carvoni found himself in the new spaceport city of Johannesburg, and he had gotten out of Marsport with enough cash to bum a ride on a rim-runner. The freighter was headed for Aurora, where petty stories from the homeworlds never warranted coverage, and where he promptly paid the hundred-credit fee, and redocumented himself. As Leo Michiko he finished his degrees at University of Aurora, Thule, and UAT had nothing bad to report. From the moment Carvoni became Michiko, he was a high-grade student with an impeccable record, as if he had frightened himself onto the legit side of the fence.

Subsequent records stored by DAC-Venice detailed his business affairs, contracts, tax audits, and he was ostensibly squeaky-clean. But McKinnen's AI had been set to probe not forward, but back. It had wormed its way through ancient Tactical files and, appended to one of these, was a candid holosnap captured at a wild dorm party back on the campus at University of Mars, Chryse, before the 'sex kids' affair.

The image came up on the CRT, zoomed and froze. McKinnen had set it to zoom on one segment of the picture, where Inoshiro Carvoni was crashed on one end of an overcrowded couch, squeezed against a voluptuous Companion on one side, and a young man on the other.

When Jarrat saw this an hour before it had taken a few moments for recognition to dawn. He waited, now, for the same recognition to hit the officers around the table who had been keeping abreast of the investigation. For the benefit of the others, McKinnen's readover said,

"The young man at Michiko's left hand, at right of your screen, is Marcus Brand. In this image, young Brand is approximately twenty, a few years younger than Michiko, who was then known by his birth name, Carvoni. According to Tac records, the two were frequently carded in city bottom dens, where house security is required to report their patrons. And UMC records state that Carvoni and Brand roomed together for a semester. And here, the oddities begin."

"Begin?" Stone echoed in a whisper, close to Jarrat's ear.

The voice track for the presentation had been laid while McKinnen was

halfway back to Aurora, aboard the courier. "Tactical had cause to ticket Carvoni several times, most often for reckless flying, but he was arrested only once prior to the 'campus sex party' event, for flying — not to put too fine a point on it — while stoned right out of his twenty-four-year-old gourd. He appeared in court, entered a plea of guilty and paid a massive fine. The Marsport Magistrate's Assembly records a *cash* settlement of five thousand credits. The aircraft was impounded during the proceedings; Marsport Tactical recorded it as a Chevrolet SkyPirate, valued at sixty-five thousand credits. Marsport Vehicle Registration list Michiko as the sole owner, following a cash purchase from the Chev dealership in Chryse ... which is interesting, when one remembers, the Carvoni family were lower middle-class, from the so-called 'wrong side' of Marsport. Following his final altercation with Tactical, the 'sex kids scandal,' Carvoni was financially unable to transfer to an orthodox university on Earth, but he arrived in Providence with enough funding to get out of the colony aboard a freighter, land in Aurora, change his name and complete his degrees as Leo Michiko."

The presentation froze on an image of Michiko as he was known in Thule society now. McKinnen stepped into the lights. "No records explain how Michiko came by the cash to buy the SkyPirate, or pay his monstrous fines, but whatever his source was, it dried up when he placed himself in the media spotlight. He left the homeworlds under a cloud, but no sooner did he arrive in the Providence colony than he was back in the money. Inoshiro Carvoni vanished, slipped through the cracks when he became Michiko in Thule ... but in the year he passed briefly through Providence, the city of Johannesburg reported quite an Angel problem. It's common on the frontier where people can feel trapped in harsh conditions, with no means of escape."

"And it's a small leap of intuition," Jarrat added, "to figure Michiko was dealing, probably Angel, in college. You can bet he was dumped by the syndicate controlling Chryse and Marsport when he put himself in the GlobalNet spotlight. And we know the cartel, way back when."

"Aphelion," Stone said bleakly. "They weren't busted. NARC had only been open for business six or seven years when the Brand boy was tanked, and it seems Earth didn't trust us to work in the homeworlds."

"It took a few years before we earned our spurs." Cantrell said quietly. He was one of the few officers still in the field who had been there in Marcus Brand's day. "We were cleared to work closer to home when they wanted the Angel cartel cleaned out of the Jupiter system. It was the tentacles of Aphelion, of course, but by the time we busted them out of Callisto, Ganymede and Europa the bosses took the opportunity to vanish out of Mars, as if they'd bled away into the sand. Tac in Chryse and Marsport had the buggers under surveillance, but Mars was easy to get out of. Still is. It's not a rat-circus like Earth."

This was more or less the story as Jarrat had always understood it, and he gave Gene a grin. "What Captain Cantrell didn't tell you," he said to the gathering of officers, "is that the Jupiter arm of Aphelion was his first bust at command rank. He's too modest. The trick is to get a couple of pink gins into him and get him on the subject ... it's a hell of a story. And," he added with

a wry glare at the image of Michiko captured in the CRT, "you can bet your last credit Leo got away from Mars, and got his oars back in the water, by smuggling an Angel shipment into Providence. Mules are very well paid. Next stop Thule. New name, legit degrees, and a company in a midtown office."

"Don't underestimate Michiko," Stone said thoughtfully. "He's not a gangster like Hal Mavvik, nor is he a politician like Randolph Dorne. When I talked to him, I got the impression of an idealist as well as an industrialist. He has some weird-ass notions about designing the future of Mankind. A lot of folks working for the legit company seem to idolize him. They'll tell you their Leo's a visionary."

"They have no idea," Jarrat added, "he was just a punk when he was young. In any case, Inoshiro Carvoni seems to have scared himself into legitimizing. As soon as he become Michiko, there was no more campus crap, no more tickets for drunk flying or hiring underage kids as party favors." He paused, bringing to mind everything he had heard and seen inside Scorpio, everything he had heard from Lindgren. "Don't be too eager to indict Michiko for the 'sex kids' thing. He was young himself, dumb as mud bricks, and a lot of Companions *do* start way too young. They buy ID to backdate their records a couple of years, live hard and age fast. Hiring a Companion three *months* on the low side of the line is all it takes for the law to roast a guy alive. The episode was probably a prank gone haywire ... Michiko still likes to hire 'em young and nubile, both genders, and you know he's been gene-tweaked or modified himself ... he hasn't aged."

"He's been modified four times." McKinnen released the display and the presentation began to roll again.

Her AI had tracked down multiple medical records. Michiko had optioned gene therapies, retarding his age. At fifty-six years old, he could have been in his early thirties, and he obviously had no intention of letting time and age creep up on him. As if, Jarrat thought, the 'weird-ass' visionary wanted to be there to witness the future he had designed. And if he had to crucify several generations with Angel, so be it. He despised his victims.

The AI was not done yet. Working with every erg of speed provided by the most powerful archival mainbrains on Darwin's World, it rampaged through Data Access Corporation like a virus, gathering, storing, even collating on the fly. It probed the whole group in which Michiko and Marcus Brand had lived and moved at UMC. University records spat back names; Tac rap-sheets, tax returns, bank accounts, property movements, marriage, deaths, births, mapping the lives of multitudes of individuals, including teachers and administrators.

Data came to light that had not been looked for, and the AI collated it impartially: a UMC administrator who was busted for getting female students pregnant ... a senior student who served twenty months in a correctional facility in Marsport for embezzling a scholarship fund ... faculty parties where the airborne Buran would knock you over as you walked through the door ... a final-year med student, whose death certificate was rewritten so it would not read 'Angel OD,' because the truth would set a bad example to younger students. Over a five year period, UMC embraced upwards of eighty thousand

individuals, and the AI widened its search to include their families, creating a dossier measured in terabytes. The vast part of this was unrelated to Angel, but the collation revealed enough to end careers, bankrupt some people, put others behind bars. All this, McKinnen had edited out into a separate file labeled only with a question mark. What to do with data NARC should never have gotten hold of was not her problem.

But as the AI raced through the archive it churned up other data, and Jar-rat was waiting for the murmur from around the table as an image appeared. Another holosnap, a couple of kids in the back of a very expensive car. They knew by now, the Chev SkyPirate belonged to Michiko, and it was the only one on campus. In the back seat were Marcus Brand and a boy identified from his student ID mugshots as Jason Denehy.

The image froze and McKinnen stepped into the lights. "There are very few records of Pietro Denehy's son. Most have been erased from the archive. My AI found the footprints of insurgents all over the mainframes, and in any case, Jason Denehy did not live long enough to leave many records. I have reason to suspect Michiko ... once known as Inoshiro Carvoni ... is right now in the process of systematically erasing his younger self. Our file search was timely. Previously, Michiko probably saw no reason to run the DAC gauntlet. Don't underestimate the difficulty, and the risk! Harry Del's presence in Senator Brand's house is more than likely his inspiration. With Marcus one breath short of dead, Michiko had no problem. But if Marcus should be retrieved from cryogen the Inoshiro Carvoni fiasco would reawaken with him. An absence of records documenting Carvoni's history, even his existence, gives Michiko the option of denying any allegations.

"According to UMC and Tactical Jason Denehy lived fast, high and wild for eighteen months, perhaps two years, before he was found very dead ... not on Mars, but in city bottom Thule. There was no way his death could be concealed, nor the death certificate altered, but the records were sealed. Colonel Janssen has no access to them, though her own department would have handled the case. Jason Denehy was killed in a brutal gangland-style execution."

"Jesus," Cantrell whispered.

"There's a little more," McKinnen added. "I don't believe even Jason's father, the Pete Denehy who today is at the head of PharmaTech, knew his son was legally married." Faces turned toward her and she aimed the remote at the CRT, pulling up another image. "The marriage took place in Chryse, just before Jason headed out into the colonies. There's no reason why Denehy, Senior should have known about it ... but the spouse is still living, right here, insystem. At the time of the marriage his name was Willem Kronjer, but this was changed at the time of Jason's murder, probably wisely. The documents were processed in a tiny mining town, Freehold, far away from Chryse or Marsport.

"New ID, passport, licenses, everything, were issued in the new name of Vern Stromberg. Immigration lists him outbound from the homeworlds very soon after Jason died. According to Aurora Vehicle Registration, the same Vern Stromberg lives on Maui, just outside Mackenzie. No further marriages,

no children; regular tax returns, a series of boats, a business, a house." McKinnen set down the remote and took the chair at the end of the table. "He was at UMC," she said to Jarrat and Stone. "He ran with a rat-pack which included Michiko, Marcus Brand and Jason Denehy. And he married Jason.

"These were the years when Michiko was running wild and NARC flushed Aphelion out of the Jupiter system ... when Jason Denehy was murdered and Marcus Brand was preserved in cryogen. Will Kronjer, or Stromberg as he has been for two thirds of his life now, was born in Thule. He's fifty-seven years old, and owns four boats working out of Mackenzie. If I wanted to know what happened twenty-five years ago on Mars," McKinnen finished, "I'd go talk to Vern Stromberg."

Profanity was chattering around the table when Stone lifted a brow at Janssen's videodrone. They had run this data as soon as McKinnen provided it, and an hour ago an officer at Thule Tac had been asked to track down Stromberg. "You find him?" Stone asked Janssen, via the drone which hovered behind Cantrell.

On the CRT, her image said acidly, "He wasn't hard to find. Not too many trawler skippers in Mackenzie have the name of Stromberg. And you're in luck, he's in port right now. We called him, asked if he's aware NARC is insystem, and if he's willing to talk." She paused. "As if he has a choice. Naturally, he's *delighted* to talk to you."

"Surveillance?" Jarrat asked of Petrov.

The Russian took over the CRT display. "Loads of pushing and shoving, coming and going, around PharmaTech and Inquanoc. Some kind of bull-shit's brewing, but it's hard to tell what. You want we should assign arrest orders for Michiko and Denehy? What about Brand?"

"No!" Janssen's voice was a whipcrack. "Jarrat, Stone, for godsakes be careful. From what we're seeing, groundside, PharmaTech is ready to deploy. You're looking at a good-sized corporate army, equipped at least as well as Equinox. You issue arrest warrants, they *will* deploy. You put Starfleet peace-corps troops on the street and NARC riot troops in the hot-zones ... that's how fucking corporate wars start!" She glared out of the screen. "This colony's too delicate to survive. The spheres, the underground. You saw what happened in Mostov. You want to see Argentia and Arkadia explode? We'll be another Sheal, or worse, abandoned like Oromon, because if you dump two or three million people on the surface in thirty below, they'll be dead in minutes."

"Colonel," Stone said evenly, "take a deep breath. We know the score. There isn't going to be a corporate war, NARC against PharmaTech, and we can virtually guarantee, Colonel Holder wouldn't commit peace-corps troops under these conditions." He was looking at the Starfleet man, brows arched, as he spoke.

"Not a chance," Eric Holder said succinctly, "in hell, Captain Stone." He frowned at the CRT, and at Janssen. "We've been that route before, Kris. It's a road to hell. Make no mistake, Starfleet could crush not only the Angel syndicate and the corporate Army, but the whole colony. In fact, this is the prob-

lem. We don't have the infrastructure, the resources or the tools to perform surgical incisions, deep inside the civilian community. Nor do you, Kris."

Holder and Janssen clearly knew each other from way back, and Jarrat had stopped wondering about Janssen's contact in Starfleet. Holder looked over at Jarrat and Stone, and sat back with a frown.

"I've been monitoring your data feed," he said at last. "PharmaTech is a force to be reckoned with. I mean you no disrespect, Kris, but Tactical will be torn to rags if you try to engage them, and then your corporate war would happen anyway."

"I know, we've always known." Janssen looked tired. "The same's true of our colonial militia. They're a bunch of weekend warriors, half-trained and armed about half as effectively as PharmaTech. NARC informed me about the Oromon arms bazaar. Your people did damned good work, Eric. But I think we're done now, all of us. I'm recommending the militia be pulled out, and I'm pulling Tactical back from the zones until further notice. It's NARC's war."

"Christ," Stone said soundlessly.

"Angelwar." Jarrat struggled to find his pragmatic streak, and settled for cynicism instead. "It's what we're here for, Stoney." He looked at his chrono, and at Petrov's surveillance data. "You want to talk to Stromberg while we have time? They're shuttling back and forth between PharmaTech and Inquanoc, and frankly, I'm inclined to let them stew. I don't want to be the one who touches off *any* kind of war."

Stone's brow was creased in a frown. "You're maybe thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Covert op?" Jarrat guessed. "No warning. Go in, grab Michiko and Denehy, dead or alive, bring the buggers out ..."

"Issue the arrest warrants after the fact, backdated," Stone finished. He looked speculatively at Cantrell.

"It's unorthodox," Cantrell said slowly.

"So jiggle numbers," Jarrat suggested. "It's been done before." He was watching the PharmaTech data come up, and shook his head over the stats. "Set these goons loose, and the *Olympic* will be running emergency refugee evac before we have a million dead in an ice storm." He turned toward Stone as his partner's turbulent feelings began to override the empathic shields and leak through. "Stoney?"

"Maybe it's time to be bloody unorthodox," Stone growled, "and if NARC wants to dump us after the ice dust's settled, I'll be the first one out the door!"

"You need a job, kid," Janssen offered, "you got one, right here."

"Thanks," Stone said wryly. "Kevin?"

"Do it," Jarrat agreed. "Has everyone here run the data from Oromon, and Stoney's meet with Michiko? Now's your chance, before we take a look at the goods I brought out of Scorpio. Our man Lindgren should have finished processing the simulation by now."

"Enough of it to be useful," Petrov told him. "I've queued it to play after the Germer and Michiko files, if you want to run those."

"Go ahead," Stone decided. "Run your own surveillance data, too ... and have a shuttle prepped to shove off, ASAP. Colonel Janssen, have your department call Vern Stromberg. Tell him to expect us."

The files were playing as Jarrat stepped out of the lights, and Stone followed him to the water cooler. Disquiet throbbed between them, and Jarrat did not have to ask what was bothering Stone. The idea of doing battle among the hab-spheres of uptown Thule was chilling, and Mostov haunted them both. One mistake, one deliberate act of destruction on the part of men like Michiko and Denehy who despised the people of city bottom, and half of Thule could erupt.

Yet the alternative was for NARC to back off the way Starfleet and Tactical had withdrawn. Holder was right. Neither Starfleet nor Tac had the ability to launch an offensive in this kind of zone. The question in Jarrat's mind was, did NARC? And there were no simple answers.

He and Stone stood by the cooler, not even conferring in whispers as they listened to Michiko's indictment of NARC. The idealist, the visionary, Jarrat thought, was infinitely more terrifying than gangsters such as Mavvik, and infinitely more dangerous than the rogue industrialist like Randolph Dorne.

And where did Pete Denehy fit into this picture? He had buried his only son, Jason, while Cassius Brand went to extraordinary lengths to save Marcus, and both young men had run wild with Inoshiro Carvoni, until Carvoni himself was caught in his own web. Aphelion dropped him like a red-hot rock. Carvoni was finished, vilified at home, expelled from his university, black banned at the other Martian polytechnic where his degree could be completed. But at least he survived. Jason Denehy died, and Marcus Brand was suspended in a weird half-existence, while Pietro Denehy equipped his corporate army for war, and funneled billions of colonial dollars into the Michiko Aurora company.

"Shuttle hangar, Stoney," Petrov said under the audio track. "Your ride's on standby, whenever you're ready."

"We just want to take a look at Lindgren's stuff," Jarrat told him as the Aspen audio capture finished.

It was in line to run as Stone and Michiko finished, and Jarrat began to watch closely. Chuck Lindgren had worked for hours, and it was still a work in progress. The sim branched in hundreds of directions, and he had covered about half of it when Petrov appropriated his work. Lindgren had gone through the sim, interpreting numbers, trends and individuals graphically, systematically clicking values into the variables. Where the sim said 'mule,' he substituted the name of Vaughan. Where it said 'money man,' he identified Reineck. When his own knowledge ran out, he opened the Scorpio files he had filched that morning, and ransacked them for names, dates, numbers, destinations.

The result was an animated chart, graphed data swimming in a threedee ocean, with a life of its own. Red zones indicated where Michiko was losing, green zones, he was winning. Mostov was a vast red disaster, but the Nielsen Lode job was redder, brighter, still draining him, while Oromon was orange,

shot through with bright green lances radiating from PharmaTech. File pictures of individuals popped up at pivot-points, and Lindgren had adjusted the sim to play like a game. It awarded points each time a player appeared. Jarrat saw what he had done: the highest-scoring characters were Scorpio's key players. The game itself was the Angel market; the field of play was Aurora. As Michiko's legit company turned red, streaks of blue, representing incoming cash, wove into the blood-dark rafts, and file images depicted people like Vaughan and Reineck.

Jarrat had met some of them fleetingly, but many of the Scorpio lieutenants had died in Mostov. For a moment the whole graphic turned red. Blue rays of funding were extinguished at source. Others angled in from Inquanoc and Maui, and again the graph was bright with cash lines, before a pure black-and-white icon entered the threshing chart.

This was NARC. As it appeared, the icon exploded into a spider web, invading every sector. The mobile graph hived off into three segments ... Michiko Aurora, Scorpio, PharmaTech. Cash flows stopped. Red zones darkened to black. Bright bubbles of pale color inflated, and Jarrat leaned forward to pause the playback.

His finger stabbed at the pale bubbles. "Did you get Lindgren's notes?" He asked of Petrov. "What are these?"

The Russian had already consulted his notes. "They're hotspots, possible battle zones, hypothetical engagements between Scorpio and NARC. Various parts of midtown Thule ... city bottom ... and these big suckers are Arkadia, Argentia, Inquanoc."

"Jesus bloody Christ," Gil Cronin growled. "I don't want to put gunships around the hab-spheres. 'If you know where to hit it, you can knock one of the bubbles out of the air with a rotary cannon!'" He sat back, making emphatic negative gestures. "No way, Cap. Don't even think about it. Gunships and riot troops in there? You could have a disaster so vast, Mostov'd look like a kids' party. I'd rather have the local bozos snorting Angel up both nostrils."

The evaluation ran parallel to Jarrat's own. "Relax, Gil, that's not the plan, even though Michiko simulated it." He glanced at Stone. "You want to see how it turns out?"

"Let it run," Stone said grimly.

Jarrat released the display and Lindgren's work restarted. As the black-and-white web of NARC's involvement encroached on every part of the sim, the bright bubbles of probable encounter zones dimmed one by one. The simulation was discarding them as the engine driving the program calculated the probability of NARC actually engaging in battle.

"It knows," Cronin whispered. "It knows we won't take 'em on. They're using the fucking civvy population as a shield."

At last only three bubbles remained, and Stone swore softly. Tok city bottom. The Argentia sphere, where Michiko, Denehy and Brand had mansions, along with most of the colony's most wealthy. And the city of Inquanoc.

"Well, now," Stone said darkly. "We know why there's been so much to-ing and fro-ing between PharmaTech and Inquanoc ... they've chosen their ground. It wouldn't have been my choice."

"No shit?" Cronin passed both palms over his smooth-shaven scalp. "Okay, I'll start loading data. I thought for sure it was gonna be city bottom. I've been looking at that ant hill in VR for days. Inquanoc's a whole 'nother question, Cap." He was looking at Stone, whom he had known for many years, and then the Blue Raven's flinty eyes passed on to Jarrat. "If you want to go fight in there ... all bets are off."

Jarrat knew exactly what he meant. "Run your own models, Gil. Find out what's doable. And what's not. Keep us informed."

"I better get on it right now." Cronin was already moving, heading out, and as he settled a headset Jarrat heard him calling his second, Joe Ramos.

On Cronin's heels, Evelyn Lang wore a troubled face. As the gunship pilot for the elite descant unit, she would be in the forefront of the battle, and Jarrat might have wished she had drawn an easier assignment, first time out. But there was no way to stack this particular deck, and both he and Lang knew it. She caught his eye as she followed Cronin out. Jarrat raised a brow in question, and though the expression of disquiet remained, she raised a thumb and nodded. Military Airlift, Sheal, was one hell of a proving ground.

"All right, people." Stone clapped his hands quietly. "Assume it's going to be Inquanoc. Work out the how, and the when. Colonel Holder, we're going to need Starfleet."

"Not in the field," Holder warned as he stood.

"Seal the system," Jarrat said tersely. "Nothing gets in or out of Aurora till it's over. The *Olympic* can handle the cordon better than we can. We're going to be way overcommitted at Inquanoc."

"Consider it sealed." Holder lifted a headset from the breast pocket of his uniform shirt, and was talking to his ship a moment later.

"Colonel Janssen," Stone said to the videodrone. "Pull Tactical out. Right out. You've lost enough of your 'kids.' Run surveillance but keep your distance. Pop up as many drones as you have. Strip the militia for them. Cover Michiko and Denehy. Can do?"

"You got it," Kris Janssen said without hesitation. "Good luck, Stone, Jarrat."

She did not say 'You'll need it,' but Jarrat heard the words. Petrov was coordinating with Helen Archer, who would move the carrier into Inquanoc low orbit just before the engagement, and Gene Cantrell had stepped back, officially assuming his role of observer. He was in the ops room, scanning CRTs, and the light fragrance of kipgrass and roses wafted from the glowing tip of a cigarette as he inhaled.

"Maui," Stone suggested tersely.

"Vern Stromberg," Jarrat agreed, and followed him out.

It was midnight over Maui. The lights of Mackenzie and Koksoak glittered out of a steel-blue night and the wake of an icebreaker working out of Burnaby, on the north shore, was a kilometer-long silver fin. The volcano loomed against the stars, crowned with aials and pylons which were marked out in

winking red and blue hazard lights. Otherwise Maui was dark, punctuated only by ice fields which reflected the bright starlight of the arctic night.

The Small Boat Harbor nestled in an inlet on the southeast of the island, where currents from the boiling volcanic vents of the Murchison Deep kept the waters open year-round, made Mackenzie's chain of lagoons and harbors strangely warm, and wreathed the east coast in dense fog until the winds rose. Tonight, the stiff westerly had cleared the air and from several clicks out Stone saw the blue and green acquisition lights winking from the backyard of the Stromberg property.

The house stood on a slope above a private mooring. Two small trawlers were tied up there, and the house lights were on. As Stromberg heard the thunder of military jets he turned on his floodlights, and Stone saw a wide, flat lot where several pickup trucks and a flatbed SkyHauler had been moved aside to make landing space.

The Corsair's wings swept in and Stone rotated the plane to fit it into the yard with a meter to spare off nose and nail. The house's backdoor opened and the figure of a man stood leaning on the jamb, silhouetted against the lights from within.

"We're expected." Jarrat lifted off the helmet, reached for a parka and settled the headset among his hair. "9.4 to ops room." The midnight cold was clammy, humid, but the air was not quite as cold as Thule. The geothermal activity kept this part of Maui warm and damp.

"Reading you," Petrov's voice said, thin over the earbug. "No unusual activity in your location. Looks like you've snuck in. Scorpio's too busy to know or care if you're on Maui."

The canopy was up. Stone was lifting himself out of the cockpit. He sat on the side to shrug into a heavy, hooded parka. "Monitor our audio, Mischa. Give me a status on Green Raven."

"Holding up at five thousand, ten k's west of you. Nothing moving except icebreakers," Petrov informed him. "Tac reports nothing stirring around PharmaTech or Aspen. Michiko hasn't budged yet. Like he's waiting for us ... or maybe Denehy ... to make the first move."

As Jarrat dropped to the ground in the glare of Stromberg's floods he mused, "You want to think about snatching Michiko from Aspen?"

The thought was not without merit, and Stone paused to consider it. "He's less trouble right where he is. Make a move on him, and a taskforce out of PharmaTech could be in Aspen in minutes."

"I'd rather fight in Aspen than Thule or Inquanoc," Jarrat said pointedly. "No spheres, no underground."

"Doesn't matter where it starts," Stone reasoned. "You're just not thinking like a terrorist. We make a move on Michiko in Aspen, and PharmaTech targets Thule Tactical. They can hold most of the civvy population hostage. It's Gil Cronin's worst nightmare come true."

He argued a good case, and Jarrat filed the idea for further thought. Stone was making his way up to the house, and the man stepped aside to allow them in. They entered through a thermally insulated, meter-square hatch filled with overboots, mustard-yellow foul-weather gear, fishing tackle,

but once inside, Stromberg's house was warm and bright, with a view of the Small Boat Harbor.

A two-meter game fish, stuffed and mounted, commanded one wall; another was covered with trophy photos. Much of the house's heat came from a woodstove in the middle of the sunken lounge, where a screen almost as wide as the fish was showing the aeroball playoffs, though the sound was off and Stromberg ignored the game.

He was a tall man, big-shouldered and slim-hipped, with battered hands and eyes nested in creases. For a quarter of a century he had worked out of Maui: the story was told in the photos lining his walls. He had made a good living from sport fishing, the crab 'harvest,' and later, farming scampi in the warm water from the Murchison Deep. His hair was white-blond, thick and tightly curly, his skin was like pale leather, his eyes a shade of blue not so different from Stone's. Stromberg was around Michiko's age, but he had lived out in the elements, worked hard, and had never bothered with rejuvenation therapies. Perpetual youth held no allure for him. In fact, he was powerfully attractive in his own way, as individual and unique as Michiko's gene-tweaked Companions were like a regiment of clones.

"I've spent twenty-five years wondering when you jacks would get here," Stromberg said glibly. "You took your sweet time." His voice was whiskey-rough, and he grinned, showing white teeth. "Call me Vern. Which one of you's which?"

"Jarrat." He took the man's hand.

"Stone. And you could have called NARC any time. Call your local Tactical, ask them to forward the call, and we'd get back to you even from as far away as Darwin's."

"That a fact?" Stromberg's grin widened. "Sit. What are you drinking? I got whiskey or whiskey."

"Nothing, thanks." Jarrat sat on the end of the couch beneath the big stuffed fish, and looked out over the harbor, where lights marked the boats moored along the jetties. Stone took a shot glass from Stromberg and perched on the arm of the couch.

Taking the bottle with him, Stromberg settled in the chair opposite and watched the game, though he said, "What do you want from me?"

"Information," Stone told him. "Share what you know."

"About what?" Stromberg's eyes remained on the screen.

"Who," Jarrat corrected. He lifted a brow at Stone and said quietly, "Jason Denehy."

No flicker of expression crossed Stromberg's face, but he looked up from the aeroball playoffs and leaned back heavily in the chair. A big snow-white cat appeared from under it and jumped up onto his shoulder, where it began to rumble. He scratched its head, rough-gentle.

"It's been a long time. I spent the first five years just trying to fuckin' forget ... but I knew Jase'd come back to haunt me in the end. And here you are." He swallowed a shot of Irish whiskey and the blue eyes closed. "So what d'you want to know? He's dead. If you're sittin' in my house, drinkin' my whiskey, you know how."

Jarrat shared a rueful look with Stone. "We know a little," Stone told Stromberg, "but the records were sealed."

"Old man Denehy did that? Well, shit." Stromberg almost laughed. "He's got the clout. Him and Carvoni, and Brand. Doesn't surprise me ol' Denehy covered his ass."

"You want to tell us about it?" Stone prompted.

An old, old bitterness settled over Stromberg's features now. "Sure, why not? You jacks made it here at last. Better late than never. You gonna bust Carvoni and Denehy?"

"That's the plan," Jarrat said tersely. "But it's not going to be easy. Aurora makes it complicated. The underground, the spheres ... this warm, welcoming climate of yours. Right now, we're going to bend a few rules to take them, and the less you know about *that* the better. But Angel lawyers will try to take any infraction of inter-colonial law and use it to invalidate our case, so we're on thin ice."

"Your testimony should give our lawyers the ammunition to shoot the bastards down," Stone said baldly. He reached into his pocket and touched the R/T. "We're recording."

"You want to know about Jase." Stromberg closed his eyes. "He was the greatest guy I ever knew. What can I tell you? I married him." He sighed heavily and refilled the shot glass. "He was also the craziest guy I ever knew. Maybe it was part of his charm. He lived out there, way past the edge ... not dancing on it. He'd already jumped over."

"How do you mean?" Jarrat prompted.

Stromberg was immersed in his memories now, and enough years had passed by for him to think clearly about events which would have been traumatic. But the bitterness remained, and the crease of his brow told Jarrat how much was left unsaid.

"It was weird," Stromberg admitted. "I used to bloody plead with him to quit the wild stuff, but he only laughed. To me, it looked like he was out there tryin' to kill himself. Every crazy stunt, every contraption his father's money could buy. The fastest cars, race planes, VR games that were supposed to fry your brains, every drug you could get your hands on, cost no object. He spent his father's money like it was water, and old Denehy never cared, never argued. You want some more money, son? Here, lay another mill on yourself. A new raceplane? No sweat. A week skiboarding on Olympus Heights? Go for it."

"Jason was spoiled," Stone said carefully.

But Stromberg made negative noises. "Bribed, is closer to it. After he was ignored for eighteen, twenty years, all the time he could have *used* a father, suddenly Denehy's shoveling money at him. Okay, there's a lot of guys can't stand kids, even their own. I never had kids. What the hell would I do with them? But Jase was just another rich kid, like Marc Brand. They used to practically have contests to see how fast they could get rid of money. Marc's father kept him well greased."

Bribed? Jarrat and Stone shared a frown. "Denehy paid Jason to, what, stay out of his hair? Go away and play?" Jarrat guessed.

"Something like that." Stromberg's eyes opened to slits of dark blue and focused on the aeroball game, though his mind was years in the past and light years distant. On Mars.

"Did you and Jason hang out much with Marc Brand?" Stone was prompting, subtle, careful.

"A lot." Stromberg sighed. "Marc's dead. I know his father's got the body in a tank at home, but Marc's *dead*, and the fact is, he probably got what was coming to him. The old man's being freakin' creepy. Marc had his day, and he lived good, he lived big. Him and Jason did the kind of stuff you only dream about ... the cars, the planes, the boys, the chicks." He shook his head slowly, as if denying the memories. "Times, I used to wonder if Jase was just trying to keep up with Marc, or the other way around. Didn't matter in the end. Them and Carvoni were up to their balls in it, and when you get in that deep ..." He drew one index finger over his gullet. "I used to try to get Jase to quit, let the other bastards have their fun, but what the hell?"

"You knew this for sure?" Jarrat pressed, "Don't guess, Vern. You have to *know*, or it's no good to us. I realize it's a long time ago. Take all the time you want."

"Shit, it's like yesterday." Stromberg was mocking himself. "If I don't watch out, I'm gonna wake up and find myself gettin' old! But yeah, Jase was in it. Thing is, Jase was involved, but he hated it. Marc roomed with Carvoni for a while. Him and Ino were like this." He laced his fingers. "Jason and Marc were huge buddies from way back. I never knew where they met, but it was probably the track or the tables, or a VR den, some place where rich kids hung out while the rest of us poor dorks were studying. S'how Jase got to know Carvoni. Got *involved*."

He fell silent, thoughtful. The memories were rolling through him so powerfully, Jarrat could see the old love, anger, fear, naked in his face. Stone was recording every word. Without Stromberg knowing it, he adjusted the input levels.

At last Stromberg swam up through the ocean of time and said, "Jason hated it, but he'd been dragged in, *involved*, and it was too late to get out. Once you're in, they don't let you go. Never."

"You talked with him about it?" Stone asked.

"Hm?" Stromberg seemed to become aware of them again. "I tried. Sure as shit, Jason knew stuff, but he'd never tell me. But he *knew*, and I always thought he was guilty about what he knew and couldn't tell. He ran hard, fast ... the roughest sex shops he could find, illegal VR, anything. So long as he could keep his goblins on the run he could live with himself. It's like that when you've done something bad that you hate, and there's no way to get away from it. But it was dangerous."

Dangerous was an understatement, Jarrat thought. "We won't ask you to speculate about Jason's guilt. We need facts. Guesswork gets us shot down in flames in court."

The man was lost in the past and seemed not to hear. "In the last few months Jase was never sober. He was always flying, like he couldn't live with his own thoughts. Even Marc started nagging him about it, but Jase wouldn't

listen to him any more than to me. And he fell in with some bad people. Evil people."

"Leo ... Inoshiro Carvoni?" Stone prompted.

The name snapped Stromberg back to the present. "Carvoni was one of them. There were others, but I don't know too many names. I didn't, wouldn't, run with their pack. I was married to Jase, but he was gone a lot. I was trying to study. Aquaculture." He gestured at the bay, the workboats. "I didn't have Jase's and Marc's money, and I sure as hell couldn't afford to fuck my education. Jase wanted me to drop it, go party all night and fly raceplanes all day with him and Marc. I wouldn't ... and we started to fight about it. Jesus, what can I tell you? Jase and me were starting to drift apart. I couldn't talk to him anymore. Two words, and we'd start arguing. I'd demand to know why he was trying to kill himself, he'd tell me I didn't know *squat*, then he wouldn't tell me what was eating him."

The story was painful even now. Jarrat watched Stromberg knuckle his eyes and asked quietly, "Talk about Michiko. Carvoni."

"Oh, Christ, him." Stromberg stood, stretched, began to prowl the house aimlessly. The white cat rode his shoulder easily. "Carvoni was bloody brilliant, you know? He was the kind who could party all night, cut classes, then show up hungover and bat a thousand in an exam! He thought he could get away with anything."

"Like ...?" Stone pressed carefully.

Stromberg stood gazing out over the darkened bay, where the green standing lights of his boats and a hundred others bobbed. "Ino's folks were just city engineers from Marsport. They could scare up the money to send him to UMC, but it skinned 'em alive to do it. So where in fuckin' hell did Ino get the money for a Chevy race plane? For the kind of Companions you see in the Chryse casinos and the uptown clubs, not the dens and sex shops students can afford."

"Carvoni was loaded." Jarrat lifted a brow at Stone: they knew this much from DAC records, but Stromberg had seen it with his own eyes.

"Carvoni was floatin' away on it," the man said bleakly. "Not like Jase and Marc. You knew where Jase and Marc were gettin' it. Jase looked sideways at his pa, and Ol' Pete just gave him a new credit card. Marc'd whine about being broke, and money appeared. But Ino, now ... Ino was on his own. He arrived in Chryse dead broke, drivin' a beater. He scored a job as a bouncer in a leather club on the south side, and the next thing you know, he's buyin' a SkyPirate!" He angled a hard look at the NARC men. "What's that sound like to you?"

It was all too easy to make the connections, and Jarrat deliberately hunted for alternatives. They were hard to find. "You're sure Carvoni didn't gamble? A big win at the tables would explain it."

"Ino gambled, and mostly lost," Stromberg said acidly. "If Carvoni'd won big, all o' Chryse would've known about it. He didn't have the rich uncle who died and left him the family castle, neither. And what you guys have gotta be thinkin' is dead right."

Stone cleared his throat. "You must have been aware of the Angel

syndicate controlling city bottom in Chryse and Marsport at the time?"

"Kind of." For the first time Stromberg looked uncomfortable. "I didn't run with the rat-pack, but I was married to Jase, and Jase hung out with Marc Brand, so ... sure, I saw 'em. You'd have to be struck blind not to see." He paused. "Aphelion."

"You saw Marcus Brand and Michiko, Carvoni, in company with known agents of Aphelion? Don't guess, Vern. Speculation makes this job bloody impossible," Jarrat warned.

But Stromberg was unconcerned. "Jase and Marc drank with 'em, screwed the same Companions, hung out in the same clubs. I told Jason a thousand times to stay the hell away from Carvoni, but he'd just give me this look, like he could see right through me, and he'd say some dumb shit like, 'It's too late for me, man.' It was pure *crap*," Stromberg growled, "but he was too far over the edge to even talk about it." He hesitated then, and his face creased in thought. "The more spaced-out he got, the more he was inclined to fight. He was the sort of drunk who wanted to put his fist in your face, y'know the kind? He took to fighting, verbals, with a bunch of Ino Carvoni's friends ... Aphelion guys."

This was new. Stone leaned forward, elbow on his knee. "You saw them fight? Heard what it was about?"

"Shit, half of Mars saw them," Stromberg said bitterly. "They got their faces plastered all over the newsvids. This one night, Jase arrives at what has to be the fanciest restaurant on the north side of Chryse, way out of my price bracket. And he's totally skulled. Carvoni's already there, settled in with a couple of 'business associates.' Aphelion bastards. Jason walks up to the table and starts shoutin', wavin' his arms around. Christ, what an idiot ... Buran rots your brain in the end, but he wouldn't believe me when I told him. So Carvoni gets up from the table, maybe to reason with him, and suddenly they're slugin' it out, right there in the middle of a restaurant! GlobalNet was always around. Paparazzi bloodsuckers." He chuckled without a note of humor. "Old man Denehy was so mad, you saw the steam comin' out his ears! He paid Jason's fines, settled out of court, paid the right bribes to the right Tactical bastards to get Jase out ... all the way out. Next thing I knew, Jason was booked on a clipper, and Marc Brand was out, same time, soon as his old man's agency on Mars could get him a ticket." Stromberg mimed an agile ship peeling out and heading off fast. "Good Christ, think about it! Cassius Brand, sights set on a career in colonial politics, and his son-an'-heir's hangin' out with Aphelion scum."

"So the pair of them were shipped out fast, to Aurora," Jarrat concluded. "Marcus was being sent home, and we know Denehy already had contacts out here. Associates who had paved the way for him."

"Associates." Stromberg looked tired of a sudden, and sat by the wood stove. The cat jumped down and stalked away. "I can't prove nothin', y'understand, but I saw ol' man Denehy and Carvoni together more than once. Think what you want. You guys know as well as I do, Angel was always out here in the colonies. It's nothing new ... and then the Chryse chapter of Aphelion quit the homeworlds right ahead of the NARC bust. The shindig in

the Jupiter system.” His eyes were drawn to the flames as if he were hypnotized.

“All roads,” Jarrat mused, “lead back to Mars.” He looked at Stone, saw the sparkle of fascination in the electric blue eyes and knew Stone was on the same wavelength.

“All roads,” Stone said softly, “lead in two directions.”

“So Denehy already had contacts in Thule,” Jarrat prompted.

“Matter of fact,” Stromberg added, stirring, “that’s how I came to know Jase in the first place. I was born in Thule. He came lookin’ for me, wantin’ to know what in the hell his father was gettin’ into, with investments out here. We had a few beers, got a little silly ... woke up next day in the same bed.” He snapped his fingers. “Chemistry.”

“It happens,” Stone said with a sidelong glance at Jarrat and a faint, crooked smile. “How’d you come to be on Mars?”

“My folks sent me to the homeworlds to get some education. Not that I wanted it,” Stromberg made a face. “By the time I was ten, I was livin’ aboard a trawler. The family owned six hulls at the time. Quite the fleet. They lost two in Hurricane Alma. Sold another one to raise my college money.” No expression reached his face as he said softly, “My parents died in the big storm three years after I left. You’re looking at the last two trawlers out in the bay. I still own ‘em, but I don’t run ‘em much. This house, everything I got now, comes from a shrimp farm over on the Murchison Deep.”

“After Denehy sent Jase out here, you came on home?” Jarrat frowned at Stone. “This would be about the same time Michiko was busted. The ‘sex kids’ scandal.”

To his surprise, Stromberg laughed. “Christ, I’d halfway forgot about that! Pete Denehy was so mad, we thought he’d give himself a heart attack. Jase was at the party. It was just Carvoni being dumb. It’s weird: he was brilliant in class, exams, architecture, whatever, but if you let him loose on the street with a wallet full o’ cash, watch your ass. He hired from the wrong stable of Companions, and God, what a stink. Turned out, some of the little bastards were sixteen. And no, I wasn’t at the party. I had to work that night.”

“This was before Jason was arrested for assaulting Carvoni at the restaurant?” Stone wondered.

“Maybe a week after the restaurant,” Stromberg said thoughtfully. “Jase and Marc were waiting for the clipper. Carvoni lit out a little while later, and he landed in Thule not long before Jase ...”

Was murdered. Jarrat and Stone looked speculatively at one another and Jarrat said cautiously, “Carvoni became Michiko right after he got here. Jason and Marcus would probably be the only two people in Thule who could identify him as Inoshiro Carvoni, and he and Jason had fought, very publicly.”

Stromberg glared into the smoldering heart of the wood stove. “You managed to work that one out all on your own? Shit, you NARC jacks are smart.”

“We get there eventually.” Stone stood and looked down over the harbor. “You know anything about how Carvoni left Mars?”

“Not much.” Stromberg seemed uninterested. “After Jase and Marc ship-

ped out, I didn't see much of Carvoni. I never hung out with him, and I was workin' hard. I straightened out the paperwork to finish my degree back home, the Thule campus. It doesn't have the prestige of a homeworlds degree but, I should care? I wanted to be with Jase. I totaled everything I had, took out loans, the lot, to get the money for a clipper ticket. I left a load of debts on Mars, but they got paid eventually. Jase and me, we were gonna start over in Aurora. It was gonna be the big new start, the bright future." He fell silent.

Jarrat followed Stone to the wide window overlooking the bay. "Then a guy called Michiko turned up, and either Marc or Jase recognized him," he guessed. "Jason, being Jason, had to pick a fight?"

The older man nodded slowly, once again consumed by his memories. "I was workin' as bloody usual, trying to catch up, make the grade at UAT ... by then Jase had let it all go. He had money in his pocket, Denehy made sure he didn't land out here broke, so he was in the right clubs, the right dance shops, to see the big-A changing hands. Marc was right back in his own huntin' grounds, he knew all the wrong places to be, all the wrong people to know. Jase and Marc knew Carvoni right off, and you're right. Jase was skulled. He started it all again, where it'd left off in the restaurant way back in Chryse. Marcus had to drag him off." His brows rose and his voice was curiously light as he said, "Three weeks later, Jason was dead."

"Take a break," Stone offered. "It must be damned hard to talk."

"Nah, it's okay." Stromberg pulled a deep breath to the bottom of his lungs, held it, exhaled it hard. "It's a long time ago. Years, I laid awake nights, tryin' to put sense to it. The Thule Coroner ..." He swallowed and began again. "Jase was executed. Huge shot of Buran, three times what he could take. Thing is, his wrists and ankles were taped before he took the shot, and he was still alive when the bastards shoved him in a dumpster in Mostov city bottom. The body was supposed to be flash-incinerated with the city trash, but y'know what Mostov's like. Dumpster-divers found him ... it. He was dead. Like Marcus."

Like Marcus? Jarrat took a deep breath. "No wonder Cassius Brand didn't take much persuading to fall in with Denehy's plans, and cripple Aurora Tac. You knew he was hiding something, protecting his kid."

"Or himself," Stone added. "This isn't the kind of news that does a man's political career any good." He turned back from the view and tilted his head at Stromberg. "Obviously, you dropped out of sight, came out to Maui, changed your name and kept your head down. If Michiko and Denehy were ever aware of you, they left you alone."

"That's about the size of it," Stromberg grunted.

"So would you know when Marcus got into Angel?" Jarrat asked softly. "I know you tried to keep out of the rat-pack, but you must have seen the kid going to hell."

Stromberg jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Chryse. He'd been in some city bottom den, too drunk to know what he was snortin'. He said he thought it was some Buran cocktail, but there was this Buran-brain fairy tale at the time. The morons through you could cut Angel with Buran and not get addicted." He rolled his eyes to the gods. "Marc was already rotten with Angel

when he and Jase arrived back on the same clipper, but old Brand wouldn't see it at first. Couldn't, I suppose. We're always great at ignorin' what we don't want to see. After Jason was killed, I never saw Marc again. I know his father picked him up after a heavy trip, found him crashed in an alley outside a dance shop in Kansai city bottom, took him home. Marc didn't live long. And he's dead, no matter what the old bastard senator wants to think." Stromberg sat back and called the cat to his lap. "There's not much more to tell."

No more to tell, Jarrat thought, but the ramifications were vast. In fact, Cassius Brand had probably hamstrung Tactical in his own interests. Jarrat was certain the old man had no idea Denehy and Michiko were the driving forces behind Scorpio. Nor could Brand know PharmaTech was playing both sides of the fence — providing the syndicate with a corporate army which wore a semi-legit face but was armed by gunrunners, and at the same time raising billions with an angel-cure which was simply a fraudulent money-machine. Brand might never be convinced of Denehy's syndicate involvement.

But the greatest secret Stromberg had been keeping was the one which would have split Scorpio down the middle. Pietro Denehy had never known who was responsible for his son's death. Inoshiro Carvoni had certainly not executed Jason with his own hands, but he had surely arranged it. He might also have arranged for Marcus to die a few months or weeks ahead of time, but since Marcus was already on the death sentence of Angel, he had no need to take the risk, right under the nose of Cassius Brand, in the senator's home.

And then Brand raced his own specialists to Angel of Kansai, and Marcus was suddenly in cryogen, never quite alive, but always suspended over Michiko's head like the blade of a guillotine. Jarrat almost heard the last piece of the puzzle click into place, and from Stone he felt a great surge of intense satisfaction.

They had it. They could move on Scorpio without hesitation. Only the terrible delicacy of the battlefield made the assignment questionable, and it had become a problem of logistics, not legalities.

An antique twenty-hour clock chimed one, and Stone offered his hand to Stromberg. "Thanks. Watch the newsvids for the Scorpio bust. When it goes down, you'll be safe for the first time in twenty-five years."

"Longer." Stromberg shook Stone's hand, and Jarrat's. "It wasn't safe in Chryse. Aphelion slimes were under every rock."

"They weren't busted out of Mars," Jarrat added thoughtfully. "Pharma-Tech still has a Martian branch."

"And Michiko is invested back on the old world." Stone's brows were up. "This one has to get Bill Dupre interested." He gave Vern Stromberg a nod. "You may have to make a formal statement but you won't appear in court. For the moment we —"

Over the headset in Jarrat's ear, Mischa Petrov's voice was razor sharp. "Raven 9.4, Raven 7.1, the game is on! Repeat, the game is on. Get Raven Leader armored and airborne, fast. Rendezvous with Green Raven. We'll brief you in flight."

"Copy that," Jarrat said grimly. "Stoney?"

"Push," Stone said in dark tones, "just came to shove. We have to go, Stromberg."

In the glare of the floodlights and the shocking, damp cold of the Maui night they locked down the riot armor, secured and primed the full suite of weapons. The Tac-NARC bands were blazing as the shuttle fell up into the clear summer sky and headed fast into the west.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was going to happen at Inquanoc. Stone had not doubted it since they had seen Lindgren's translation of the simulation, and for hours the movement of aircraft between PharmaTech and Inquanoc had been almost a thousand percent above normal. At any point the NARC gunships might have deployed, but then the Angelwar would have become an air battle over Thule, and the specter of Mostov was haunting.

As the VM-104 Corsair raced west out of Maui, the CRTs were busy with data from Tactical's surveillance probes. Janssen had launched everything she could beg or borrow, and every sensor she could bring to bear on PharmaTech showed the building largely empty. The lights were on, mainframes were still purring; the office AI was fielding calls and the legit company people were at work. But ninety percent of the building was quiet as a cave. The executive levels were deserted, the skypark empty, and the cavernous underground where the PharmaTech corps had lived, trained and worked, was dark, cold, abandoned.

PharmaTech was one of the possible battle zones which had popped up in Michiko's sim, and Stone was relieved to watch the threat dissipate. If the battle degenerated into a question of the body count, potential casualties, Inquanoc had one sixth of Thule's population.

But Stone was haunted not only by Mostov. Oromon was on his mind, and Sheal, as he looked at Janssen's data. The danger of a corporate war, with a Starfleet carrier on station and a captive population groundside, was terribly real. The syndicate had chosen Inquanoc as its battleground, and the tactics had the acrid taste of terrorism. Just over a half-million people lived and worked in a fantasy city so delicate, Stone wished he knew where it could be assaulted without knocking it down like a house of cards.

The Tactical surveillance drones shadowed a fleet of freighters moving to and fro above the Amundsen Sea, and as PharmaTech emptied out, sparing Thule the battle, Inquanoc took on the aspect of a fortress made of glass. Last to make their move were Michiko and Denehy themselves, and as they did, Petrov was on the air.

A Yamazake Lightning had flung itself up in a backbreaker over the line of the Appalachians, straight up and straight down, out of Aspen and bound for Inquanoc. Leo Michiko had chosen his ground, and again Stone gave thanks that it was not Thule.

The city of Thule was still asleep as NARC went onto alert. The *Athena* had dropped into low orbit, right over Michiko's grav-resist fantasy, and all four gunships were in the air when Tactical, Starfleet and NARC received the broadcast on the security band.

It issued from Inquanoc. A synthetic voice delivered it, bland, calm, without passion, and Stone had played it back a second time before he could believe his ears. "The city of Inquanoc has been seized. The population of Aurora should be regarded as hostage. No military aircraft will approach closer than ten kilometers to the city of Inquanoc. NARC and Starfleet will withdraw completely from the Aurora system. You have one hour to comply, and you will be monitored via the deep space tracking network. The colony of Aurora is in no jeopardy until or unless you return. Failure to comply with the deadline, and these terms, will incur penalties, to be paid by the citizens of Thule." The synthetic voice could have been reading the time and weather.

"Bluff," Petrov said into the chaos of the NARC band. "It has to be a bluff! They haven't had the chance to rig Thule!"

And then Janssen was on the air, harsh over Stone's helmet audio: "They could have rigged city bottom two years ago, Lieutenant, setting up for a day they knew would come sooner or later. We don't dare take the chance. Colonel Holder?"

The commander of the *Olympic* was on the comm loop. "I hear what you're saying, but it's NARC's battlefield. NARC's decision."

High over the Appalachians and tracking the Blue Raven gunship, Jarrat swore passionately. "Our decision? If we deploy, we could blow Thule sky high. If we pull out ... Christ, Stoney, it'll be the first time NARC was beaten, and it'll happen again, everywhere. No city's going to be safe if we let the bastards have this one. You might as well stand NARC down, dismantle the department. We'd be worse than useless: we could be used to destroy whole colonies."

"But if we force their hand, Aurora could become another Sheal, another Oromon," Stone said quietly. "We don't have time to grid-search Thule. They could be bluffing, but I got a feeling about Denehy and Michiko. They wouldn't care if Aurora went the way of Sheal."

"Yeah. Coming up on the gunship," Jarrat reported. "But I'd like to take a firsthand look at Inquanoc."

Cantrell was listening in from the carrier. "You're riding a ten klick exclusion zone. Be bloody-damned careful."

"We also have one hour," Stone growled, "and all bets are off." He tipped a wing into the east and tracking picked up Inquanoc at once. "If you get an inspiration, Gene, don't stand on ceremony."

"I'm an observer," Cantrell began.

"Not this time." Jarrat's voice had hardened. "Not with four million lives at stake today and the future of NARC on the line. Like Stoney said, we need

everybody's input. I don't care if the inspiration that takes down these bastards comes from a guy who cleans Starfleet's latrines!"

From the air Inquanoc was serene. Looks were deceiving. The Corsair's scan platforms imaged it five ways, and the heat-blooms of many big engines showed in over forty security hangars. The air chattered with encrypted signals, but the traffic lanes around the city were empty when they should have been busy.

"She's locked down," Stone observed. "Nothing moving." From just outside the ten kilometer exclusion zone he imaged the spire, the spars and spheres in ULF-resonance. "They'll know we're here."

"They've hacked the deep space network to track the carriers." Jarrat panned the gun-camera up to the crown of the central spire. It wore a multitude of thorn-like aerals, and he zoomed on these specifically. "We could blind them."

"Not from here," Stone mused, "and not fast enough to get it done without them knowing what we're up to. Give them a reason, and a chance, and they'll punish Thule."

Missiles would take out the aerals and badly damage the spire. Many civilians would die in the assault, but Thule could pay the real price. The 104 orbited around Inquanoc, imaging it from every angle. Jarrat was looking for a way into the glass fortress, and seeing nothing. Starlight picked it out in shimmering blue ice; its surface was smooth, punctuated only by the vast windows.

"Give them a reason, and a chance ..." Jarrat whispered. "So, we give them *no* reason, *no* chance to punish Thule."

"Whatever we do," Stone said tersely, "it's got to be so fast and so damn silent, they don't see it coming and don't have any chance to respond before it's over." He had begun a second circuit of the spire and spheres. "There's no way in without breaking it like so many eggs."

"There has to be." Jarrat zoomed to maximum on the skin of the spire and its branches, but everywhere the views from Inquanoc were superb: the city was designed around glorious landscapes and seascapes. Approaching unseen, even if the city's aerals were disabled, its sensors and comm systems overridden, was impossible.

Almost impossible. Jarrat took a quick breath and Stone felt the sudden rush of his pulse. "What did you see?"

"It's what I didn't see," Jarrat corrected. "Take her up, way up. Blind-spot, Stoney. You've got one blind spot."

And with a flash of intuition Stone knew what he was thinking. The only way to approach without being visually picked up was from right above the spire, where the many aerals formed a curious crown of thorns. If sensors were baffled — "Jumpers could do it," Stone whispered. "There'll be service hatches for the aerals. But jumpers'd show on sensors. They'd be tracked even if a gunship wasn't, and it would be."

"ECM," Jarrat suggested. "You've got the cold working with you. The surface temperature of riot armor would be ambient with the air. Saturate every band with ECM. Sure, the jumpers'll be seen, but we make sure they

look like something else. Anything but NARC descant troops. Anything innocent. *Think*, Stoney! Get that outrageous imagination of yours into gear!"

The shuttle looped up over Inquanoc, headed fast for the gunship now, and Stone was uncomfortably aware of the hammer of his pulse. "If we saturate every band with ECM, they're going to know we're up to something," he warned. "They'll hit Thule anyway." His mind raced on ahead. "Doublecross. Triplecross."

"Yeah," Jarrat echoed, "and fast, before the bastards get a chance to *model* it, *simulate* it, predict it."

"Out?" Stone was coming up fast on the gunship.

"Out," Jarrat agreed. "Raven Leader to all Raven units. Return to carrier," he called into the heavily encrypted NARC band. "Repeat, return to carrier. Colonel Holder?"

"Holder." The man was terse, the voice desiccated.

"Withdraw the *Olympic*," Jarrat said levelly.

"I've got over a hundred men on the street in Thule!"

"They're going to be on their own for a while, Holder," Stone barked, his temper shortening in geometric proportion to the outrageous length of the odds. "Tell them to dig in and wait for evac."

"I can target Inquanoc," Holder began.

And then Janssen came scything across the comm loop: "No! Take a shot at them, Eric, and we stand to lose Thule! Christ knows what NARC wants to do, but if they've got a plan, we want to run with it — I haven't heard another intelligent squawking sound!"

Stone stood the Corsair on its tail and opened the afterburners. "We're coming up. Colonel Archer, prepare to take the carrier out. Engineer!"

"All three reactors are available," Budweisser called before Stone could ask. "We're already preflighting the drive engines."

The sky darkened, blue to mauve to black, and as the shuttle raced up to low orbit Stone saw the blue-white glare of sterntubes. The Stavanger Dock, where the *Olympic* was parked at Thule geostationary, was on the western horizon. The four marks tracking the NARC gunships were rapidly converging on the *Athena*.

The chrono was at ten minutes and counting down as the Corsair nosed into its hangar. The gunships were already in. The canopy was up, the hangar only at partial pressure, when Jarrat plugged into the loop and said bleakly, "Colonel Archer, take us out in your own time."

"Course?" Archer called from the flight deck.

"How far, Stoney?" Jarrat had released the harness and was halfway out of the cockpit. "I'm thinking, the Diego Chavez nav beacon."

Stone had been thinking along the same lines. The beacon marked one of the major 'nodes' of the whole deep space tracking network; it was far enough out to give the carriers the cover of simple distance, and close enough to Aurora to give them swift access to the colony. "Diego Chavez," Stone agreed. "Colonel Archer?"

"Nav Station 98-960." Helen Archer was already working. "Three minutes. NARC-*Athena* fight command to *Olympic* —"

Stone broke the seals, lifted off the helmet and met his partner's mask-like face. "We're in trouble."

"Now, there's an understatement," Jarrat said softly. "It should have been a bust so clean, we could have vidphoned it in."

"Like Denehy once said," Stone growled, "time to earn our pay." He keyed his weight to twenty kilos, held out a hand, and Jarrat hauled him up out of the contour of the seat. He waggled the headset's earbug into his ear and called over the open loop, "*Athena* to battle alert. All Raven units to launch standby. Petrov, Cantrell, unit leaders, briefing in the Blue Ravens' ready room, in fifteen. Commander *Olympic*?"

The Starfleet carrier was maneuvering ponderously from the dock, but Eric Holder and Kris Janssen were monitoring NARC, every meter of the way. "I'm listening, Captain Stone," Holder said acidly, and every unspoken syllable said, *this had better be bloody good*.

"We've called a briefing," Jarrat told him sharply. "We need you and Colonel Janssen on full battle alert."

"What, NARC asking Starfleet for backup?" Holder demanded.

"Not now, Colonel," Stone barked. "We don't have time for this. God-damn it, we could lose Thule! Pull in harness now, bicker later."

And Janssen: "The kid's right, Eric. You want to bellyache about NARC, I'll buy you a beer and pretend to commiserate when all this is over! What're you thinking, Stoney?"

"We'll let you know," Jarrat told her, and added in a murmur to Stone, under the audio pickup, "when we've worked it out ourselves." Then, "Conference with us again, Colonel. We want your input. Pull your squads off the street. Get Tac the hell out of Thule. If shit happens, we can't afford to lose you."

"And check your patrol records," Stone added as the habits of a former career began to bite. "See if anyone's reported weird stuff around town, particularly in city bottom."

"What kind of weird shit?" Janssen echoed.

"If Scorpio *has* rigged Thule," Jarrat mused as he tucked his helmet under his arm and fell into step with Stone toward a freight elevator, "somebody, somewhere, should have seen something!"

"If?" Holder echoed. "You're not thinking of calling their bluff?"

"No," Stone said darkly. "But it'd sure as hell help if we knew it was a bluff ... or not. Kristyn, redeploy your popup drones."

She was a jump ahead of him. "They're already on their way back in from Aspen. I'm trying to get hold of my tech, the kid who designed the AI. I *think* we can maybe tweak them to go sniff for the chemical signatures of explosives, peek into corners, look for devices. I'll dump everything I've got into city bottom. You realize, Jarrat, if they rigged the 'soap bubbles' instead, we're going to come up blank."

But Jarrat made cynical noises. "Risk losing their castles in the air? It won't happen, Kris. Bastards look after their own. They'll cremate city bottom before they trash a single sphere, and that includes Inquanoc. Whatever they're doing, *they* are safe. They think they can win."

"Point," Janssen said tersely. "Let me get back to you. It's going to get bloody busy around here."

"Whatever they're doing," Stone echoed as he and Jarrat shouldered into the elevator, "they're safe." The platform was just large enough for the armorer's tractor already standing on it, and the two hardsuits. Stone's brain was racing. "I think you just hit it. I've been trying to work out how in hell we'd separate Scorpio from the population of Inquanoc. We can get troops in, but there's a half-million civvies in there. It'd take days to search, and if they're not bluffing we could lose Thule in minutes. But ... wherever they are, they're safe. That'd be your first priority, if you were a credit-billionaire industrialist with a vision of the future, and determined to live to see it."

The slate gray eyes glittered. "They'll have a plan to get out. They're the kind who run simulations like Michiko's, so they'll have looked at every possible outcome."

"Even their own defeat," Stone added. "It's planned for. All we have to do is second guess their moves."

"All?" Jarrat tossed his helmet from glove to glove, restless, tense as a runner under the gun. "It's a big ask, Stoney." He puffed out his cheeks. "Every time, every assignment, you go in asking yourself if this is the one, if this is the time you get beaten. I have a gut feeling, mate ... it could be here."

The elevator had just stopped but Stone held it closed for privacy, which was about to be rare. "It can't be this time, Kevin. We get beaten here, and every syndicate down to the groundside gangster operations like Hal Mavvik will hold a city to ransom. This is the one we *can't* give them. Or all that guff you heard from Leo Michiko will come to life like a bad dream." He paused and arched both brows at his partner. "Over two dead bodies, right?"

Jarrat touched Stone's cheek with the tip of one steel-gloved finger, and the gray eyes warmed for a moment. Stone had released the door and they were about to step out when he said dryly, "You know what they say about life expectancy in this job?"

"Don't remind me." Stone was right behind him as they strode into Blue Raven's ready room.

His mind had already spun a dozen scenarios, and he knew from the race of Jarrat's pulse, Kevin's thoughts were in high gear. The techs were hastily converting the ready room for teleconferencing while he and Jarrat commandeered a workstation, pulled up a flood of data and began to run their own models, crunch numbers, field ideas and blow them apart fast, as if it were no more than a game. Stone deliberately divorced his thoughts from the reality of several million civilians trapped in and beneath the field of battle.

The same ice-cold dread shimmered like a carpet of frost just under Jarrat's brash exterior. Only Stone knew how brittle the veneer was. As the battle plans came together and the mainbrain began to crunch hard on the scenario, he turned his back on the CRT and looked into his partner's dark, troubled eyes.

They did not speak; they did not have to. The empathic shields slipped by a tiny fraction, and Stone knew everything Jarrat was feeling, a confusion of emotions, confidence and misgivings so tightly interwoven that Kevin could

not separate them out. Stone laid one gauntlet on Jarrat's breastplate, where his name was stenciled. He did not have to feel Kevin's heart through his palm; if he closed his eyes, concentrated, he could feel the double-beat of two hearts in his own chest. He took a breath, and was sure he felt Jarrat breathe with him. Words eluded him as always, but when he opened his eyes Kevin was wearing a half-smile which mocked them both a little.

A chirp from the workstation intruded, and Stone swore. Live or die in the coming action, this was the only moment he and Jarrat were going to get, and the speed of the mainbrains sheathed in armor under the carrier's flight deck made it all too brief. Fleeting, Jarrat's gloved right hand closed over Stone's on the smooth black breastplate, and a flashfire of emotion blazed along Stone's nerves. More was said in an instant than could have been said in an hour, and Stone swallowed a curious lump in his throat as he turned back to the CRT.

The odds were with them. Raw reality never agreed with the numbers, but they provided a base to build on, and Stone felt the knot in his belly begin to unravel. The Blue Ravens' ready room was crowded by now, and the briefing was two minutes overdue to begin. Voices muttered, the air sizzled with coffee and kipgrass.

All of the armored descant troops who could squeeze into the hangar-sized compartment were present. With the carrier on alert and every gunship on standby to launch, all personnel who would be armored in the field were already suited up, and this included the captains. The carrier itself could be a target. No one was about to forget Equinox.

A holoprojector had been set up opposite the airlocked feeder doors to the suiting rooms and hangars. As Jarrat and Stone arrived Gil Cronin was sorting a tray of labeled datacubes. He had taken off the kevlex-titanium gauntlets but even so, in his big hands the cubes might have been dice. Stone appreciated the irony.

Several CRTs were set up; Janssen appeared on one, Holder on another, and their drones were already hovering up by the ceiling. Cantrell, Petrov and Gable had arrived moments before and were sitting together at a table where the Blue Ravens usually played cards, watched videos, killing time on standby. They made space for Jarrat and Stone, and as Stone set down his helmet he watched Evelyn Lang and Helen Archer enter on the far side.

He touched the headset. "Infirmary?"

A paramedic answered. "Doctor Reardon is unavailable, Captain. He and Doctor Del are prepping the ORs."

"And Marcus Brand?" Jarrat was listening to the loop.

"Still in the tank, Captain," the paramedic reported. "As soon as we went on alert, priorities changed. He's not going anywhere."

A datacube had dropped into the holoprojector, and Cronin tossed the remote to Stone. "I pulled up the VR maps of Inquanoc," he was saying as he took his place with Joe Ramos and a knot of other Blue Ravens. "Michiko might shit bricks about it, but the VR specs have to be made available to Tac Fire Control and Medevac." He gestured at his men. "We got a good gasp on the city. Getting in's another question."

"We'll get you in, Gil," Stone said quietly, "but that's where your real worries start."

It was Joe Ramos who phrased it in words of one syllable: "But where in the fuck are the slimes holed up?"

Jarrat touched his headset. "Infirmary." The same duty paramedic responded and he asked, "You still have Chuck Lindgren there?"

"Still," she said tersely. "Can I discharge him? I swear, Cap, if he's here much longer, I'm going to stuff *him* in a cryogen tank!"

"Fetch him to the Blue Raven ready room, and have him bring his work." Jarrat was looking at Stone, and when the medic had gone he added, "Lindgren knows more about Michiko and his business than anyone short of a Scorpio trustee. If Michiko suspected Lindgren knew a tenth of what he does, Chuck would be in a dumpster too."

"And he should have finished converting the sim," Stone mused. "He was halfway through when we looked at it before."

The briefing came together swiftly and the lights dimmed to optimize the holodisplay. Captured in the three-meter globe, the interior of Inquanoc expanded, grid-fashion. Cronin's people had explored the whole thing fast. They had found the main trunks for power, air, water, waste; the transit tubes and elevator shafts; and the service crawl spaces where drones and techs kept the whole city purring, just out of sight of the population. The display followed the red lines charting the flow of Inquanoc's power supply. All conduits fed along the spars to the spire, and at the heart of the central pylon they joined a ten-meter vertical trunk stretching from the aerials at the crown, to the two-kilometer wide disk of the footer.

Below the city's disk base, as Jarrat had guessed when Max Tyler flew into the city with a load of Angel, the underground was massive. The size of twenty sports arenas, it housed two fusion reactors and the three monstrous repulsion generators, one shut down for service, one on standby, one holding the city in a grav-resist cradle.

And there, Stone thumbed the remote to stop the VR display. The central power conduit fed directly into the cavern housing the reactors and generators. He zoomed on it, and the graphic became a high-rez representation of the interior. Brushed-steel walls, ceilings higher than any cathedral, the two reactors in hundred-meter spheres, and the three grav-resist generators, each big enough to lift a loaded rimrunner.

The room's loudest sound was the whir of the a/c. Even the techs who would take no part in the assault were intent on the display. "You ran this in VR, Gil?" Stone asked, and when the Blue Raven nodded, he tossed Cronin the remote. "What'd you find?"

"The trunks and conduits were the first thing we looked at," Cronin told the assembly. "Playing a hunch that the smart-asses in command could get us in ..." He gave Jarrat and Stone a wink. "We broke Inquanoc into quadrants, assigned each quadrant to a Raven unit, and took it apart. If you're thinking about fighting them for it, level by level, forget it. The skin's triple-insulated lexanite. The windows are some kind of thermo-shielded polycarb. Everything's light as air, easy to insulate, dead-right for this shitty bloody climate ...

but I'll tell you this: keep the ammo coming for an ordinary rotary cannon off a regular hardsuit, and I could cut Inquanoc into scrap in an hour, without help."

"Damn," Cantrell murmured. He took a long drag on the kipgrass and lime he was smoking and gestured at the display. "You want to go in by stealth?" He gave Jarrat and Stone a speculative look. "Let them see you coming, we can kiss good bye to Inquanoc as well as Thule."

"That's the least of our worries, Gene." Jarrat had set his helmet on a table littered with spent coffee cups and printout flimsies. He came to Cronin's side, slipping sideways between Archer and Lang, dwarfing them in the big-shouldered armor. The mirror-black surface reflected the holodisplay as he leaned in and down for a better view. The VR plans imploded, affording a schematic of the whole pylon and base, and he looked up at the Ravens, many of whom he knew personally. "We'll get you in unseen," he promised, "but once you're in, the fun starts. You've got to *stay* unseen, or like Gil just said, we're toast." His gloved hand was inside the holodisplay, tracing the route of the service shaft. "You'll insert by the aerials. Maintenance hatches, here and here."

Stone leaned closer to see. The VR plans were a copy of those supplied, by law, to Tactical's emergency services. They were complete to the last detail. The hatches were right under the crown of aerials, and the service shaft went straight down the kilometer-length of the pylon.

"Once you're in," Jarrat was saying, "you'll be radio-silent, dark. Vision intensification *only*. They don't expect an incursion, but don't assume they're crazy or dumb. They're smart enough to have picked the toughest ground on Aurora to fight on, with a half-million civvies as their living shield."

"Still," Stone added, "everything we see of Inquanoc is designed around preventing an incursion, not dealing with it once troops are in. They *will* fight in there if we spook them, and the PharmaTech security force, a fully-fledged corporate army, will give NARC one hell of a run. While they're doing it, they'll also cut the city up for scrap. You heard Gil. It's all polycarb and lex-anite ... and thirty below zero outside."

"So you don't spook the bastards," Jarrat said to the Ravens. He was looking around among the thirty armored men who had crammed into the room. The others were watching the show on CRTs in their own space, or aboard the gunships. "Passive imaging and radio silence. The maintenance shaft will be drone-monitored, so you'll have to shut that system down as soon as you get in. Fortunately, we lucked out. They made it easy for us."

"About fucking time," Cronin growled. "So where do we cut the security system?"

The control nodes were every ten meters up and down the whole conduit: service hatches gave access to cabling, pressure hoses, control panels. The last hatch was right under the aerials, and Tac Fire Control had provided a schematic of the master cable harness. The view zoomed and exploded until the individual cables were flagged.

"Cut 417 on the live side of the junction, and surveillance in the shaft goes out," Stone observed.

"They'll know," Ramos warned.

"The security AI will report a fault," Stone agreed, "but not an incursion. They didn't see anybody on approach, so whatever the trouble is, it can't be from outside, can it?"

Each descant unit had its hardware specialist, and they were taking notes. Jarrat rotated the display to let them view the schematic from every angle. "Drop through the kilometer fast. Surprise is the only advantage we're going to get ... but you'll find Michiko and Denehy and the PharmaTech army in the underground. It's the safest place in Inquanoc."

"You sure?" Petrov growled. "If you're wrong, I wouldn't want to be any place in Thule."

Jarrat turned to look at Stone over Lang's and Archer's heads. Stone had gone over the logic, examined it minutely and could not find a crack in it. So had Jarrat — yet Stone was aware of the single anxious thread in Jarrat's mind. Petrov had nailed it: the price for error was horrifically high.

"Be sure," Cantrell said quietly.

"I'm sure." Jarrat glared at the schematic of Inquanoc's guts. "I'm from Sheckley, Gene. For the first seventeen years of my life, I lived in a big steel tank, played tag between pressure valves, and hide-and-seek among the pipes and conduits. Kids went behind the reactor housings to play doctor because it was warm and dark, and we knew where the drones *weren't*. We knew every nuke bunker and 'hard shelter,' where you could hide out and get shit-faced and sleep it off ... and you know *every* structure like Inquanoc's got 'em." He gestured at the globes of the reactor housings, the domes of the repulsion generators. "You've got enough potential energy in Michiko's basement to tear the atmosphere off half of Aurora. He got the planning permits, so you know the underground is hardened, shielded, like the engine housings on a starclipper."

"Which makes it the safest place in Inquanoc," Cantrell mused. "There's nothing NARC or Starfleet could throw at them to even put a dent in the bunkers. It's more secure than a fortress, with a city-sized human shield right overhead."

The description was bitingly accurate. In the back of the ready room a figure was fidgeting, trying to duck as Janssen's and Holder's drones hovered too close. Jarrat beckoned him forward and, when he hesitated, Stone propelled Chuck Lindgren into the center of the briefing.

The man was dressed in fresh fatigues and a crew cap with the NARC-*Athena* logo, but he looked alien, ill at ease. "I, uh, what do you want, Max ... I mean, Captain?"

The swift correction made Stone smile faintly, and he remembered, Lindgren had been infatuated with Max Tyler. He seemed merely intimidated by Jarrat. "Share data," Jarrat was inviting. "You must have finished out Michiko's simulation. You've seen the final permutations." He gestured at the holoschematics. "Is there anything in the battle algorithms about an incursion into Inquanoc?"

For a moment Lindgren could not find his voice. He was lost among the massive, armored figures of the descant troops, all of whom were looking at

him. His face shed so many layers of color, Stone was about to call for a medic when Lindgren pulled himself together.

He peered at the VR plans and the tip of his tongue flicked, lizard-like over his lips. "They never figured you'd get in. There's two scenarios about battles around Inquanoc. One's an air assault. They, uh, have missiles. They shoot down your gunship ... it crashes and the reactor spills in one scenario, but not in the other one. If the reactor spills, it's Game Over. In the sim, Scorpio bugs out of Aurora, because the, uh, colony gets abandoned. In the one where the reactor doesn't spill, PharmaTech slugs it out with the crew and takes a lot of prisoners. Hostages. Then, NARC either backs off to save its people, or not. If they don't, it's Game Over again. If they do, Scorpio gets to negotiate. They buy their way out of the system."

So that was their final bottom line. "Escape," Stone said grimly. "And the other scenario?"

The accountant was way out of his depth. Like any civilian, he knew far more about VR wargames than battlefield simulations, and he was showing the whites of his eyes like a frightened horse. At any moment Stone expected him to bolt. Jarrat dropped a gauntlet lightly on his shoulder, and he jumped out of his skin.

His voice was breathless. "The, uh, other scenario's about a ground assault, could be NARC, could be the colonial militia. Missiles again ... the troops get fried. If some get through, close to Inquanoc, there's collateral damage to the city, evacuation plans. Michiko figures Tac's own Emergency Services will kick in and save the public, and in the chaos, the evac, they, uh, make their escape run."

The bottom line was the same: escape. The backdoor was always there, no matter how dire the scheme. Stone frowned deeply at Lindgren. "You saw nothing about an incursion? Fighting inside the city?"

"No." Lindgren edged away from Jarrat. "They don't think you can get in. Can I leave now?"

"Scram." Stone jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Take a pill."

With a quiet curse as Lindgren fled, Cantrell dropped the cigarette and ground it out beneath his heel. "So if we can get troops inside, we're already more than halfway home."

Jarrat handed the remote back to Cronin. "Study the maintenance shaft and the underground. Know it as if you've lived there. Because you'll be dropping out of the shaft into the pit. You'll have the element of *shock*, never mind surprise. Use the last control node, just above the reactor housing, to cut power to the underground a second before you go in. Drop like bricks, hit bottom, and shoot anything that moves."

"Cover the whole underground," Stone went on, "*instantly*, with a heavy stun field. You'll put down anyone not wearing a helmet. You can still expect to meet thirty or forty percent of the PharmaTech troops, but you won't have Michiko or Denehy remote-detonating devices in Thule. They'll be face-down with their brains scrambled."

Again, the room was so quiet, the a/c seemed loud. Jarrat and Stone said no more. They gave the Ravens the opportunity to size up the mission profile,

kick it around, try it for bugs. At last Cronin gave the commanding officers a dark, brooding look. The blue-white overhead strip lights reflected in his armor, making his eyes narrow. "We can do it. According to Tac, the PharmaTech security force is maybe four or five hundred men, but they've out themselves in a chokepoint, and they won't be in armor. We won't be taking on any more than thirty or forty at a time, and God help the bastards." He lifted his right arm and mimed hosing an endless stream of 9mm from the rotary cannon which would be installed on the armor's forearm panel. "Joe?"

Ramos's dark head nodded slowly. "It can be done, if we can get in. But just getting on the outside, by the aerials, is a fucking big *if*."

All eyes turned to Jarrat and Stone. The drones panned onto them and Stone felt the fierce weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders. He saw the shadows in Jarrat's face, and felt a surge of some complex emotion, part resentment, part thrill, part dread.

The only way to get into Inquanoc was through its blind spot, and so fast, the Scorpio monitors never figured out what was happening. Stone met Gil Cronin's flint-hard eyes levelly, watching for the big man's reaction as he said, "HALO."

A collective exhalation rushed around the room; several heads shook. Jarrat held up one gauntleted hand. "One gunship bucks most of the way through reentry on repulsion. You jump high, in a storm of ECM that gives the gunship the scan-profile of a freighter in big trouble." He was looking at Evelyn Lang. "You detonate a couple of our own warheads, right off your flank. The jumpers are going to look like cargo modules, broken out of a ruptured hold."

Stone was watching faces. To a man, the Ravens were hooked. NARC descendant troops had the reputation for being a little nuts. "You fall like bricks," he said quietly, "while the gunship *looks* like its drifting downrange. But not too far, not out of touch. Long before you get close to Inquanoc, you'll be at ambient temperatures. Cold. We'll set up a 'grayzone' with ECM broadcast from drones the size of tiny ultralites, too small to track accurately. Repulsion-brake, fast and hard, the instant you pass into the zone. When you drop out, thermoscan won't pick you out of the background environment. You'll be right in their visual blindspot, and we'll launch three diversions to cover you."

"One," Jarrat went on, looking from Raven to Raven, men he knew well, others who were barely acquaintances, "we'll saturate the whole area with high-level EMP from orbit, right out of the sun. I can guarantee, their tracking systems will scream alerts about solar flares."

"You've done this before," Lang guessed. "Army?"

"Yeah." From somewhere Jarrat produced a faint smile. "There's a lot of veterans in this room. We've all pulled crazy stunts."

"This one's a tad bit nutser than most," Cantrell observed.

To Stone's surprise, it was Petrov who added, "But it'll work. We're setting up the solar flare stunt right now, Gil. The Scorpio bastards'll be scratching their heads about it, maybe suspicious, maybe just cussing, and running scared about our second diversion."

"Which they get from the deep space network itself," Stone told the ass-

embly, “so they won’t question it. You all know, we’re parked at the Diego Chavez beacon, Nav Station 98-960. From this node, we can tap in and have the deep space network itself inform Aurora of the arrival of four carriers, two Starfleet, including the *Olympic*, an Army carrier and the *Athena*.” He gave Jarrat a grim look. “There’s no way Scorpio could know what was in the region, passing by, but every ‘jack’ in the PharmaTech army is going to know he’s dead meat now.”

No matter how well men like Braith Germer had armed them, a company of five hundred men could not go up against such force, and even if the Scorpio tracking people doubted the solar flare, they would never think to question the deep space network itself.

Now, heads were nodding, and Jarrat went on, “A lot of PharmaTech’s guys are going to be like the security goons we interrogated after the hit on the Stavanger Dock. Shim Redden, late in his career and only in it for the money to get out. Den Chizmar, still wet behind the ears, looking for cheap thrills. Mercenaries and wannabies. Sure, they’ll have some real soldiers, but when the network reports four carriers on approach, the officers’ll have their hands full trying to control a rabble.”

“Watch for cars and planes bugging out fast.” Stone smiled thinly, without humor. “There’s going to be bolters, rabbiting in every direction while the techs try to recalibrate gear that was fried in the solar flare. You’ll get two, maybe three minutes of chaos in the underground. Then you’ll be in, with a surveillance blackout in the service shaft.”

“We drop the klick down the shaft, fast as gravity’ll let us,” Cronin mused, thinking it through, pacing it, testing it mentally. He gave Stone a hawkish look which transferred to Jarrat. “You got one more card left to play, some last diversion.”

“A beaut,” Jarrat affirmed. “Colonel Janssen?”

On one of the CRTs, Janssen leaned forward. Her videodrone had angled onto Cronin, who would lead the HALO jump. “NARC has a part for me in this, Sergeant. On a specific cue, I’ll be calling Inquanoc on every frequency with the offer of a deal. I want to talk to Denehy and Michiko, no one else will do. I’ve seen the carriers coming, I also see the corporate war exploding across this planet, *my* planet, and I’m panicked. I speak for the first fleet families, the descendants of the pioneers. We know we could lose Aurora, and I’m offering a deal, a get-out for Michiko and Denehy before hell busts loose. We’re offering a ship, a good one, and big, fat bribes if they’ll get the fuck out of Aurora before Starfleet and NARC and the Army trash it.”

“At the exact moment,” Stone said to the Ravens, “when you’re dropping into the underground, the genuine soldiers among PharmaTech’s ranks will be fighting to keep command, and if we’re lucky, a few like Redden and Chizmar will go rogue, turn some serious weapons, Braith Germer’s equipment, on their officers in an attempt to just get out of Inquanoc with their lives. You couldn’t blame them. At this same moment, when a solar flare has fried their sensors, Janssen calls.”

“She calls,” Jarrat finished, “not with the voice of Tactical, but with a deal so illegal, the first families could be busted by NARC. You don’t deal with

Angel syndicates. But families like the Janssens, the ‘heritage lunatics,’ just might try, if it was the only way to save their territory.”

“It could work,” Cantrell said quietly.

“It will.” Stone picked up his helmet.

“It had better,” Jarrat observed, “or you’ll watch NARC dismantled. There’s more at stake than a syndicate bust.”

“Thule,” Janssen said, a whisper from the CRT as the briefing began to break up.

“We,” Stone heard the ice in his own voice, “have one hell of a lot of work to do, and no time to do it in.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The freighter lumbered into orbit with its main drive intermittent and its distress beacons wailing. Two escape pods punched out in low orbit but the ‘trash hauler’ continued to struggle, its automatics fighting to keep it out of the atmosphere. The hull had begun to glow with the first compression heat of reentry when hull plates started to fail.

Explosions blossomed against the hull, ripped away by the jetstream of reentry, and freight spilled. The AI pilot shifted the distress beacons from desperate pleas for assistance to impact and haz-mat warnings. Each cargo module weighed a thousand kilos, and the contents were flammable. The AI calmly warned Tactical to evacuate civilians.

From the two escape pods the human crew identified as the pilot and engineer of the freighter *Sylvia Wang*. Panicked voices babbled about a solar flare that had caught the ship when she slung in through the inner system, close by Aurora’s cool, distant star. They shouted warnings to other pilots, before transmission became intermittent and their power failed.

Anyone tracking the escape pods would watch them pile into the side of Mount Fairweather, sixty kilometers north of Inquanoc, where local lore promised fair weather if the mountain could be seen, and an ice storm inside of three hours if it could not. Air Traffic in both Thule and Maui had tracked the pods, and were also tracking the cargo modules blown out of the ruptured holds.

Search and Rescue squads launched fast. They were on a wild goose chase, but Stone did not regret it. Those squads would only add to the seeming reality, as facilities across the northeastern hemisphere scrambled to lock down their mainbrains before a solar flare hit Aurora.

The Blue Raven gunship glowed cherry-red as it listed through the upper levels of the atmosphere on repulsion, neither reentering nor skipping out. Hull temperatures soared and control surfaces would have been heavy. Jarrat

and Stone watched on the shuttle's long-range vid scanners, and Jarrat said quietly, "She's good."

The trick of disguising the gunship as a derelict about to burn up had been dumped into Evelyn Lang's hands, and they had watched her face clench. Military Airlift had never asked anything of her which came close to this insanity. Then again, she had watched Karl Budweisser and Mischa Petrov break so many standing regulations, if they had not done it under NARC auspices, they would not have seen daylight for thirty years. They had hacked the deep space network and inserted a data feed from the carrier's own main-brains. The feed showed four assorted 'heavies' inbound from the rough location of Diego Chavez. Interfering with a deep space network station was so illegal, even Stone felt fingers of ice scamper along his spine.

Sixty Ravens, the full complement from all four gunships, dove out of the Blue Ravens gunship's jump bay and hit the atmosphere boots-first. Surface temperatures on their kevlex-titanium skins soared off the scale. Instruments read off the altitude as they dropped toward Inquanoc like a flock of smoking-hot shrapnel cast off from a wreck.

From the west horizon, riding wavecrests over Vancouver Sound, the VM-104 Corsair watched them drop on long-range video. Gil Cronin would have been the first in the air. Behind him the Ravens were incandescent flecks in the dawn sky while recorded voices in the gunship's escape pods blared the *Sylvia Wang's* hysterical messages.

The timing was critical. Stone was listening for a marker which would tell him to set the shuttle down on a clifftop high over the east shore of the Amundsen Sea. His screens were alive with data; red lights blipped warnings everywhere.

Every authority on Aurora which drew data from the network knew four carriers were driving into the system. Civilians across the planet could only conclude that Aurora was about to erupt in war, and panic would race through the cities like a plague. This, Jarrat regretted, but there was no avoiding it. Mainframes were shut down, civvies began to raid stores for supplies, nuke bunkers were opened and anyone who had the means fled out of the city, putting distance between them and the probable battle zones. It was as if the whole colony had gone onto war alert, and given the reality, perhaps this was no bad thing.

The marker Stone had been listening for chirped urgently. The shuttle nosed swiftly toward a landing site he had pinpointed minutes before. Every onboard system shut down. He and Jarrat were already on internal power and air, and to be certain they closed down suit sensors, scanners, telemetry, computers. Only repulsion and life support remained online, and as the riot armor became island worlds, isolated even from each other, Jarrat opened the empathic shields.

Visual was restricted to the angle of the visor and the narrow field of view afforded by the cockpit surround. He tilted the helmet back and looked up through the armorglass canopy. Dead above, the dawn sky was flushing with the colors of sunrise. From Stone he felt the clench of muscles, the tension of his belly, the prickle of sweat.

In training they had both performed the maneuver they had asked of the Ravens. In simulation a HALO jump, armored and on repulsion, was a rare thrill. In reality, with the possibility of a missile launch ahead and the knowledge that several million civilian lives were in the balance, the thrill turned to a healthy trepidation even for the most hard-nosed of the Ravens.

The same feeling echoed back and forth through the empathic link until Jarrat groaned, unable to tell which were his own feelings, which were Stone's. Given the choice, they would rather have jumped with the Ravens, but the protocols of the job would only bend so far. And both Jarrat and Stone were very much aware of the potential for disaster. Raven Leader needed to be out, airborne, free to move until ingress to the underground was secured.

Civilians on both sides of the Amundsen Sea were still scrambling to prepare when the solar flare hit. Dawn was rising over Inquanoc, and the *Olympic* was hidden in the glare of the sun, a mote lost in the star's shower of hard radiation. Her stern was turned to the planet's surface and one of the three drive engines had ignited.

The maneuver broke every civilian and military regulation. Make or break, Jarrat's and Stone's signatures were on the authorization without which Holder would not proceed. At three percent power, the one live engine saturated the whole hemisphere with sizzling EMP in the same wavelengths as would have been expected from a genuine solar flare.

No matter the shielding, no system was safe. Several million credits' damage would be done in the next three minutes. The upper atmosphere ionized, danced, flared, and from Thule to Inquanoc communications broke up. Tracking screens crackled with white noise and gibberish data, and delicate systems fried. Those buried in the caverns beneath Inquanoc were either shut down, dormant, or were being torn apart by desperate technicians.

In the stormy halo of Aurora's star, the *Olympic* pulled out and headed west in the wake of the Blue Raven gunship. Evelyn Lang had drifted into the night side. Though both NARC and Starfleet were holding radio silence, Jarrat and Stone knew the gunship would be on reentry procedures, coming in on an angle so steep, it would have torn the wings off the shuttle. Just over the horizon, the Starfleet carrier went onto station-keeping in convoy with the *Athena*, both of them monitoring Inquanoc and Thule, and feeding data to Tactical as the solar flare died back to high-normal levels.

Tactical's own mainbrains had been shut down with minutes to spare, and as the ionized upper atmosphere ceased to sizzle and dance they came back up fast. Thule Field was a shambles, but their 'crash recovery' services had already swung into gear. Their equipment was better shielded than normal business systems, and they would be up while the Scorpio technicians must still be realigning, reconfiguring, replacing burned-out circuits.

The radio silence was the worst part of it, Jarrat decided. The constant chatter of the Ravens' comm loop was sometimes annoying and even confusing, but knowing where they were, learning what was going on from secondhand profanity and barked orders, was infinitely preferable to this terrible isolation.

These were the critical minutes, and they would race by. Jarrat's eyes had been on the chrono since the crippled freighter lost its hull plating and a hold ruptured on the edge of space. He had glimpsed the incandescent motes of the falling Ravens before the warning of the solar flare bellowed across the colony, and though the flare was a blast from a drive engine aboard the *Olympic*, it was no less real, no less damaging.

Sweat was prickling Stone's palms. Jarrat felt it in his own hands as he brought the suit systems back online. He wished he knew how to pray, and believed in something to pray to. Instruments crackled back to life and he heard the soft rasp of Stone's breathing in his ear. Moments later the onboard decks booted up and the CRTs fluttered, skipped, stabilized. With green on all systems, Stone hit the igniters and both jets and repulsion fired, first time.

Jarrat's eyes were still on the chrono. "The Ravens should be in," he whispered. "Take us up, I'll try for a visual."

The shuttle lifted like a feather. Inquanoc was forty k's in the west, over the horizon, but with altitude the city became visible to long-range scan. In the aftermath of the flare, the Scorpio tracking technicians would not see the NARC aircraft.

"No sign of missiles." Stone's voice was hoarse. "No wreckage, no exhaust signature, no smoke."

"So far, so good," Jarrat murmured, intent on the screens as he zoomed out the lenses and fine-tuned the image. And then, "Got it."

On the CRTs in both cockpits, a grainy close-up on the aerials topping Inquanoc showed the dark smudges of open service hatches. No Ravens were in sight and Jarrat began to breathe again.

"They're in," Stone said softly. "Say, a minute to kill video surveillance in the shaft, then a half-minute to drop, another minute to cut power to the underground and saturation-stun the whole warren."

No margin for error, no chance to recover from a mistake or miscalculation. Jarrat flicked a glance at the chrono. "Janssen should be standing by."

"Trust her," Stone muttered. "Some Tactical people are the best in the business."

"I know," Jarrat told him. "That much, I learned at first hand ... Christ, here we go."

The wide-band call went through at blistering high power. Janssen was taking no chances. With the Ravens maintaining complete radio silence in the maintenance shaft, no audio, no telemetry, there was no way to know if they were ready to crack open the service hatch above the reactors, but Janssen was dead on cue.

"Mister Denehy, Mister Michiko, this is Kristyn Janssen." Not Tactical, not 'Colonel' Janssen. "I'm calling on behalf of a ... a consortium. The households of Welland, Takahara, Kronje, McPherson, Wisting, and others. I've been delegated because you know me, and this ... this is on short-notice by anyone's standards. Michiko, Denehy, we're out of time, all of us. You have the equipment: you must have seen the data from Diego Chavez! It's time we talked a deal, while there's still something to fight for. You call us the 'heritage lunatics?' Fine. Maybe we're just bloody lunatic enough to do business with

Scorpio." She spat the word. "You hear me, Denehy, Michiko? We know who you are, and where you are ... and it's past time when any of it mattered. You didn't see the data? We've got four fucking carriers insystem, and the next thing is a corporate war that'll strip this planet back to bare rock! You want out? You want to walk away from Aurora and go away rich?" A long pause. "Jesus Christ! What's the matter with you people? You want to see this planet burned to cinders before you die? Talk a deal, for godsakes, before NARC gets in and we're all dead!"

And then, when Jarrat no longer even hoped to hear it, The Voice answered. The same voice that had interrogated him out of the darkness and given the order to shoot him with Buran. "We hear you, Colonel Janssen. Give us a reason to believe a word you say, and perhaps we shall consider your suggestions."

They might not yet admit to negotiating, but they were listening, and Jarrat took a long deep breath. Michiko's voice on the air told him several things: the Ravens were still in the service shaft, and their presence remained undetected; the failure of security surveillance in the shaft had been ascribed to the solar flare; the data from Diego Chavez had been received by Scorpio as surely as by the Thule Field ... and the Scorpio moguls were willing to talk.

"Damn," Stone whispered, "it's going to work. They want out."

"Don't be counting eggs," Jarrat advised, intent on instruments.

"Chickens," Stone corrected.

"Like a kid from Sheckley would know the diff?" Jarrat demanded. "I'm seeing the Blue Raven gunship, Stoney."

It was riding low on the horizon, radio-silent, shrouded in the fog which crept between Maui and Thule's east coast, and at least for the moment it was invisible to Inquanoc's disrupted tracking gear. The shuttle had just the altitude to visually pick up the gunship in one direction and Inquanoc in the other, but Evelyn Lang would see the three other NARC gunships, all of them over the western horizon, where dawn was beginning to brighten the night sky of Thule.

Janssen's voice was a whipcrack, lashing at Michiko, and for the first time Jarrat heard an edge in The Voice. His ears pricked, he began to listen intently, and he was wondering if Janssen might actually talk her way to a bloodless coup, when the power cut out on Michiko. His broadcast died in mid-sentence.

"That's it, Jesus God, that's got to be it!" Stone's pulse rate cranked up fast. "The Ravens just cut power to the underground."

Now the risk factor exploded exponentially. Jarrat's mouth was dry as a desert. The shock in the bunkers under Inquanoc would be vast; the chaos ripping through the PharmaTech ranks was the best weapon they had at this time, yet even so, success would be measured in seconds.

If it was no bluff, and Thule was rigged —

If Pietro Denehy or Leo Michiko had a remote in his hand —

Military jets howled in Aurora's cold, thin air as Stone opened the throttles, accelerating through the forty k's to Inquanoc and cutting a wide arc around the city. The chrono was still counting, and Jarrat was conscious of his own pulse and Stone's. He was holding his breath, waiting for it, counting with the chrono.

A minute took on the proportions of an hour. The tension in Stone's shoulders made Jarrat's bones ache, and they sucked in a simultaneous breath as Gil Cronin's voice bellowed:

"We're in, we're down, but it's for shit. Green Raven, Gold Raven! Set a perimeter, seal the lifts! Raven Leader, you better seal the whole fucking city while you still can!"

His voice was the cue for all NARC units to abandon radio silence, and at once the Ravens, the gunships, the carrier, filled Jarrat's ears. Stone barked across them all, "Blue Raven 6!"

Cronin was working hard, breathing fast, though he was in armor. "It's an ant heap, Cap. It's bunkers inside of bunkers, and the only good thing is, the deep ones are rad-shielded, and that's where Scorpio's got 'emself dug-in. You getting this?"

"We hear," Jarrat shouted over the audio clutter. "Means they can't punch a signal out with a remote. Even if their gear's wired to the main radio masts, they're off the air. Thule's safe, even if she's rigged ... and they're not ready for an incursion, Stoney."

It bought them a few minutes. Thule was safe, until or unless someone made it out of the bunkers, or into the fantasy superstructure of Inquanoc. Stone's eyes flicked to the weapons systems screen at his elbow as Jarrat armed the Corsair's chain guns and missiles. The VR plot of Inquanoc, as supplied to Tac Emergency Services, pulled up. Every exit at ground level, every lift shaft, was blue-highlighted.

"All gunships, this location, fast!" Stone barked. "Blue Raven 6, is the underground sealed? Gil! Gil!"

"It's sealed," Cronin panted, "but they were bolting before we got in. They're splitting, every direction. PharmaTech could be in the city."

"But not the officers," Jarrat whispered, "not the guys who would have their fingers on the button ... they wouldn't bolt. Stoney?"

It was a hunch, but it was a good one. "Still, we'll seal the hangar level exits," Stone said quietly. "And Kevin ... carefully."

Carefully? Jarrat licked lips that were suddenly dry. He knocked the covers off the laser's trigger and studied the headup display. "You see 'em, Stoney? We have to make this fast."

The exits were also highlighted on Stone's CRT. He jinked the shuttle onto a line from which Jarrat could reach four. These were the teardrop entryways to the hangars and garages on the west side, and they had been closed when PharmaTech moved in. A tiny burst from the argon laser fried each mechanism in turn, and Stone moved on. As fast as Jarrat could lock targets, the laser burned out the control electronics while the Corsair orbited the pylon.

The comm loop was howling and behind the Ravens' voices Jarrat heard multiple rotary cannons, stun field projectors, snappers discharging massive voltages. The sounds of battle. Only NARC's highband transmissions issued from the underground. The power was still out, and the whole honeycomb of bunkers was isolated.

The sun was up as the gunships roared in out of the west and took station

around Inquanoc. Jarrat's gun-camera was rolling, and Stone took the shuttle up for a wide-angle on the whole location. The Ravens were bawling over their own audio chaos, but they were making headway. The Green Ravens were reporting bunkers opened and cleared; the Red Ravens had assigned a vacant garage as a holding cell for captives, and the array of confiscated weapons was the equal of anything NARC commanded.

A single exit point had been left functional in Inquanoc's base, a single viable hangar, and the Green Raven gunship was on station, covering it. Lang had taken Blue Raven high over the city to grab telemetry video. Stone was cautiously satisfied. The shuttle dropped in to the last open hangar, which was flanked by yellow chevrons and warning signs. It was a service bay for access only by the City of Inquanoc.

Dim red emergency lights lit the interior. The shuttle's floods cast grotesque shadows from construction equipment, drones and transports. Stone took the shuttle in on repulsion and performed a full three-sixty before he set down just short of an interior hatch. The hangar was deserted. Only a cleaner drone lifted its head to watch as the 104 settled and the canopy whined up.

Rotary cannons and stun projectors slid into their mounting brackets, and Jarrat reached back into the locker at his feet for the battered AP-60 which had served rough duty. The Colt clipped into its place at his right hip, and Jarrat keyed his weight to thirty kilos before he dropped over the side of the plane.

"Raven Leader to all gunships," Stone called. "We are groundside in Inquanoc. Locate on this signal. Hold up and wait for advice."

"Copy that," Lang called tersely. "Nothing moving topside."

The other gunships were calling in as Jarrat led the way to the inner hatch. It was sealed, but he lifted his right forearm and the rotary cannon peeled it open. Inside was a short passage, an elevator and a stairwell leading down into the pit, illuminated in the same feeble red. The lifts were out along with the power, but sensors showed the stairwell very deep, very empty.

"Down?" Jarrat suggested redundantly.

Helmet audio was picking up a whisper of sound from far below: concussions, full-auto, the unmistakable sound of falling masonry. The Ravens were still fighting, but the comm loop had begun to quieten as Jarrat and Stone started down.

Unfinished plascrete, pipes, raw conduit, tanks, cabling roughly duct taped to the side of the ringing steel stepway. It was eerily like Sheckley. Jarrat's hackles were up, prickling so strongly, Stone set a gauntlet on his shoulder plate. "Kevin, what?"

"It's nothing," Jarrat told him, only half a lie. "Just ... this place looks a lot like home."

"Sheckley's not your home," Stone argued. "Just the place you come from. There's a difference ... listen. Helmet audio, not the loop."

Ten levels below the hangar where they had cut their way in, Jarrat paused to listen. The whining roar Stone had heard could only be four or five rotaries firing in unison, and they hosed 9mm without pause until the magazines must be empty. As they fell silent Joe Ramos's voice bellowed in anger.

"Shit! Forget it, stand down, you're not gonna get through. Gil! Gil, get over here!"

Stone keyed his weight to ten kilos and took each flight of ringing steel steps in one jump. Jarrat was right behind him, and as they went down fast he tried the comm. "Blue Raven gunship."

"On station," Lang reported. "Still nothing moving out here."

"Stay put," Jarrat said shortly. "Ops room." Nothing. "Carrier, respond." Still nothing. "Blue Raven, I'm not raising the carrier."

"You don't have the power to get through from down there," Lang called. "Boost your transmission, I'll bounce your signal on through ... try it now."

"Raven Leader to ops room," Jarrat shouted over the increasing crackle and flutter.

"Ops room," Petrov responded after a second-long signal lag. "Where the hell are you, Jarrat? I can hardly hear you."

"Getting into the shielded levels," Jarrat guessed. "We're going to lose contact. You need to raise us, call Blue Raven, get a bounce."

"Explains why we can't get jack-shit out of the Ravens," Petrov said sourly. "I've had a tech crew checking aerials. Stay in touch, Jarrat."

He was breaking up. Jarrat cranked his gain. "What's the scene in Thule?" Nothing. "Petrov!"

"S ... thing ... might be a ... cause we're n ..."

"Damn," Jarrat muttered. "They built this place as a goddamned fortress, years before they expected NARC to get here."

Stone was a flight below him. "Hand it to them. They built themselves an empire and they're not going to let it be torn down without a fight." He held up his hand as Kevin landed hard beside him, and as the stepway stopped vibrating he added, "Feel that?"

The shudder was heavy, thudding like a pulse or a heartbeat inside the structure. "Not a weapon," Jarrat murmured. "What the hell is it?" They were not far above the underground now. Close enough to feel the constant buzz of the repulsion generator, and clearly hear gunshots, occasional grenade concussions. Jarrat adjusted his signal strength, cut out the carrier and gunships, and concentrated on local radio. "Blue Raven 6, where are you?"

Cronin's voice was clearer, louder, with proximity. "About two hundred below you at one-one-five degrees, between the reactor housings and the repulsion ... and we got a mother of a problem, boss. You feeling that? We got warning lights on the grav-resist system. It must've taken a stray shot somewhere."

"She's starting to trip," Stone rasped. "Intermittent turbine trip. Christ. There's a backup, Gil! Shut it down, fast!"

Shut it down before the turbine trip shook the generator right out of its mountings, or the trip became a 'pogo,' and the whole generator housing shattered loose. It would launch itself across the underground — a five-tonne, superhot missile filled with blades spun in every axis at over 10,000rpm — scything through anything in its path.

"Shut it down, Gil!" Stone was shouting as he and Jarrat cut their mass to ten kilos and jumped the last two hundred. "Gil!"

"We can't shut it down, for chrissakes," Cronin barked. "This whole shitty place is already riding on the backup. The main generator took some heavy collateral damage in the firefight, and the third one's laid wide open, waiting for service."

"Jesus," Jarrat swore softly as they hit the ground, the lowest level in the city, and spun in Cronin's direction.

The sullen red emergency lights gave the cavern the look of the pit, and the fighting had strewn the dead and injured like litter. Monstrous machinery loomed in the shadows, and the half-seen locust shapes of the Ravens seemed to burn with live fire as the curves of the mirror-black armor reflected the emergency lighting.

"Raven Leader to Blue Raven gunship." He cranked his transmission strength to max and raised his voice. "Raven Leader to Blue Raven! Evelyn! *Lang!*"

The signal was so broken up, the pilot's voice was barely readable, and Jarrat cast about for the nearest Ravens who were not securing the area or working on the generators. Three of the Green Ravens had stood down and were waiting to be retasked. Stone had joined Cronin and the field engineers from all four units at the generator control bay, and Jarrat beckoned the Green Ravens.

"You've tried to jack into the main aerals?" he demanded of Yablansky, Myles and Cheng. He knew them only by the names stenciled on the armor. The visors were faceless, featureless.

"Just tried, soon as we secured the place. No joy, Cap," Cheng told him. "The conduit was busted all to hell in the firefight. The fiberoptics are chewed up."

Jarrat tilted his helmet to pan the floods back up the stairway. "Lay down a landline, as far up as you need to punch signals through fast. Then get a tech crew up into the city, either jack into the aerals or set up a mobile comm station." He was feeling the drum-like pounding in the floor, which intensified or quietened as the automatics 'trimmed' the generator every tenth of a second to keep it operational at all. "You've got about two minutes," Jarrat told the Ravens, "if we're bloody lucky, "and then the city comes down. *Move!*"

They were bellowing for their unit techs as they ran, and Jarrat cast about for Joe Ramos. He could do nothing to assist the field engineers, and both Stone and Cronin had stepped back to give them space. They were running diagnostics on the generator, and their voices were grim. Cronin had not exaggerated: the grav-resist unit that had been online when the Ravens broke through was pockmarked, carbonized in patches. The third unit was partially dismantled. The covers were off, the hundreds of circular three-meter 'blades' laid bare, and some were marked for replacement.

"Don't even think about the backup." Stone was as grim as the Ravens. "Engineers' notes say they need replacement blades, and they don't get here till late today."

"She's coming down," Jarrat whispered, looking up at the cantilevered ceiling and thinking of the city floating above. "There's about a minute left in that generator, unless we can shut it down and realign it." He flicked a glance

at the chrono. "We'll have a comm landline any second. Gunships, Stoney."

For a blind moment Stone did not reply, and then Jarrat felt every muscle in his body clench. "They don't have the power to lift this mass on tractors," Stone warned.

"We don't know the gross mass of the city," Jarrat reasoned. "According to Gil's research, it's mostly lexanite and polycarb, the whole structure's like a bundle of feathers and air bubbles." He swallowed hard on a clenched throat. "And we're not trying to lift it. We're trying —"

"To break its fall," Stone finished. "Christ, this is insane."

But they were so far out of options, the insane rapidly began to look doable. Jarrat felt Stone take a breath to muster a gang of Ravens, but before he could shout across the background comm clutter a voice with a thick East Coast US accent yelled,

"Cap Jarrat, you got your landline!" Mick Yablansky was breathing heavily, working hard. "Techs are headed on up right now, but we just raised Blue Raven."

"Blue Raven gunship!" Jarrat bawled.

Lang was there at once. "Cap, my comm officer's reading some weird shit in the subetheric levels. I think —"

"We've got a generator trip," Stone affirmed, sparing no syllable. "Get the gunships in close, kid. Grab this thing in tractors, kick your repulsion up to max."

"Get a signal out to Janssen," Jarrat added. "Tactical Emergency Services are on full alert, right now, everything, fire, crash, medevac, the lot. Then raise the *Olympic*."

"Wait!" Lang yelled. "Let me task the gunships first. Your generator's sounding like a lousy flamenco band."

The pounding through the soles of Jarrat's boots was louder, heavier, than the drumbeat of his heart. He could not begin to imagine the gross mass of the city, but he thought he felt it above his head. He had never before suffered claustrophobia — no one who had grown up on Sheckley would have suffered it — but now, here, he felt as if the weight of a mountain were about to crush him.

Or were they Stone's sensations? Jarrat had passed the point where it mattered any longer. They waited through twenty interminable seconds before Lang was back on the air, with a sound of steel in her voice, an edge like a razor.

"Got it, Cap," she shouted. "Shut your generators back by ten percent increments. We'll tell you when we can't carry any more. Red Raven are updating Tac ... full emergency services will launch out of Thule in one minute, but give them thirty to get here."

"Raise the *Olympic*," Stone said hoarsely, "and the *Athena*. Launch the engineers' tractors, the squadron transports, anything with a lot of lift potential. Get them here fast."

It was Gene Cantrell who answered, boosted on by the gunship: "We have your audio, Raven Leader. Budweisser is launching now."

And Eric Holder, on the Starfleet carrier: "Launching five heavy lifters,

Raven Leader. I'm also launching Starfleet Medevac. They'll be with you in twenty minutes. Can you hold Inquanoc that long?"

Jarrat and Stone were watching the field engineers. The generator was shut back to seventy percent. The automatics struggled to realign it on the fly, with thousands of micro-adjustments. As Jarrat watched, the engineers shut back to sixty. The bass hammering began to smooth.

"Cross your fingers," Stone muttered.

Cronin's helmet turned toward him. "Don't start breathing again yet. This mother's damaged itself bad. Kapshaw guesses, if we can get it shut down to something like thirty percent we *might* work on it while it's running. I say, *might*."

Could the gunships carry seventy percent of the dead-mass of Inquanoc? Jarrat seriously doubted it, and his belly was filled with ice. "Raven Leader for Budweisser."

The signal lag was under two seconds. "Hearing you, Cap."

"What's the sustainable overrun on a gunship's grav-resist?" Jarrat asked baldly.

"About fifteen percent," Budweisser told him. "Goddamn it, are you doing what I'm afraid you're doing?"

"Get that tractor here," Stone growled.

"You got twelve minutes?" Bud asked tersely.

"We can hope." Jarrat was still watching the field engineers. The generator shut back to fifty-five and he noticed another layer of smoothing in the terrible, juddering vibration. But Lang's voice was snarling over the loop before Jarrat could update Budweisser.

"We're at ninety-five percent capacity," she warned.

"Generators are at fifty-five, Bud," Stone called. "Automatics are running constantly, we're still tripping intermittently. Field engineers need to take it down to thirty ... your call, Bud."

The signal lag was under a second now. "Shut down to fifty. The gunships can take it," Bud said in a terse growl. "Engineer to all Raven units. You're authorized to overrun your repulsion. I'm watching your telemetry. I'll tell you when to back off."

"You got it, Bud," Lang said acidly. "Five percent over the redline. System looks stable."

The field engineers shut back another notch and the drumbeat in the bedrock smoothed again. Jarrat took a breath. "Kapshaw?"

A helmet panned toward him for a moment before the Blue Raven engineer returned to the CRT monitoring the generator. "The automatics are holding it, Cap. Just."

"For eleven minutes?" Stone hazarded.

"You know any good prayers?" Kapshaw's massive armored shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Time to say 'em if you know 'em."

For the moment they could do no more for the city, and Stone beckoned Cronin out of the shadow of the reactor housings, into the blood-red light and a drifting pall of smoke. Instruments were giving bad-air warnings, but across the underground the power was coming back on by sectors. Pools of white

light had begun to appear, and the full extent of the damage done in the fire-fight became apparent.

"They gave you a scrap," Stone observed.

"The bastards had no choice," Cronin said sourly. "PharmaTech sealed the city, including this hole in the ground. These guys had their own bastard officers on one side and NARC on the other."

"And they blew the crap out of the place." Jarrat panned his helmet floods around the cavernous underground. "Casualties?"

"A lot of theirs." Cronin gestured at the wide-strewn bodies. "We got five walking wounded in our own ranks. Field medics already took care of them. And two dead, one Green Raven, one Red. Jim Hardesty and Tony Ho bought it. Grenades, both of 'em."

"Damn," Stone breathed. He had not known either man well, but the loss of even one member of a small elite unit was keenly felt. "Prisoners?"

One gauntlet pointed. "In a service garage where they keep dead drones. And before you ask, Michiko and Denehy aren't with 'em. The Scorpio elite holed 'emselves up in the nuke bunkers."

"You tried cutting through with rotaries," Jarrat mused. "We heard. For what it's worth, they're not going anywhere."

"They'll be waiting for the city to come down," Stone guessed. "The repulsion fails ... crash and burn. We pull out to save our own. In the chaos, they dig themselves out and vanish. Fake ID, bank accounts in other systems already set up. They're recruited by another syndicate before the dust's settled, and while NARC gets disarmed, dismantled after the fiasco here, they rebuild their empires. Kevin?"

"Sounds about right," Jarrat agreed sourly. "The nuke bunkers run their own power. Water, food, tools, machinery, supplies for a siege. They could stay there for days, then dig themselves out. Where, Gil?"

"This way." Cronin led them to the east side of the underground, where the walls of the excavation became the living rock.

Vault-like doors were closed over, and several thousand rounds hosed into the locking mechanisms had only cratered the surface. Jarrat was listening to the crosstalk between Budweisser and the gunship pilot as they juggled power, balanced stresses, and coaxed the sick repulsion generator down to forty-five percent. The heavy lifters were still eight minutes away, and under Jarrat's boots the ground continued to shudder. The generator could collapse at any moment, and the gunships could only minimize the disaster.

"The bunker's clad in starship armor." Cronin hammered his gloved fist into the dull-metal surface. "We won't cut through. It's mounted in shocks, so we won't punch through either."

"Conduit?" Stone was looking for the Hotpoint, where the bunker's external electronics would connect.

It was at ground-level, triple-shielded. "Get your comm techs," Jarrat said quietly, preoccupied with the gunship pilots' voices. "Get a hookup and open a dialog. You listening to this, Gene?"

In the ops room, Cantrell was following very word. "You want me to take care of it?"

"Yeah," Stone agreed. "We're going to be too busy, Gene ... seven minutes till the heavy lifters get here."

"Petrov's monitoring them," Cantrell told him. "Gable's in the air, doing forward obbo for this flying circus. Christ, Stoney, this had better work. Budweisser's crunching numbers, trying to figure what the gunships can hold, and for how long."

The comm techs from Red and Gold Raven had opened an equipment case, scattering tools and cable across the bare rock, and as Jarrat watched they jacked in a comm portal the size of a helmet. A hundred meters of shielded fiberoptic cable snaked away to the landline.

"You got your hookup," Cronin said tersely. "Any time you're ready, ops room."

The flightcrews aboard the gunships were probably working harder than they ever had before. Evelyn Lang's voice was stretched till Jarrat heard it crack, and he divided his attention between her audio and Gene Cantrell's.

"Six minutes," Stone read off the chrono.

"Mister Denehy, Mister Michiko, my name is Eugene A. Cantrell, I represent NARC Quadrant Command, Darwin's World. I'm aboard the carrier *Athena*, currently in low orbit over Inquanoc. And I am authorized to negotiate with you."

A pause so long answered him, Jarrat had begun to wonder if the hookup was faulty, or if the Scorpio moguls would simply ignore him. And then The Voice said, "Negotiate? NARC doesn't negotiate, Captain. Your propaganda department must have quoted this as an axiom a thousand times."

"True, Mister Michiko." Cantrell knew The Voice from countless audio captures. "However, it would be more true to say, NARC will not negotiate unless the circumstances are ... exceptional. I would deem these to be exceptional. As I began, I represent Quadrant Command, and I'm authorized to deal."

"Five minutes," Jarrat whispered.

"Christ." Stone cleared his throat. "Gil, get your boys together. Casualties first, then get the prisoners out. Take them up the stepway, onto the surface. Emergency Services'll be here soon. Gable can keep a gun on the PharmaTech goons till then. I know it's ten below outside, but they knew the bloody job was dangerous when they signed on."

"Call it done." Cronin mustered the Ravens with a few terse words.

The casualties went out first on repulsion, drifting up the stairwell. Behind them, the PharmaTech casualties were the next out, then the able-bodied, disarmed, disgruntled, gray with dread. Every one of them expected the building to come down at any moment, and even if it held itself up until they got out, they knew they would be looking at the inside of the bars for many years.

But one face was glaring at the NARC men, and Jarrat knew it. The rest were studying the plascrete as if it were fascinating as they marched, hands locked behind heads, under NARC stun cannons. But one head was lifted to give the captains a murderous look.

"Shim Redden." Jarrat laid a glove on Stone's armored shoulder. "I know that horrible face."

"Gil, cut that guy out of the pack, get him over here." Stone cracked the seals and lifted off his helmet. As the PharmaTech lieutenant was hustled over, he showed his face. "You know me?"

"Four minutes," Cronin growled. "Red Raven gunship reports critical overheat in its repulsion ... they're powering down."

Which meant the Inquanoc generators would be throttled back up, while the automatics were still struggling, realigning them every quarter second. Jarrat was listening to Budweisser, who was still on approach. From the tractor, Bud was juggling everyone's telemetry.

"Do you know me?" Stone repeated as Shimon Redden, in the pale steel-blue PharmaTech fatigues, coughed on the mildly toxic air.

"Course I bloody know you," Redden wheezed. "Whaddaya want? You already got your bust, let me be."

"We want Denehy and Michiko," Stone told him.

"Well, one out of two ain't bad," the mercenary mocked, and coughed again, rackingly hard. "Oh, Christ, just shoot me. You gonna gas me to death?"

"One out of two?" Jarrat cocked an ear to Michiko and Cantrell, talking in acid tones, thrashing out a base line from which to work. He cracked the seals and took a breath of the basement's air as he lifted off the helmet. "You should also know me, Redden. I'm the bastard who wouldn't think twice about blowing off your kneecap to get what I want to know fast, and telling your buds to carry you out. Denehy's not in the bunker? Michiko's talking, we know where he is. Where's Denehy?"

Redden took a breath, and actually laughed. "Not in a fuckin' nuke bunker. How dumb do you think he is?"

"As dumb as Leo Michiko? Michiko's in there!" Stone snarled.

The mercenary coughed hard. "There was two ways to get out. Pete and Leo never could agree about nothing, not even how to die."

"Three minutes." Jarrat was listening to the gunships. "Green Raven reports critical overheat ... they're shutting back."

And the heavy vibration of a sick, stressed generator began to thicken in the rock underfoot. Shim Redden's face blanched.

"You get one more chance to answer," Stone offered, "then I'm going to cuff you to that conduit, and you get left behind. If this place comes down, you're buried under it."

"All right! Christ, all right!" Redden's voice rose to a shout. "He's got a plane, man. Denehy's got a fuckin' Yamazake Sylph up in the exec garages on the east side. Denehy told Michiko he was nuts for staying put, the nuke bunkers wouldn't hold when she comes down. Leo told Denehy he was ten kinds of fool, the Sylph'd get trashed before it got halfway to orbit ... but if he can make orbit, he's out. They never agreed, except to split-an'-git, go their own ways when it happened, okay? Denehy was out of this hole before the heavy brigade busted in, soon as we heard about the four carriers headed in-system."

The Sylph was hyperflight enabled. If Denehy made a run for it, he could be anywhere in the colonies in a month. The only thing slowing him down was the fact the hangars and garages were sealed, the locks burned out before

the shuttle landed. Jarrat met Stone's crackling blue eyes as Stone snapped, "Which garage is he in, Redden?"

"I dunno! I —" Redden struggled to find his voice. Stone seized him in both gauntlets and propelled him toward the conduit, and the mercenary yelped in shock. "All right! It's A19, the A19 garage, okay?"

"You better be telling the truth, Redden," Jarrat warned as he lifted his helmet, "or I'll be right in back of you." The helmet locked down, power and air screwed in, and he keyed his weight to twenty kilos.

"Two minutes," Stone read off the chrono as he dropped his own helmet back into place. "Bud?"

"We can't get there any faster," Budweisser warned. "Get the hell out of Inquanoc. If she goes, we'll let her down lightly."

Meaning, five-figure civvy casualties, Jarrat through grimly, not six. "The Ravens are extracting, Bud. Field engineers are passing the generator back to the automatics. How's it look?"

"Shitty," Bud warned in a Canadian accent which seemed to thicken with concern. "Ninety seconds ... I can plot a tractor-grab solution from here, and fill in for one of the gunships till the heavy lifters from the *Olympic* get in. They're three minutes behind us, running hard."

Jarrat and Stone stood shoulder to shoulder, and two rotary cannons blew out the access way to an equipment ramp leading up to the surface levels. Like a couple of deer, they took off on repulsion. From Cronin's schematics of Inquanoc they recalled the layout of the hangars and garages, and Jarrat knew where they were headed. The executive facilities were on the perimeter, which was designated the A-circuit, and they numbered clockwise, with north at zero degrees. A19 was at about 125°. Again, Michiko's keen, intuitive design actually made it easy.

The thousand-meter armored sprint was made through cavernous hangars, equipment stores, garages where the city's vehicles and drones were housed, all in a strange dusk of red emergency lights. At twenty kilos riot armor bounded like a gazelle and Jarrat was not breathing hard as he heard Budweisser call,

"Thirty seconds. Red Raven gunship, standby to trade off. I'll take your repulsion on remote ... get clear and pick up our boys."

The chrono was counting down the last half minute as Jarrat skidded to a stop at a hatch bearing the stencil, 'Hangar A19: authorized entry only.' A cardswipe was waiting, but Stone took the whole mechanism in one gauntlet and tore it out of the wall.

The lock shorted, spat a phosphor-bright shower, and the door released. The main power was still out, but an emergency generator hummed in the hangar. Portafloods were on, and enough current reached the door to move it a hand's span. Jarrat put a glove into the aperture where it had opened, keyed his weight to two hundred and leaned on it. It rumbled open just wide enough to allow a hardsuit to go through. Jarrat's helmet floods were off. He cut his weight to forty, switched to vision intensification and looked the hangar over. At his shoulder, Stone was arming his weapons.

In the glare of the Portafloods, a silver-gold Yamazake raceplane shim-

mered in a haze of heat from its own tailpipes, which were angled toward the door. The jets had been test-fired and were idling, but he saw no sign of the pilot. A moment later Jarrat knew why. He stepped back to let Stone see. As Stone's helmet dipped to the door, they heard a crackle and spatter they recognized. It could only be a plasma torch.

"Ten seconds," Budweisser was saying evenly. "Red Raven, pull up. I'm going to slide in beside you. Five seconds. Four. Three ... got it. In position, and I can hold it. Green Raven, shut down to twenty percent, I'm going over-run my own repulsion, we can carry it." The engineer exhaled hard. "The *Olympic* heavy lifters are on approach, three minutes out. Red Raven, give me a status on your overheat!"

Behind this exchange was a whisper on the edge of Jarrat's hearing: Cantrell's voice, sharp with interest, asking razor-edge questions. And then, The Voice itself, like dark velvet, offering —

The plasma torch had been dragged in from a maintenance shop, and was systematically cutting through the hangar door, where the shuttle's laser had fused the lock. The door was on the other side of the Yamazake, and the hangar held only the one aircraft. Stone's voice was a murmur. "Figure three of them. Denehy, plus pilot, plus bodyguard."

As he spoke a shape stirred under the beaked nose of the Sylph. A woman's voice bellowed, though Jarrat could not make out the words in the enclosure's weird echoes. At a glimpse he recognized the bodyguard they had seen with Pietro Denehy, in the window at Cassius Brand's house in the Argentia sphere. The woman snatched up a helmet, crammed it on before a stun field could discharge, and the visor slammed down. She wore a flak jacket and lexanite guards on limbs and abdomen, and cradled something big, heavy, in both arms. It might have been a rotary, but if it was, it was locked on short-burst, which told Jarrat she had limited ammo. Her aim was uncannily accurate, and she was still bellowing at someone in the plane as she opened fire.

Half-second bursts smacked squarely into Jarrat's visor and tumbled him backwards. Stone caught him, shoved him onto his feet and into the hangar. As Jarrat moved forward Stone leveled his right arm, and the rotary cannon on the forearm plate.

He had barely triggered the weapon when the Yamazake's idling jets throttled up and spat two tongues of blue-white flame, five meters long and blazing at fierce temperatures. Jarrat's suit clamored warnings, though the kevlex-titanium alloy would tolerate the punishment. Internal temperature soared; cryogen gas pumped around the armor segments, but still Jarrat was sweating, panting, and Stone was no better.

Swearing fluently, Jarrat dropped and rolled to get out of the searing jet-wash. Warning lights continued to blink. He was so hot, as he rolled away from the plane he watched the paint strip off a locker that grazed his shoulder. Stone had rolled in the other direction. Jarrat felt the jolt as he hit the plascrete, and before Stone was back on his feet the rotary was firing again. It picked him up, swept him along toward the nose of the plane.

Jarrat rolled to his own feet, and with a few shots he doused the floods.

The hangar plunged into darkness, and when the emergency lights flicked on, he doused those too. Thermoscan was useless: the hangar was furnace-hot, accuracy was dangerously low. But motion sensors told him exactly where two figures were — and he knew the position of the third to a finger's width, though he could not see him.

The rotary was still whining, sweeping Stone into the Yamazake's struts, when the third figure pounced. Jarrat heard a gasp from Stone, a breathless expletive. Stone's shock rolled into him, and he moved fast.

Three meters above, the Yamazake's gullwings had locked shut, and they were hardened, triple-layer armorglass. He had no weapon that would even dent them, and his belly clenched with frustration as he saw Pietro Denehy's face, grimly triumphant, in the cockpit. Denehy believed he had won, and he was running up the flight harness.

For the moment ignoring Denehy, Jarrat went up over the back of the plane in one vast, five-kilo leap, and landed hard on the starboard wing. Stone was still down, though the rotary had quit. Where the bodyguard was, Jarrat could not guess, but he saw the pilot who had been using the plasma torch.

The same torch was now licking around the seals of Stone's helmet, the sockets where power and air fed in. Stone was sensorblind, and reached a gauntlet into the flame of the torch, trying to find the man behind it. On his right forearm, the gattling was silent, and Jarrat knew at once, the torch had fused it before the pilot went for the armor's vulnerable points. A stun field *whumped* through the hangar, but both bodyguard and pilot were helmeted.

Jarrat's teeth clenched as he slid down off the wing and snatched up the pilot as if he were a doll. One big steel glove plucked the plasma torch out of his hand, and as Stone rolled to his feet Jarrat tossed Denehy's pilot into the bank of lockers hard enough to knock him senseless. He slithered onto the plascrete and lay still.

The torch snapped like a carrot between Stone's gauntlets. "That's one I owe you," he said breathlessly. "Can you —"

He was surely going to ask if Jarrat could see the bodyguard, but before the words were out a high whine of servos from the Yamazake made them duck. Like all aircraft in the service of a corporate army, this one was modified. Weapons pods had gaped open near the junctions of wings and body, and barrels extruded, snub, snout-like.

Twin chain guns battered the inside of the hangar door, and as Jarrat watched it began to give. The plasma torch had cut most of the way through.

"It'll go," he muttered. "Where the hell's the bodyguard?"

"I've got movement," Stone rasped. "Under the nose, right below the chain guns. I'm going to go under."

"Watch yourself," Jarrat warned. "Christ knows what they stashed in here — I heard grenades in the firefight."

With a tearing of metal and a sudden rush of blue daylight, the hangar door burst outward. The aperture was ragged, uneven, but the guns swiveled under Denehy's hands, peeling back the steel fangs until enough space opened up off each wingtip to let the Sylph ease through.

Stone had just ducked down to squirm under the plane when the struts

folded up and in. The blistering-hot repulsion cushion kicked in. Screams from under the nose told them where the bodyguard had been hiding. Denehy might not have known she was there, but Jarrat was certain he did, and simply did not care.

Big jets howled up to a banshee crescendo, and every bone, every armor plate shuddered as the Yamazake nosed out. The hangar was filled with jetwash, toxic, roasting. For the bodyguard and unconscious pilot, it became a cremation chamber, but Jarrat and Stone dove out through the blue-white inferno.

The armor was shimmering hot as they rolled into a carpet of crackling frost. Stone's rotary cannon was a fused lump. Still on his back, out of time, Jarrat aimed his own gattling into the tailpipes of the race plane. Stone was shouting over the comm loop, his voice breaking on the words, "Ravens, Ravens, *knock it down!* Blue Raven gunship, bogey at your two o'clock, catch it in tractors!"

Twenty cannons locked on the Sylph as it angled away from the hangar, and the rounds Jarrat had hosed into the stern tubes had damaged the jets. It staggered away, clumsy, heavy, and as the Blue Raven gunship's tractors closed on it like a fist, it wrenched apart. A halo of incandescent gas blossomed about it in the bright morning sky, and in a moment it was hot steel confetti, showering into the fresh snow.

The comm loop was wild, and as Jarrat and Stone clambered to their feet they saw why. Inquanoc was still afloat, three gunships and the engineer's tractor ranged about it, and a flock of heavy lifters was driving in from the west. Budweisser was on the air, conferring with the field engineers. Moments later he was talking to his opposite number on the *Olympic*. Jarrat heard snatches of a plan to bring a battery of smaller generators from both the Starfleet carrier and the *Athena*, and with this, he turned his attention to his partner.

Not for the first time, Stone was the worse for wear. The surface of the kevlex-titanium was dulled by the scorching jetwash, his helmet was scored and pitted by the plasma torch, and an unrecognizable lump remained where the cannon had been on his right forearm. His gloves were scarred, blistered, but Stone seemed not to care.

He lifted the helmet off and drew in a deep breath of the cold, fresh air. His eyes creased as he watched the heavy lifters taking station around the city. Through a chink in the empathic shields Jarrat felt the surges of sheer relief.

The air was cold enough to smart in the sinuses. Jarrat tucked his own helmet under his arm, and he cut out of the loop for a few moments, for privacy. "You okay, Stoney?"

"I'm good." From some untapped reserve Stone discovered a smile. "We have to be the luckiest pair of bastards in this colony."

Jarrat was looking up at the towering, kilometer-high spire of the city. "That one was too close. Closer than Equinox."

"The syndicates are getting smarter." Stone flexed his back, worked his neck to and fro. "They were just gangsters, once, like Mavvik. Now they're strategists, or terrorists. They'll be harder to beat."

"So Central's looking for new weapons, new tricks." Jarrat made a face. "They're looking at us."

"It's ... been an advantage," Stone admitted. He lifted the battered, scorched right gauntlet and swept the hair back from Jarrat's brow as the chill morning wind tossed it into his face. The blue eyes warmed by shades, and then Stone cut back into the comm loop. "Now we're finished here, you know we're rotated back to Central for more tests."

"Oh, I know." Jarrat worked the knots out of his neck and shoulders. "I also know how close to quitting Harry is, and when he walks out, mate, we all go, and leave Central with a handful of air."

"That," Stone said grimly, "sounds like a plan. Blue Raven 6. Give me an update will you, Gil?"

The Starfleet heavy lifters had taken up the slack and the situation would be resolved in an hour with a bank of eight smaller generators harnessed in tandem. Red Raven had taken aboard the descant troops. Its own repulsion was on minimal power, just enough to serve the ship itself, get it home. It was pulling out as the Tactical Emergency squads began to swarm, and the *Olympic's* Medevac squadron approached cautiously. Field engineers from both services were going into Inquanoc, and Janssen was en route to coordinate, and provide the public face. The PharmaTech casualties and prisoners were Tactical's responsibility. GlobalNet had arrived along with Fire Control and Medevac. The shouting was about to start.

"Pass it back to Tactical?" Stone speculated.

"Consider it passed." Jarrat fell into step with him as they strode around the outside perimeter of the public hangar level, with the spire and the spheres suspended overhead.

He was conscious of a curious feeling, almost lightheaded, and he knew it for what it was. They were out, they were alive and safe. They had survived another assignment, when he and Stone both knew their luck was wearing thin. Jarrat felt the same emotions from Stone, and beneath them, a rueful mocking humor. Not that Stone found the situation amusing; quite the opposite. But being alive when the odds said they should be dead could make a man a little drunk. Jarrat took a long breath of Aurora's cold, pure air. He was listening to the ops room, to Gable and Lang.

"9.4, looking for Cantrell," he called into the loop.

"Right here." Cantrell's tone was odd.

Taut, Jarrat thought, filled with some electricity he had not heard from Gene before. The lightheaded sensation of relief receded, banished from Jarrat's fibers by a rush of fresh adrenaline from Stone. He shot a glance at Stone, who was also listening, and Stone's brows rose.

"What's doing, Gene?" Jarrat prompted

"You have a last pickup to make," Cantrell said cryptically.

"Who?" Stone wanted to know.

"Classified, not on the air," Cantrell warned. "Go to the Seattle Mall exit. West side. A man will come out to meet you. Bring him in."

"We're almost at Seattle." Stone lifted a glove to block the sun.

The malls, parks, hangars and garages were clearly marked. The Seattle

Mall was the largest, since it fronted onto the vast plascrete disk at the foot of the spire, with transit-access to all points above. As they had expected, a vast crowd had gathered to watch the fleet of gunships and heavy lifters. Not one of the civilians, Jarrat saw, had guessed what was happening in the bunkers right under their feet.

None of them knew how close they had been to death. Many were waving, while an Inquanoc Tac squad held them back. They knew they had enjoyed a ringside seat at a syndicate bust, but the probable destruction of their city had never dawned on them. The party of a decade was about to begin across Inquanoc.

One figure walked right past the Tactical squad. The uniformed officers left him go by. More than likely, they recognized him, and were watching for him. Stone whispered an eloquent profanity as he recognized the figure.

Unarmed, with a mask-like face, Leo Michiko strode deliberately toward the NARC men.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

If the cascade of hot water was a joy, the hard, slender body in his arms was sheer bliss. Stone held him, caressed him as if still trying to convince himself they were alive, with whole skins. That Jarrat was in his arms again. Many times in these last hours, he had not believed he would feel this again, and he plunged himself into the empathic bond. He drowned in it, with his face pressed into Jarrat's wet hair. Kevin's weight pressed him back against the tiles, and one long, slender leg was between his own.

The empathic shields were down, and though the flood of sensation overwhelmed Stone, he was no longer troubled. Once, he had believed the only way to experience anything like this was to breathe in the fine gold dust which gave dreams of heaven, until at last the dreams became death. He was wrong. Fantasy spun and unraveled as he held Jarrat, as rich as any Angeldream. Death was no part of it.

He could never know the thoughts in Jarrat's tousled head, but the emotions coursing through him were under Stone's skin, and Stone reveled in them. He slid down Jarrat's body, his lips and tongue hunting, paying homage. He laid claim to the hard, blood-hot shaft, swallowed Kevin down deep, and when the comm buzzed for attention they listened for just long enough to know the call was routine, then ignored it, let the comm queue it. Downtime was precious.

Almost an hour later Stone remembered the call. Black silk whispered on his skin and Jarrat's. They lay in a tangle of warm limbs, not sleeping but dozing and talking in undertones, desultory, easy. Stone was reluctant to move,

but it was Kip Reardon's call still unanswered, and at last he snaked an arm out to the comm.

Jarrat gave a groan of protest and pulled the black silk over his head. The sheets were a gift from Jesse Lawrence. The Rethan burgundy and glasses standing on the deck by the bunk were from Kristyn Janssen. Stone leaned over Jarrat and swiped up his glass, leaned further and hit the comm with one knuckle.

"Kip, you wanted to talk to us?"

The surgeon was some moments answering. Stone took a mouthful of the rich red, laid his lips over Jarrat's, and shared it in a curious kiss which deepened until Reardon spoke from the comm. They were out of the view-angle of the video pickup, and Jarrat's hand slipped high between Stone's thighs.

"I interrupted something?" Reardon guessed.

"You must be psychic." Stone heard his own breathy voice and chuckled. "What's on your mind, Kip?"

"You might want to be here," Reardon suggested, "when the tank opens. Senator Brand's shuttle got in an hour ago. I left a message. Harry and Bud are set up in OR3, and our ... guest has asked to be present. I need your authorization. Gene's taken the usual three steps back and put his observer's hat back on. And the Russian looked blankly at me when I asked, and told me to call you."

"Because he bloody knows we're on downtime!" Jarrat said loudly from beneath the sheet. If Michiko wants to be there, it might be interesting to watch him and old Brand in the same room at the same time."

"Michiko tried to kill Marcus," Reardon said pointedly.

"At one time or another, Michiko tried to kill us all," Stone argued. "Right before he claimed Janssen's unconditional amnesty."

And the lawyers were still deadlocked on that score. The wording of Janssen's amnesty offer was plain. *Anyone* with information contributing to the downfall of Scorpio was offered amnesty, a bounty, and witness protection. Scorpio had already gone down when Michiko claimed the amnesty, but Cantrell had not lied. As Quadrant Command's representative, he was authorized to negotiate.

The single word Michiko wanted to negotiate was *Scorpio*. The word he preferred was *Aphelion*, and antennae went up fast. Even Janssen, who liked to pretend indifference to the business of the homeworlds, was interested. Complete, unconditional amnesty for Michiko was never on the table, but some kind of deal was. While the articles of the agreement were thrashed out, he was in NARC close-custody.

"If you want to watch Harry and Bud do their thing," Reardon was saying, "be here in fifteen."

"We'll be there," Jarrat groaned, and as the comm shut off he pulled down the sheet. "Goddamnit! Michiko."

"Not our problem." Stone leaned over and kissed him, offcenter of his mouth, before he bounced to his feet.

"Aphelion," Jarrat growled.

"Also not our problem ... yet," Stone allowed. He pulled a fresh pair of sweats from the closet. "It's Bill Dupre's headache, until they're ready to assign a carrier."

Jarrat was padding into the adjoining cabin, barefoot, naked. Stone watched him for the pleasure of following the line of his back, the curve of his buttocks. As he rummaged for denims Jarrat called over his shoulder, "Assign a carrier to the homeworlds? Christ, Stoney, it'd be the first time since —"

"Since Gene busted Aphelion out of the Jupiter system," Stone finished. "Not our problem, honey. If and when they decide to assign the *Athena* to Mars, I'll lose sleep over it then."

Because Aphelion had drizzled away into the cold, dry Martian sands, and only the tentacles had been lopped off, out on Callisto, Europa and Gany-mede, where Angel had become a plague uncomfortably close to Earth's own backdoor.

Twenty-five years ago Gene Cantrell was Jarrat's age, or Stone's: young, eager to score vengeance for the friends and lovers he had lost to Angel. Full of innovative ideas, ready to take risks that would have been anathema to older officers who were anticipating retirement. He was not long out of Star-fleet when he was bumped up to captain, and Central considered him expendable when they threw the Aphelion assignment into his lap.

Today, Gene Cantrell was close to retirement himself, but he still wanted field work, carrier assignment. He swore he had one last command in him, and when the next NARC carrier came out of Mitsubishi's shipyards in Kure, Japan, it was already his. The launch was due in a few months, and when Cantrell left the *Athena*, either Central would judge Jarrat and Stone sound enough to fly without an observer, or their warrant to command would be withdrawn.

Stone knew he and Jarrat could be looking at one last assignment. As they went up to the Infirmary he tried the name of Aphelion on his tongue. Michiko had been part of Aphelion, and he was still connected. Many years at the helm of Scorpio had lifted him through the ranks and back into favor after the madness of his youth. And right about now, Stone thought as he and Jarrat stepped into the Infirmary, Leo Michiko's obituary was being broadcast by GlobalNet. For once Arial Quinn was doing something useful. Leo Michiko was officially dead. With the safety, the security, of the grave, he was at liberty to spill every secret.

For a man who had apparently been killed when a Yamazake Sylph was blown away at zero-altitude by at least a dozen NARC riot troops outside Inquanoc, in full view of the city, Michiko looked to be in good health. His face was shuttered, reserved, but he was standing — with a granite-faced guard at his shoulder — together with Cantrell in the corner of Reardon's third OR facility. The guard was a Gold Raven. Armed, Michiko's permanent shadow, he pretended deafness while Michiko and Cantrell spoke quietly. They had been talking, now, for days.

Catlike eyes looked up as Jarrat and Stone appeared. They lit on Jarrat and narrowed. Michiko would never forgive the intrusion, the deception of Max Tyler, but he gave the captains a stiff nod and returned his attention to

the cryogen tank. Cantrell said something softly to him, and came around the tank to join Jarrat and Stone, leaving Michiko to his guard. Stone looked Michiko up and down, from the designer boots to the diamond ear studs. Michiko returned the scrutiny, and Stone saw a flicker of challenge in the dark eyes.

Stone shook his head minutely, refusing the lure. Like Aphelion, Leo Michiko was Dupre's problem, and Stone bit back the resentment, the anger, he shared with Jarrat. For the moment the man had his uses, and NARC was not reluctant to negotiate when they saw a good deal. But Michiko's time would surely come, Stone thought. And it could not be far away.

In a chair by the head of the tank, Cassius Brand held court over the proceedings. He was thin, pale, but his eyes were bright. He looked up at Jarrat and Stone with a certain acid humor, and after a moment's hesitation, offered his hand. Stone took it. It was dry as paper, soft, thin as a claw. Brand was dying, despite his determination to live. He was much closer to the end now than he had been when he met the NARC captains on the terrace of his house in Argentina. Stone released the old hand and looked up over the man's white head at Harry Del.

The empath was frowning over his current patient, but he gave Stone a glance, a nod, and mouthed, *soon*. Then, "Are we ready?" Harry asked quietly of Reardon and Budweisser.

Surgeon and engineer were intent on a forest of equipment which had sprung up around the tank. Jarrat and Stone stepped back with Cantrell to make space. As Del took his place at the head of the tank, Jarrat asked quietly, "Does Brand know Michiko tried to kill Marcus?"

"No. Nor will he," Cantrell murmured. "Putting Brand in the picture will just get Michiko assassinated, and we need him."

"We do?" Stone echoed soundlessly. "Let me guess. Classified."

Cantrell's eyes were flint-hard. "Right now, Stoney, it's on a need to know basis. When you need to know, Bill Dupre'll brief you."

"You mean, when he hands us the Aphelion assignment. Christ!" Jarrat tipped back his head and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. "So what's the deal you're offering Michiko?"

"Depends, doesn't it?" Cantrell was preoccupied with the surgeon, the engineer, the empath ... the young-old kid in the tank. "Michiko surrendered the Scorpio files, and he's offered us Aphelion on a plate. If it's not the classic doublecross, we'll come up owing him. And if Janssen's amnesty counts for anything, he gets his deal."

"Which is?" Stone prompted. "Not amnesty!"

"No. His life. Conditional liberty," Cantrell said softly, "in a place where he'll come to no harm and cause no harm. Where he can muddle on with grav-resist architecture, designing the future of Mankind."

"He bent your ear with that crap?" Stone made a face.

The elder captain shrugged. "He's a visionary. Angel became the means to an end ... he despises city bottom and the people who live there. They're raw materials, the fodder for his vision." He frowned at Michiko, who was standing alone, in the corner of the OR, utterly ignoring Cassius Brand. The

old man knew about him now, and about Pietro Denehy. The shock had aged him visibly; the Bergman Syndrome was racing, probably as a result.

A strident blip from the machinery marked the second when the cryotank went into retrieval mode. Every cover and panel was off it, and all but the core electronics had been replaced on the fly. Cables sprouted like demonic tentacles in every direction. Bud was actually controlling the tank's functions from a laptop while Reardon monitored the patient's signs and stood by with the life support which had kept Marcus half-alive for frantic days while Cassius searched Aurora for a tank.

The nightmare of those days, Stone thought, watching the old man's face, must be like yesterday to him. The kid's Angel-raddled face was pale, with a faint tracery of blue veins. Did Cassius recall the wild days, when Marcus ran with Michiko and Jason Denehy, flirting with Aphelion, and in the end becoming an Angel statistic himself? Stone thought not. The old man only remembered his son, perhaps even the child Marcus had been before Hunter Santini was killed.

Green lights winked on across Budweisser's boards. The tank was performing adequately, though the engineer was correcting constantly from the laptop. As his lights turned green, Reardon's winked red. He was reading the kid's temperature, BP, brain activity, all of which simply said *dead* — normal at this point in a difficult retrieval.

The life support machines wheeled in around him, and Harry moved closer. One by one, Reardon's red lights began to wink green. Pulse was at twenty, then thirty; a flicker of brainwaves registered, and Reardon coupled up the life support fast.

"He's out, Senator," he told Brand.

"Alive," Brand said hoarsely.

"Not really," Reardon corrected. "Not yet. He's comatose, just as he was in the ER at Angel of Kansai. But we've got him, and he's stable enough for Doctor Del to begin."

The old man sagged back into the chair and gave Del an owlish look. "I know what I said to you back there, Doc ... Harry. I said a whole lot of bullshit. The fact is, I'd been buried in my own affairs for so long ... I had no idea what was going on in my own house." He gave Jarrat and Stone a nod of acknowledgment. "For what it's worth, Denehy said it: you're my brain children. You're bastards, and you're damn effective. I owe you."

"You're quite welcome," Jarrat said dryly.

"Don't thank us yet." Stone gestured at Marcus. "You don't have your son back yet." He was recalling Harry's speculations, though he mentioned none of it. What happened to the *mind*, not the brain, after twenty years in cryogen? When the body died, did the mind leave? These were questions to make a man shiver, and Stone stepped closer to Jarrat, needing the warmth, the solidarity, along his side.

"Even so." Brand gave a dismissive gesture. "I've pledged Harry the funding to continue his work. Finish it out. Find the cure, some way for a kid who's made the mistake to come back from Angel. Like Marcus."

Like Riki Mitchell and Tim Kwei. Like Stone himself. Harry was studying

Stone with a deeply thoughtful expression, though he said nothing, and Cassius Brand went on, almost to himself,

"It'll be the last useful act I can make. My legacy. It's going to be the Marcus Brand Memorial Foundation for Angel-addiction Research. I've asked Harry to administrate it."

"Marcus isn't dead yet," Del said gently. "Give me a chance, Cass. I haven't even tried yet."

Bright tears gathered in the old eyes. He could not speak now, but he watched as Harry pulled up a chair, and the healer's long brown fingers threaded into Marcus Brand's dark curly hair.

Now it would take hours, and even when the healer had done all he could, nothing guaranteed that Marcus would wake. Stone slung one arm around Jarrat's shoulders and steered him out of the OR. "Downtime," he said succinctly. "Embrace the concept."

They were waiting for a dock shuttle even then. The Cygnus Lines clipper *Pacifica* was swinging by Thule on its way to Chell, Elysium and eventually the ports of Earth itself. Seven days on the white beaches on the south island of Tarataga, which straddled Rethan's north tropic, sounded about right to Stone. Then another week in the heated pools and casinos on the *Stardust*, back to Darwin's. Yvette McKinnen was also booked aboard the *Pacifica*, but Harry Del was staying on Aurora at least for the moment, even when the *Athena* shipped out.

His excuse was his patients. Stone suspected otherwise, but he was not about to comment. Del's business was his own. With the support of the Senator for Thule, he could work independent of NARC funding. Dupre had been warning Central for months; now, they must believe.

"Downtime," Jarrat said, rolling the word on his tongue. The mission report was already filed, the telemetry dispatched. Janssen was pleased enough to send a case of wine, while Cassius Brand had made his peace with NARC and at least two of its officers. Cantrell's own report was on the courier *Hebe*, racing ahead of the tachyon band telemetry.

Jarrat looked at his chrono, and as they stepped into an empty lift he slid an arm about Stone's waist. Their baggage stood in the middle of Stone's cabin, already tagged for the *Pacifica*. With the habits of a lifetime they watched the carrier's routine data scroll endlessly through the CRT, and Stone mocked himself with a wry chuckle.

"I think I'm actually going to miss this."

"While you're lying on a beach in Tarataga?" Jarrat gave him a disbelieving look. "You want to stay here? I'll send you a card."

"Think again," Stone told him.

As the flight status monitor signaled the arrival of a dock shuttle he slung their bags over both shoulders and herded Jarrat toward the door.

The cult classic is back — as you've never seen it before!

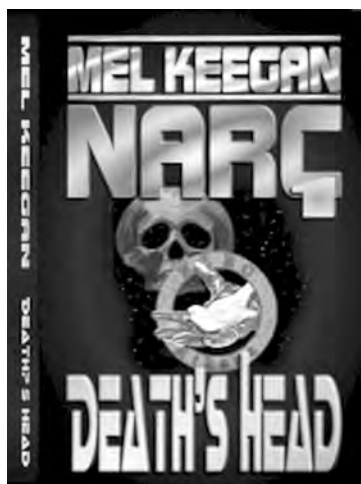
Four centuries from now, humans have colonized scores of worlds, terraforming them and populating them with the untold, unwanted millions of earth's people. The colony worlds opened up new vistas of opportunity ... for the criminal cartels as well as the law-abiding.

It's an age of massive technology: ships the size of cities, artificial intelligences — and designer drugs which have never been imagined in Mankind's long history of experiment with rare, precious substances. The "traditional" drugs of recent centuries have been rendered harmless and therefore legal. The 'blockers' are as cheap as the drugs, sold legally, side-by-side ... but one drug is different. There's no blocker, no 'cure,' and the first dose is lethally addictive. One rash act or inebriated mistake — or an act of spite on the part of a rival — and the user is on a one-way trip. The drug is *Angel*. A golden powder that has built empires and torn them down, across the exotic colony worlds of the Twenty-fourth Century. The Angel empires are drug syndicates ... Equinox, Black Unicorn, Death's Head, Scorpio, Aphelion. In the distant colonies, their rule exceeds the power of government. And the siren-song of Angel, the most seductive 'exotic' ever designed, lures ever more humans, endangering whole generations. Fourteen years after Angel appeared, its threat was monstrous enough for the government of Earth to found a new paramilitary department.

Narcotics and Riot Control (NARC) was designed, chartered, equipped, to take the new drug-war to the front lines: Deep space, raw new colonies and rancid old ones, where hightech has put the Angel empires outside the law and beyond the reach of Tactical Response. NARC is based on the biggest carriers in space, each a kilometer long, housing a squadron of four gunships, and the 'descant troops,' units of armored soldiers, whose task is to jump into the urban battlefield and lock horns with the contract warriors of syndicates like Equinox and Death's Head.

But the urban battleground is only one of the fronts on which NARC fights. Their war is more often about data, jurisdiction, espionage and 'deep cover' work, assignments taking their special agents, such as Kevin Jarrat and Jerry Stone, undercover into the hearts of the syndicates. Its dangerous work, which will one day probably claim their lives — and they know it.

In Death's Head the urban battlefield as the smoggy, filthy slums by the spaceport. *Citybottom*. Taking the Angel war into these zones stretches NARC to its limits, and in this huge first novel, both Jarrat and Stone will look their own deaths in the face and survive only because of a 'mutoid' called Harry Del. But their survival is bought at a price. They'll be empathically linked for the rest of their lives, and the challenge is, can they find a way to live with this and still do the job?

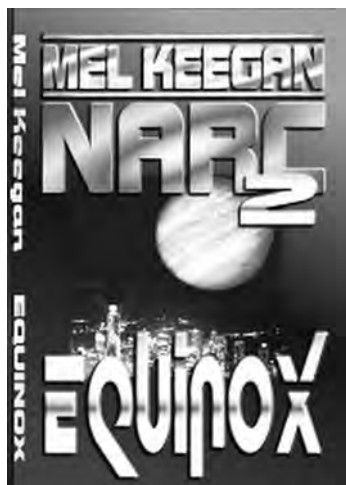


NARC #1 - Death's Head
ISBN 0-9750884-5-49
Cover by Jade

The second NARC book,
direct sequel to
DEATH'S HEAD

Jarrat and Stone are back!

The carrier *Athena* is in the Zeus system, and NARC takes on the most hazardous assignment in the department's history. The system is controlled by Equinox Industries, and the city of Elysium is on the brink of bloody corporate war, while the "Angel war" has already begun. But Angel, Equinox and the gas giant, Zeus, are locked together in some deadly mutual embrace ... and soon not merely the *Athena* but all of NARC is involved.



Jarrat and Stone have returned to duty following the events of *Death's Head*, but are still under observation when the carrier is discovered to be in jeopardy. Elysium is at war with itself and at the conflict's epicenter is Equinox, controlling the industry, politics and probably the Angel trade. But hard evidence is not easily won, and the hunt for proof takes Jarrat and Stone right across the Zeus system, into battlefield engagements ... a supersonic dogfight ... a brute-force slugging-match in the docking bays of Eos ... and at last, the unforgettable showdown between NARC and Equinox Industries.

When high-tech has failed utterly, the courage, quick wits and keen empathy of Jarrat and Stone might still win through. The lovers share both the rank of captain and command of the *Athena* within the paramilitary Narcotics and Riot Control; and they share the empathic bonding which spelt their survival in *Death's Head*.

"Unputdownable. Keegan has taken the two dimensional Marvel/DC comic strip and made it flesh ... and what flesh!" — **HIM**

NARC #2 - Equinox
ISBN 0-9750884-7-5
Cover by Jade

**Downtime becomes an
explosive excursion into an
industrial hell-zone...**

With the Scorpio syndicate closed down, Kevin Jarrat and Jerry Stone are on furlough, aboard the starclipper *Pacifica* and headed for an island resort in Rethan's tropics.

But when the clipper suffers engine trouble and must detour to the halfway station of Sheckley for repairs, the vacation dissolves into unexpected and unpredictable hazard.

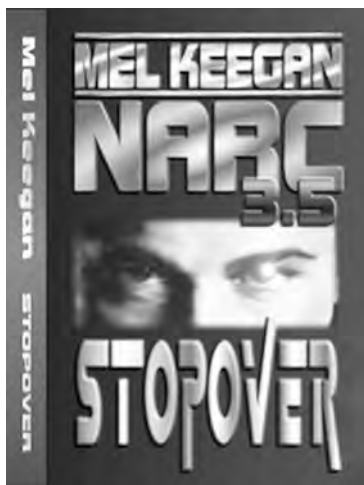
Stone is fascinated to take the 'ten cent tour' and experience the 'gas can with lights' where Jarrat spent his youth. The tour turns deadly when they run into escapees from Scorpio who recognize Jarrat as his undercover persona of Max Tyler, and the NARC captains find themselves making a flight right into Hades.

Cut off from NARC, the carrier, backup and weapons, they're on their own devices, surviving on their wits ... and making it to that island resort starts to look like an impossible fantasy.

*A Pocket-sized NARC page-turner, falling between
SCORPIO and APHELION...*

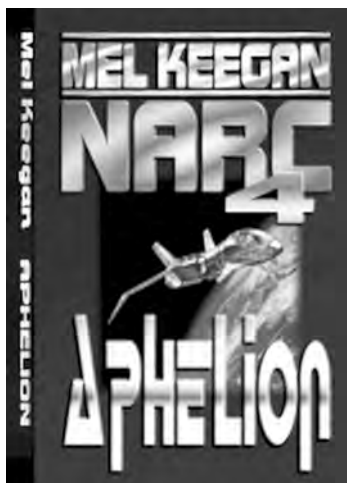
For the first time in print, from the award-winning author
of *Scorpio*, *Hellgate* and *Fortunes of War*

NARC #3.5 -Stopover
Cover by Jade



All roads lead to the homeworlds...

The Scorpio data-trail ... the Michiko dossier. Earth. Mars. The timeless cities of ancient worlds ... dark. Wicked. Corrupt. For the outsider — the stranger, the colonial, the mutoid — it's a mean arena, alien and dangerous. For the 'Earther' headed back in after many years ... it's not what you expected, nor where you want to be.



Chicago ... Marsport ... Sequoia. The incredible skycities of the Jupiter system. These are the new-old worlds on the old high frontier ... new battlefields where Death wears the same old face.

Aerosports and Angel packwar — politics gone mad — the launch of a supercarrier — the death of a friend.

Nothing is as it seems, and enemies and allies trade places. Trust only those you know — believe only what you see.

The NARC series continues in the same dazzling form as SCORPIO. Jarrat and Stone are back with a vengeance in this pivotal novel which takes the carrier *Athena* to the heart of humanity's old homeworlds. It's a thrill-a-page ride, rich with action, intrigue and sensuality, set against an astonishing background of real worlds, real places.

Mel Keegan's name is a byword for thrilling gay adventure
in the past, present and future
— MILLIVRES on *Aquamarine*.

NARC #4: Aphelion
Cover art: Jade

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www.melkeegan.com

Since 2001, Mel Keegan has been online, and after more than six years in the current creative partnership with South Australian studio DreamCraft, you might be astonished by what you'll find on our website.

We have more than *twenty* Mel Keegan titles, many of which are available as eBooks; most of the old GMP and Millivres range available again as re-issues, fully repackaged with brilliant new covers. We have

downloads galore — more than a quarter *million* words of fiction to 'try before you buy,' rafts of artwork, interviews, 'behind the scenes' non-fiction, free eBooks, screensavers, desktops ... video on demand featuring NARC and HELLGATE; regular competitions for Members, and a lot more. Short fiction. Epic and series fiction. The *fifth* entry in the NARC (Jarrat and Stone) series, the two vampyre series novels ...!

Feeling out of touch? If you knew and loved Mel Keegan way back when the novels were appearing from GMP, you'll have wondered where MK has been all these years. You might know that Millivres closed its paperback line around 2001. You might not have been aware that MK promptly hooked up with DreamCraft, and new novels have been appearing the whole time.

Our readers say MK is writing better than ever, and the new editions (you have one in your hands) are more beautiful than the old. The new titles are so numerous and varied, we can't begin to describe them here. You'll have to meet us on the web ... and help yourself to your free eBooks, screensavers and desktops while you're there. Get into the competition to win a collector's item such as a calendar, a set of bookmarks or mousepad. We'll see you online!

